

Storm King 331

Chapter 331: New Home

Two months had passed since Leon returned to the capital and a couple weeks since his ascension to the sixth-tier. Events in the capital continued to unfold in the same vein that they had been, and Leon was more than happy to remain apart from them. In fact, the more he stayed with Elise filling his days with little else but training, the more he realized that that was what he should've done in the first place. The longer he stayed away from the Legion, the less he wanted to go back.

But he was still a knight, he'd have to go back at some point, whenever Trajan called on him. Fortunately, though, it seemed to Leon that that point was still far in the future.

During that time, Leon finished building the vault in his soul realm, a huge metal container with many long rows of shelves. It was simple, and he could always build something else later, so for now, he considered the job finished. As he built the vault, he wondered if he could take the things he made in his soul realm out into the physical world, since they seemed no different from the objects he'd stored in there. It didn't work, though. He made a rock the size of his fist in his soul realm, but when he attempted to bring it out of his soul realm, the only thing that appeared was a bit of mist which instantly disappeared into the air.

A disappointment, but one that Leon wasn't too surprised by. If other sixth-tier mages could perform such a feat as bringing their creations out of their soul realm, then there would be no such thing as resource scarcity in the world; it would be an incredibly widely known power. Still, experimentation with his new powers brought Leon no small amount of joy.

But he eventually had to stop for a while, for a day that he had been eagerly waiting for arrived: his and Elise's realtor found them a place that satisfied their requirements. When Leon and Elise went to check the place out, they found that it was about as perfect as they could've ever asked for without building a place of their own.

The villa itself was relatively small compared to the rest of the villas in the noble district, but more than comfortable. It had a nice stable next to the main entrance for Anzu, and its accompanying land was more than large enough both for Leon and Elise to do some landscaping and achieve some modicum of privacy with trees and large bushes, and for Leon to train Anzu into becoming a suitable war mount. There was also plenty of land for any renovations or additions they might want to do to the property.

The entire villa was roughly U-shaped, with an eastern, northern, and western wing. In the center was a courtyard that had a wall on the south side with a large gate, and a peristyle running around the main building. The master bed and bathrooms were in the west, while the guest quarters were in the eastern wing. A large living room was in the center of the main villa building in the north. In one corner was a kitchen and a dining room, while in the other was a private dojo that was already quite heavily enchanted to withstand typical training behavior. Along the entire northern side was a covered porch, surrounded by intricately carved columns. The property bordered a small curve along the Naga River, and the spacious backyard ended at the banks of the river, where a private dock had been built.

They bought it on the spot. If it had unseen flaws, then it wouldn't be that big of a deal for the two to fix the place up. It also didn't matter that most people, nobles included, who bought land in the capital had

to wait a few weeks for the paperwork to be processed and approved, since Heaven's Eye always got what it wanted in a timely fashion.

And so, a week after buying the villa and squaring away the paperwork and payment, Leon and Elise moved into their new villa. Rather, Elise's servants moved their stuff over to the new villa in an afternoon, which was to say they moved Elise's possessions, as just about all of what Leon owned was within his soul realm. Regardless, they quickly had their own place.

"So, what now?" was the first question that Leon asked his lady once they were finally alone. There would be no permanent servants, with only a chef at mealtimes, a beastmaster to tend to Anzu when the need required, and landscapers during the day—at least until their new property was as private as Leon wanted it to be.

"Hmm, what room should we break in first?" Elise asked with a coquettish smile.

Leon wasted no more time. He swept Elise off her feet and carried her directly to the bedroom, much to her delight.

In a happy twist of fate, the next day was Elise's birthday. Perhaps after being affected by Leon's general misanthropy or her own general weariness with the endless ceremonies of nobility, Elise decided to not only have a very limited guest list for her party, but she also decided to have it at the same time as their house-warming party, killing two birds with one stone.

Typically, the birthday of most high nobles was an extremely serious affair for the rest of the noble class—most nobles didn't need an excuse to ingratiate themselves with their peers, but when they had one, like a birthday, it was treated with grave severity, especially since it was also a way for the family holding the party to show off their wealth and power. Commoners didn't celebrate their birthdays much, but most nobles who were concerned with appearances never forgot a date.

Those that gave gifts chose them with extreme care, and when a party was had, thousands of servants would be required to fit all the noble lords and ladies into their party attire, arrange travel, and to deliver gifts. The entire day would be treated like a national holiday to those who received invitations, taking time off from whatever usually occupied their time so they could prepare. Many of those who weren't invited would send gifts anyway, hoping to better relations between them and the recipient enough to be invited next year.

It came as no surprise, then, that when the announcement was made that Elise wasn't going to have an extravagant party, most of the nobles in the city were beyond shocked. These parties, after all, weren't just a way for them to get closer to the Tower Lord and her family, but also for Emilie and Elise to maintain good relations with the rest of the nobles. Never before had a birthday party been so low-key in Elise's family, not even in the two years that Elise spent in Teira before meeting Leon. Most nobles were already used to not receiving invitations to such functions unless they were important enough, but to not have a spectacular party at all was quite unusual.

This last bit took Leon by surprise, as he had known Elise for years now and had never once heard about these parties. To be fair, though, during that time he was either training in the Knight Academy or stationed at the Bull's Horns, and Elise had never given him too many details.

But regardless of the surprise any of the nobles felt and the confused messages they sent Emilie asking if they had been misinformed, Elise wasn't going to change her plans. The only people invited were her parents and her friends—those who could take off work, at least. There were a few people who worked for her mother that she wanted to invite, but they had other duties and didn't want to push their work or foist it off on other people. Elise understood, but was disappointed.

The entire guest list ended up being five people, in the end: Emilie and Jordan—Elise's father—Alix, Asiya, and Valeria. Elise had also wanted to invite Princess Cristina but doing so would exclude both Leon and Jordan from the party, as it would be incredibly inappropriate to have a member of the Royal Family around members of the opposite sex when they hadn't yet been formally presented to the court. She wanted Leon and Jordan there with her, so she was forced to compromise; she'd visit Cristina later to make up her lack of invitation.

So, when the day came, it was an extremely modest affair. Or at least, the party was, the day itself ended quite spectacularly.

Emilie and Jordan were the first to arrive. Elise hadn't seen her father in a while, and they joyfully caught up with each other. Emilie smiled at Leon, any animosity she felt towards him for Elise giving up her right to have a harem gone after seeing how happy Elise was.

Asiya and Valeria arrived next. Asiya was her normal cheerful and teasing self, while Valeria spoke very little and tried to look anywhere but at Leon.

Alix arrived last, her work with Minerva keeping her fairly late.

Not one of them noticed the pale figures in the distance watching the villa extremely closely.

—

"This place looks amazing!" Alix said as Leon and Elise opened the gate for her.

"Thank you!" Elise gratefully exclaimed as she excitedly brought Alix inside to show her around.

Leon stayed outside with Anzu, though. He'd just about exhausted all of his social skills already, and he craved some time alone to recharge. He could hear Elise inside happily discussing with everyone else what she and he were planning to do to the property, focusing mostly on the garden she'd practice nature magic on, and the workshop Leon wanted for his enchanting practice. There were already some gardens and privacy trees around the villa, but it still needed plenty of work before Leon or Elise would feel satisfied.

Hearing his lady talking so excitedly with her friends put Leon in a good mood, despite his desire to be alone, but knowing that Valeria was in there as well was just one more reason that Leon needed a breather.

Sensing his human's mild distress, Anzu nuzzled up against Leon's shoulder, almost knocking Leon over as he did so.

"Thanks, buddy," Leon muttered, grateful for the griffin's presence. "I'll go back in there in a few minutes. Just need a bit of space..."

Anzu pushed his head against Leon's hand, all-but forcing Leon to give him some head pats and eliciting a few chuckles from the young man.

He couldn't stay outside for long, and he quickly put Anzu back in the stable and went back inside. As it so happened, he walked in during a brief lull in the conversation, and Elise waved him over.

Jordan and the ladies were sitting in a rough circle around the living room table, which had the bouquet of Sun Lotuses that Leon had bought Elise proudly displayed upon it. The one place left to sit was next to Elise, which Leon normally wouldn't mind, but it also just so happened to feature Valeria on the other side.

He didn't see it, but as he sat down, Elise shot Valeria a subtle wink, and the latter instantly went red as a rose. Elise then leaned against Leon as if she just wanted to be closer to him, and while that was true, her true intent was to push him slightly closer to her silver-haired friend.

Silence followed that, to Leon, felt like an eternity. In reality, it was barely even five seconds before Asiya began to animatedly talk to Elise about her own training and how much Valeria was forcing her to do in that regard.

"Don't blame me when you fall behind," Valeria responded after quickly regaining her composure. She still didn't once look in Leon's direction, though, and kept her eyes fixed firmly on Asiya.

"Indeed, at this point, Alix is going to pass you up in a matter of months and then you'll be the only third-tier mage left here!" Elise said with a teasing smile.

Asiya frowned, but it was more like a pout and no one took it that seriously. "I won't be left behind..." she muttered.

"By the way, you two," Jordan said as he looked to Leon and Elise, "congratulations to you both on your ascension!"

"Hmm?" Asiya wondered out loud, Jordan's statement at first only sounding a bit strange before sending shockwaves rippling through her mind. From the way Valeria's head whipped around to stare at the man, she, too, was shocked beyond words.

"You ascended again, Sir?" Alix asked with a knowing smile. Everyone already knew that Elise had made it to the fourth-tier, and the ladies had celebrated quite a bit. It seemed that news of Leon's ascension hadn't made it to their ears before now, though.

Leon simply nodded. He didn't want to make such a fuss about this matter, especially not on Elise's birthday when she should be given the focus. He didn't want to say anything, even when Elise smiled at him and briefly hugged his arm. She hadn't told her friends about him, believing that it was his news to spread, and she didn't mind if he did it right now. She enjoyed attention and could certainly act that way when she wanted to—Leon was well aware of that given how she had acted to catch his attention before he had enrolled in the Knight Academy—but she wasn't so conceited that she had to make everything about her, even on her own birthday. Of course, part of that was because she knew Leon hated the attention, and she took no small amount of pleasure in making him feel awkward over things that he should've, by all rights, been shouting loudly for all the world to hear.

Leon still felt awkward despite being well aware that Elise was having so much fun at his expense and let his eyes wander around the room, and they eventually landed on the window. He would've seriously considered making some retort if it weren't her birthday, but now all he could do was-

Something moved outside. It was dark, but Leon could still see perfectly fine, and he knew that wasn't a natural movement from the bushes outside. As Leon's focus went from the living room to just outside, he started picking up on sounds he wasn't hearing before. He could hear Anzu frantically scratching at the walls of his stable, footsteps outside, and some hushed whispering.

With a growing sense of alarm, he released his magic senses and perceived the entire estate in an instant. The villa was surrounded by fourteen dark figures, and all of them had swords drawn.

Chapter 332: Breaking in the New House

Leon leaped to his feet, almost pushing Elise to the floor in his haste. However, with armed figures surrounding his and Elise's new home, he wasted no time with apologies as those could wait. Before anyone could say a word in shock at his behavior, Leon called upon his power, bringing his sword and armor from his soul realm.

At this sight, both Emilie and Jordan released their own magic senses, believing that Leon wouldn't be acting like this without reason. As soon as they saw the figures approaching the villa, they responded much like Leon. In less than a second, they were on their feet with their armor on and weapons drawn.

Both of them were equipped as well as Leon would expect, given their positions in Heaven's Eye, and seeing Emilie's glittering form-fitting golden armor and Jordan's bulky black armor encouraged him quite a bit.

"What's happening?" Asiya asked in shock.

Valeria and Elise were curious as well, but despite both being fourth-tier mages, it was the third-tier Alix who responded next. She rose from her seat and calmly asked, "Weapons?"

"Training room," Leon replied, pointing to the northeast corner of the villa.

Alix needed nothing more, she ran for the door.

After the cold realization that Leon wasn't playing around sent a shiver down their spines, Valeria, Elise, and Asiya quickly followed. Valeria was the calmest among them, but all three were terrified of whatever was happening. None had the battle experience of Alix or Leon, but they were still third and fourth-tier mages, so once they got moving, they no longer hesitated.

"There are fourteen in total," Emilie said. She was the strongest of those remaining in the living room, so she gave them the information she could glean with her magic senses with a lack of hesitation that quietly impressed Leon. "The strongest one is seventh-tier. After that are five sixth-tiers, two fifth-tiers, a fourth-tier, and the rest are third-tier."

These people themselves were all dressed in black to blend in with the evening environment, though from how little bulk there was to their clothing it seemed they were all unarmored. They all had hoods concealing their faces, but the unenchanted cloth in their attire wasn't enough to stop Leon, Emilie, and

Jordan's magic senses. They could see the pale features of these fourteen people, as well as the blades in each of their hands.

"Eclectic combination of power levels," Jordan muttered, his voice steady and lacking concern.

"Doesn't matter. They're here, that's what they are," Leon said as he resigned himself to a hard fight. His new sixth-tier power was about to be tested much sooner than he'd thought.

Fortunately, as the invaders closed in on the villa, they passed the stable without incident. The agitated Anzu was still scratching and chirping at the door of the stable, and Leon didn't know what he'd do if they had stopped to harm his griffin. At least he could now conduct himself knowing that Anzu was fine.

In the last few seconds before they reached the villa gate and the back door, Leon wondered who these people were. He had no shortage of enemies, from whoever had been targeting his family, to Tiberias Decimus, to even Octavius given how much the Prince seemed to target him whenever they shared a room. But even then, there was still one thing, one possibility that stuck in Leon's mind. For all that these people looked like invaders, this might've just been a huge misunderstanding.

It was a possibility, however unlikely. Still, right before everything kicked off, Leon tossed a lightning mine spell at the foot of the front door. The villa had little more than a quality of life enchantments, so if the invaders wanted to get inside, there would little to stop them; the stone and wood of the villa would melt before them like snow before a fire mage.

The hostile intent of this group was proved, and Leon's caution was vindicated as soon as the villa's gates were blown apart with a fireball and seven of the figures spilled into the courtyard. Simultaneously, the back door was blasted open with another gout of flame, and four more invaders rushed into the living room. The remaining three attackers remained outside, keeping an eye on the villa just in case one of the occupants escaped through one of the many windows in the place.

The four invaders who burst in through the back door were the pair of fifth-tiers and two sixth-tiers, and they found themselves against the seventh-tier Emilie and another pair of sixth-tier mages in Jordan and Leon. No time was wasted between the three left in the living room. They held a great advantage in magical power, and they weren't going to wait around for the rest of the invaders to break into the house and negate that advantage with vastly superior numbers.

Leon acted first, his lightning magic giving him unparalleled speed amongst everyone present. He lunged forward, choosing the first sixth-tier mage that entered his home as his opponent—his left shoulder lit up in pain in a brutal reminder of the last time he truly fought for real, but it was hardly debilitating, so he ignored it. Emilie likewise attacked, her limbs glowing with light magic and moving just about as fast as Leon's were. She attacked the other sixth-tier mage, leaving the final two fifth-tier mages to Jordan, who followed his two compatriots and stepped forward to engage his opponents.

Leon, Emilie, and Jordan fought like demons. These people had invaded Leon's home and the home of the other two's daughter. Their killing intent was so intense that their combined auras caused the drinks still on the table to begin to freeze.

Golden lightning erupted from Leon's blade, and when he brought it down upon the attacker in front of him, who barely managed to raise his own blade and block with extreme difficulty. Leon's attack came

with such force that the attacker cried out in surprise as he was forced to take a couple steps back, revealing his sharp fangs.

As the vampire blocked, golden lightning arced out of Leon's blade and singed his hands. The vampire didn't much care, and his hands ignited with demonfire to block Leon's magic.

The demonfire didn't help him, though. Lightning exploded out of Leon's legs, scorching the vampire's legs and tossing him back a couple of steps. But Leon wasn't done, lightning continued to surge out of his legs, blinding the vampire with golden light. The vampire released his magic senses almost instantly, but the microscopic delay was enough for Leon to lunge forward once again, impaling the vampire upon his sword before the monster could react.

Leon had poured enormous amounts of lightning into his sword, and the Adamant metal held it all with ease. When the blade pierced the vampire's heart, all of that stored lightning exploded into him, ripping the vampire apart from the inside out while demonfire erupted from his soul realm, his demonic master taking what he could while the vampire yet drew breath. When Leon removed his sword from the vampire's chest a moment later, the monster was dead, his corpse charred and smoking, and Leon spared him no more attention.

When he turned to Emilie and Jordan, he saw that they had killed their opponents at about the same time as he did. Jordan made both of the fifth-tier vampires a head shorter, while Emilie had sliced her adversary in half at the waist with a blade of light. The rest of the living room, however, had been completely trashed. Most of the furniture was now just splinters of wood, tattered leather, and cloth, while more floor tiles were broken than weren't. Still, Leon hardly cared about all that, especially when there were still more enemies nearby.

The three exchanged a quick nod, acknowledging each other's skill in defeating the others in such a short time.

A moment later, the four ladies who had left to retrieve weapons stepped back into the living room. Elise had a rapier, Alix an arming sword, Asiya a short saber, and Valeria a spear. All were training weapons, though, and thus had limited lethality.

"That was quick," Alix observed, not perturbed in the slightest at the sight of the dead vampires and the slightly trashed living room. The other three, however, weren't so casual, and Elise especially pointedly didn't look at the four dead bodies.

"They were clearly not used to fighting trained mages," Jordan said with a confident smile. "Peasants in the country don't put up quite as much resistance as Legion knights or Heaven's Eye guards..."

"Keep a level head, don't get overconfident," Emilie warned.

Leon agreed, but he simply turned toward the front door. After seeing the demonfire, he knew exactly what was happening; these were servants of Amon, and they were after him. With his magic senses, he could see the seven vampires out in the courtyard pause at the front door. They probably knew their comrades were dead and were hesitating, but he was certain that they would find their nerve.

"Where's the local Legion when you need them..." Asiya bitterly mumbled as she prepared herself as best as she could for the first real battle she'd ever been in. Her hands were shaking, and she felt a bit

weak in the knees, plus she was already regretting eating as much as she did during Elise's party with how much her stomach was starting to turn, but she was more than willing to kill to protect herself and her friends.

Valeria was another thing. After the initial shock, she'd calmed down immensely, and like Leon, she now faced the door, ready to fight whatever came through. Her killing intent wasn't as intense as Leon's, but it was certainly far stronger than Leon was expecting, which he wasn't too happy about, but now wasn't the time to contemplate that.

Alix, in line with her experience and attitude, was as calm as Valeria, and she was more than ready to fight.

The only person who seemed significantly out of her element was Elise. She was terrified, and she had little idea of what to do with herself. She had been lightly trained for battle, but she was the daughter of a Heaven's Eye Tower Lord, she never expected she'd have to swing a blade in anger in her entire life. Now, her life, her new home, her boyfriend, her parents, and her friends were all in danger, and she was almost crying from the fear.

She shook like a leaf in the wind, and she didn't start calming down until Leon took a few steps closer to her, standing at her side. Elise was about out of her mind from terror, and Leon wasn't going to let that happen.

"I'm with you," he whispered.

That one statement was enough to cut through the darkness in Elise's mind. She looked at him, saw his calm, collected demeanor, and it brought her back to herself. She took a few deep breaths, readied her weapon, and nodded to Leon.

"I-I'm ready..." she croaked.

"I won't let them get past me," Leon said, taking a few steps forward until he was between Elise and the door. He was very worried about the others in this situation, but his priority was to protect Elise.

After a couple of minutes of hesitation, a woman's voice cut through the silence and reached not only to the vampires outside but to those within the villa as well.

"GET IN THERE!" she bellowed.

The weaker vampires in Leon's courtyard must have been much more scared of her than of him and his guests, as they immediately sprang into action. What was more, the woman and the other two who had been keeping watch on the outside of the villa began to make their move.

The front door that opened into the courtyard was made of unenchanted wood, and when a sixth-tier vampire hit it with a gout of plain red-orange flame, it instantly shattered and exploded inward. The vampires in the courtyard spilled in after that, but the lightning mine that Leon had thrown over there a few minutes before detonated. The sixth-tier vampire that led the way wasn't killed, but most of his body was severely burned after being inundated with countless arcs of lightning.

Leon charged once his mine went off. He led by slamming a bolt of lightning into the ground at his feet, annihilating many of the floor tiles beneath him and exposing the stone foundations of his villa, but the

vampires in the lead could count a few more injuries after being thrown back. Leon, not wanting to lose this momentum, continued by channeling lightning into his sword. It crackled and sparked, and when Leon slashed at the sixth-tier vampire in the lead, lightning burst from the sword and slammed into the vampire.

He tried to block the lightning, raising his arms into a defensive posture when he saw Leon's slash coming and conjuring a screen of bright red fire, but fire was no barrier to lightning, and the bolt was powerful enough to rip most of the skin on his left arm off and hurl him back through the door into several of his comrades.

All of this happened in a matter of seconds, and the others in the room charged once Leon began to move. Emilie conjured hundreds of tiny lights in the air, about as big as the stars seemed to be in the night sky, and began to fire them into the open doorway, peppering the charging vampires with light magic. They couldn't handle magic from a seventh-tier mage, and most of them were killed on the spot, including the sixth-tier vampire that Leon had injured. Jordan slammed his leg into the ground, and his shadow bent into a long tentacle that rose up and slashed what was left to ribbons.

It was over so quickly that Asiya, Valeria, Alix, and Elise hadn't the opportunity to join the fight, not that anyone really cared, they were all just relieved to see the fight going so well.

But the fight wasn't over. Sensing the seventh-tier and sixth-tier vampires walking through the ruined gate, Emilie said, "Head to the docks!" She was confident that she, Leon, and Jordan could handle this, but if the others stayed, they could be caught in the fight and killed as quickly as she had killed the weaker vampires.

Asiya, Valeria, and Alix responded immediately, running toward the back door. Elise, however, stared at Emilie with a look of terror, unable to say anything except, "... Mom..."

"We'll be all right, Butterfly, just go with your friends," Jordan said with a wide smile.

Elise's eyes turned toward Leon, and he said, "We'll be right with you. This shouldn't take long."

Elise wanted nothing more than to stay, as did the others, but she was completely outclassed. She couldn't argue on this point, and with only one last look back, she followed her friends.

The huge backyard was bare of just about everything except grass and a few trees near the edges, so it was easy enough for Elise to sprint toward the private dock on the river a few hundred feet behind the villa. With every step, she fought back the tears of fear and shame from leaving, but when she joined her friends at the dock, they had turned to tears of anger and frustration. On her birthday of all days, in her new home, threatening her friends and family. That, she couldn't abide.

But there was nothing she could do about it now. Back in her home, she could hear the battle begin. Even from outside, she and the others could just about follow the battle in its entirety, with flashes of golden light and earthshaking thunder answered by great gouts of dark red demonfire.

After about thirty seconds, Jordan was hurled through the stone walls of the villa by an explosion of demonfire, and Leon and Emilie retreated through the hole he created. They were pursued by all three vampires, and from what those at the docks could see, they had come out on the losing side of the fight, despite their armor.

Leon, Emilie, and Jordan recovered in the backyard, but the vampires weren't going to give them any time and attacked after following them outside. Elise and the others had to watch as Leon, Emilie, and Jordan's attacks did very little damage to their enemies, and while they didn't seem to be sustaining too many serious injuries beneath their armor, they were still being forced back step-by-step.

These vampires, it seemed, were far more comfortable fighting stronger opponents than their subordinates had been, and even Leon was forced onto the defense by the speed and power of the sixth-tier vampire he was fighting.

The three were forced back almost to the docks themselves, and the vampires didn't seem to be stopping. Demonfire had almost completely consumed the villa and the entire property, and every magical attack Leon, Emilie, and Jordan tried to make melted away in the heat of this demonfire.

There didn't seem to be anything they could do, and the four at the docks readied themselves to fight. Jumping into the river wasn't an option in any of their minds, so if the vampires pushed the other three the rest of the way to the docks, then they would join Leon, Emilie, and Jordan in battle. The Naga River behind them was wide and deep, but slow-moving, and all of them could've swum to safety if they had to, but none of them was going to leave when the battle was still undecided.

Finally, Leon's boot scraped against the wood of the dock rather than the dirt and grass of the expansive yard, Jordan was thrown backward fully onto the dock, and Emilie was only a step or two away from the wood. It seemed like the end, but none of them were going to give up under any circumstances.

So transfixed was everyone with the fight that they didn't notice the water rise behind them in a great, stationary wave, as if something extremely large was rising out of the huge Naga River, but the vampires certainly did, and they quickly backed off in shock. Leon, Emilie, and Jordan had been so on the defense that none of them pursued, even though Leon very nearly did, and he had to fight to stop when he noticed the other two weren't doing the same.

The 'bump' of water in the river suddenly burst, revealing a tan woman, completely naked and possessed of beauty that no one could deny. She was tall, with light brown hair, and blue eyes that shone like all the world's oceans flowed through them.

Despite everything that had just happened, Leon's heart sank into his feet at the sight of her. He had a long list of people he didn't want to see even under the best of conditions, and her name was damn near at the top.

The woman was Naiad, and she smiled back at Leon like a predator eyeing a delicious meal.

Chapter 333: To Begin Early

With a few graceful steps, Naiad stepped onto the dock, completely undisturbed at her lack of attire. Her aura was calm, but completely dwarfed everyone else's, and even the vampires attacking Leon and the others came to a halt, stunned as they were at Naiad's arrival.

As she approached Elise, Alix, Valeria, and Asiya, the four ladies quickly switched their attention away from the vampires and brandished their weapons at Naiad, but the river nymph Queen couldn't have cared less, and walked right past them doing nothing but releasing her aura. With Naiad's mountainous

aura pressing down upon Elise and the others, none of them could so much as move, let alone stop Naiad from strolling past them like they weren't even there.

When she finally came close to Leon, she whispered into his mind, [You seem to find a great many ways to get into trouble, boy...]

Leon fought the urge to flinch, but he had no response for her. He was now caught between three extraordinarily powerful vampires who had been pushing him, Emilie, and Jordan back with seeming ease, and a river nymph Queen whom he considered a potential enemy. His heart felt like it was beating a million times a minute from panic, his eyes were wildly shifting between Naiad and the vampire he'd been fighting, and worst of all, most of the people he cared even a little bit about were still in danger.

"... Who are you?" Emilie asked, asking the question everyone, including the vampires, wanted to ask. She would've been more demanding, but she couldn't identify Naiad's power, so she decided to err on the side of caution and temper her tone.

Naiad briefly smiled at Emilie but didn't respond. Instead, her next question was directed at Leon, and since she was speaking directly into his mind, none of the others could hear what she was saying. Needless to say, there was quite a bit of confusion running through their minds.

[Are these creatures your enemies?] Naiad asked, tilting her head vaguely in the direction of the vampires.

Finally finding his tongue, Leon replied, "Of course they are, attempted murder is not usually the pastime of good acquaintances!"

[Don't get uppity with me, I don't know how your society works!] Naiad shot back with a mischievous glare. [In that respect, I'd say that it always pays to confirm with those you know about who any potential enemies might be...]

With that, Naiad snapped her fingers and the river resonated with the sound. Clearly, she was working some kind of magic, but no one knew what it was, especially since she hadn't spoken any of her thoughts aloud. Everyone reasonably assumed due to Leon's spoken part of their conversation that Naiad wasn't planning anything good for the vampires, and said vampires quickly assumed more defensive postures and backed away a few steps from the river. No one took advantage of this, though, they were too busy watching Naiad with increasing worry as they waited for whatever she was doing to come to fruition.

They didn't have to wait long. Second later, the river far away from the shore rose like there was something unspeakably massive swimming through it, and it was rapidly approaching Leon and Elise's private dock. If anyone cared to look, they might have seen this raised water pushing past startled boats in the distance and a few nobles whose estates were also riverside and had come out to see what all was happening. But given their current circumstances, no one was so circumspect, and their attentions were focused almost completely on Naiad and whatever seemed to be approaching.

As the mass of water approached the dock, it quickly took shape, splitting into a huge maw with three rows of vicious fangs that could swallow a one-man fishing boat whole, a reptilian head that had a pair of curved horns that were each as long as Leon was tall, and a long snake-like body that had a row of curved sword-like spikes running down its spine.

"A... river dragon?" Valeria rhetorically asked in abject shock. She was the only one able to talk with this monster made entirely of water bearing down upon them. In fact, it was distracting enough that no one even processed what she said. Even Leon struggled to maintain control over himself and fight the urge to run. Elise, Alix, and Asiya all took hesitant steps backward, while Valeria, Emilie, and Jordan readied themselves for battle just in case.

Leon, however, turned to look at Naiad, and found that she had taken another couple of steps forward, and her face was now inches away from his own. She stared into his eyes and wore a smile of such abject pride and confidence that Leon managed to remain calm despite the incoming serpentine dragon.

The dragon rose out of the water, glittering in the silver light of the rising moon, and floated in the air above the river. It glared at the three vampires and began to rapidly fly in their direction, its nearly two hundred foot long body slithering through the air like a snake.

"Run!" the seventh-tier woman shouted in terror as the dragon quickly closed the distance.

All three vampires ran, and being powerful mages, they could run extraordinarily quickly. However, they didn't even manage to get halfway back to the villa before the water dragon crashed down upon them, crushing them beneath its titanic weight. What was more, the water that made up the dragon's body invaded every opening it could find, flooding the bodies of the vampires and utterly ravaging their bodies from within. The water was so intense that even after mortal wounds had been inflicted Amon was unable to destroy them with demonfire and take their power for himself before they died and their contract with him broke.

After the dragon hit the ground and its body returned to water, there was nothing left of the vampires except a few scattered entrails. All the rest was washed back into the river with the dragon's water after their bodies burst under the strain of Naiad's magic power.

Silence descended upon the observers in the aftermath of the battle. There weren't any serious injuries that needed tending to, as even though Leon, Emilie, and Jordan were on the losing end of the fight, they had still been wearing armor that protected them quite well. Consequently, everyone stared at the naked Naiad in a mixture of fear, gratitude, and uncertainty. Everyone was waiting for her to make her move.

And yet, she just stared at Leon with an expectant look, and after a couple seconds he got very nervous and averted his gaze. He glanced around and noticed that it wasn't just the other six who were staring, many other nobles and fisherman in the distance were intently watching his property. A quick glance backward confirmed that his neighbors were doing likewise.

"Let's get inside," he suddenly said.

Leon's voice was enough for everyone to get moving, though all seven kept a close eye on Naiad and those who could kept releasing their magic senses to keep an eye on their surroundings in case there were any nasty surprises that they had yet to encounter. Leon also verified that Anzu was perfectly fine in his stable, though the poor griffin was still going a little crazy from anxiety and seemed to be trying to tear down the door and get outside.

The villa had been completely trashed. Most of the furniture in the living room had been obliterated in the fight, and the doors had been lost in a mass of splinters on the ground. There were small fires here

and there, though thankfully none of it was demonfire, and much of the northern wing of the villa had been left blackened and severely damaged. Since there wasn't much in the way of structural support enchantments, the damage to the walls and roof from the fires was enough that the roof was even starting to sag a bit, and the outside was littered with shattered red ceramic tiles that had been thrown off of it.

There were no corpses, though. Amon had taken his due with fire, and the vampires that had been killed in the villa were now naught but ash on the wind.

"Why the hells is it taking so long for the local Legion to arrive?" Alix bitterly complained when she noticed that, even after such a loud and flashy battle that had lasted for almost ten minutes, the villa had received no official government attention so far.

"It's assumed that the nobles in this district have their own private security," Emilie answered. "There are consequently few Legion patrols, so it'll be a while before they show up..."

Leon nodded in understanding. From what he knew, it had taken the Legion more than half an hour to reach his father's villa when it had been attacked eighteen years ago. He doubted that the Legion had improved its response time since then, especially with men like the current Consul of the Central Territories in charge.

"Do we need to get them?" Valeria hesitantly asked. She didn't think it wise for anyone leaving on their own right now, given the strength of the vampires that had just attacked.

"No, they'll be here eventually," Emilie said. It was Elise and Leon's house, but she started taking on the responsibility of being the strongest, oldest, and highest ranked person present, and turned to face Naiad, who continued to stare and smile at Leon. "And who are you, my Lady?"

Naiad ignored Emilie completely, to the Tower Lord's extreme consternation. Leon, meanwhile, grabbed a tattered remnant of a black linen curtain and, after coming to the conclusion that it would sufficiently cover Naiad, tossed it at her.

"Cover yourself," he gruffly said.

[Hmm? Why are you tossing woven plant fibers at me?] she asked when the curtain hit her and slid to the floor. She made no attempt to pick it up.

"Look around you," Leon said. "One of us doesn't seem to belong, do we?"

Naiad, perhaps for the first time, finally gave the others a proper look, but it took a few seconds for it to click that they were all wearing clothes or armor. Still, she didn't try to take the curtain and cover herself.

Before she could respond, though, Elise asked, "Can... Is she talking to you, Leon?"

Leon nodded in confirmation.

"Can you understand us?" Emilie asked in another attempt to get Naiad's attention, and, fortunately for Leon's sanity, Naiad actually glanced her way and gave her a minute nod.

“Can you speak?” Asiya asked. The fight was over and it didn’t seem to her like Naiad was hostile—the river nymph Queen had been calm and had released no killing intent since her arrival, even when killing the vampires, so Asiya felt this to be a safe bet—and though her body was still flushed with adrenaline, she was regaining her usual cheerful and curious demeanor.

Naiad didn’t respond, leaving Asiya feeling a little dejected. In fact, she just glared at Leon, and Leon glared back. But Leon was far more patient than she was, and she finally broke down and asked a question first.

[Why should I wear such a disgusting thing?] Naiad demanded to know.

“Because you’re in human society now, and we wear clothes,” Leon hissed back, missing the point.

[They wear such colorful and flattering things...] Naiad said, waving her hand at the other ladies in the room, [... and you give me dead plants?]

“It’s that or animal skin,” Leon retorted.

[Then the skin,] Naiad said with an almost triumphant smile.

Leon rolled his eyes, then asked the rest of the room, “Does anyone have anything of leather for this narcissistic Princess?”

Emilie, somewhat entertained with Leon’s obvious consternation, summoned some clothes for Naiad that the river nymph Queen found adequate, though they were a bit small in some places. Once Naiad was dressed in a simple black woolen sleeveless shirt and tight dark brown leather pants, Leon and Elise managed to scrounge together some chairs for everyone to use while they waited for the Legion to arrive. Leon worked slowly, though, knowing that he’d be facing a deluge of questions once he was finished. He even took a quick trip out to the stable to calm Anzu down, which, thankfully, wasn’t too difficult. Anzu only had to see him to immediately calm down and stop tearing apart his stable.

While he was out there, Elise came out to check on him.

“We can deal with our personal issues with her later,” she quickly said without preamble, as they didn’t have long to discuss this, “but how should we explain to the Legions who she is? All it will take is a single sixth-tier knight seeing her, which I think is quite likely, and it will be known that there is an astonishingly powerful woman here where an intense battle was just fought.”

“No idea,” Leon said. “I suppose I could talk to Trajan about it, but I don’t think we can keep this from spreading...”

Elise frowned, but she said, “Hopefully His Highness can help us out here... Although, it’s possible my mother might have something that can help. Should I ask her?”

“That might be for the best,” Leon answered, and the two went back inside.

As soon as everyone took their seats, Asiya, now fully recovered—at least, so it seemed—asked Leon, “So, how do you know this woman? And where did you meet her? How strong is she? What-”

“Please, that’s enough,” Emilie said in a reprimanding tone. “This woman saved our lives, the least we can do is to ask her directly, not go through Leon—even if he has to translate or speak for her.” The

Tower Lord then turned to Naiad, who was now paying her a modicum of attention, and said, “Thank you for your assistance, we were in trouble there before you intervened. You didn’t have to, and we are all grateful for that. Is there anything I can do to assist you in return?”

Naiad glanced at Emilie and simply shook her head. It wasn’t her that the river nymph Queen had business with...

“Do you have a name?” Elise asked, her expression hard and vaguely hostile, though she spoke in a polite and welcoming tone. She sat right next to Leon, close enough that anyone with even passing knowledge of human culture would understand as being too close for them to be just friends. Elise had a good idea of who this woman was, and she wanted Naiad gone as soon as possible, despite what the nymph had just done.

This wasn’t lost on Naiad, and she gave Elise a genuine smile and said to her, [You need not fear me, girl. I only want what has been promised to me, I don’t intend to steal anything or *anyone* from you...]

Elise frowned at the voice entering her head, but she wasn’t entirely surprised, and it only made her glare even harder at Naiad.

“Hey! Leon! Introductions!” Asiya practically shouted.

Leon sighed a bit, seeing no way out of this. Asiya was looking between him and Naiad with stars in her eyes, while Valeria was trying and failing to not look interested in hearing about this woman who seemed close with Leon. For their parts, both Emilie and Jordan were quite interested to hear about Naiad but were much more subdued and patient about it.

Alix was the calmest of the bunch and had little desire to talk right now. She just sat in her seat and watched all of this with a small smile on her face. It was a good distraction from what had just happened, and she was grateful for it.

“Everyone, this is Naiad,” Leon reluctantly began, and he introduced all of them to Naiad as well.

[Is she your mate?] Naiad asked as she glanced at Elise with a raised eyebrow. She said nothing to anyone else, and barely even seemed to hear any of their names.

Leon nodded in response.

[Your only mate?] Naiad asked, seeking confirmation.

Again, Leon nodded.

[Hmm. I figured a man with your blood would’ve been trying as hard as he could to pass it on. Inherited Bloodlines don’t reproduce easily, you know, and the more mates you have, the better your chances of passing on your blood...]

“What does *that* mean?” Leon asked with a bit more force than he intended. However, he was almost incapable of harming Naiad given their power difference, so she didn’t mind.

[How much do you know about the reproductive process? I mean, I know you’re young, but you can’t be completely ignorant about these things...] Naiad said as she glanced meaningfully between Leon and an

increasingly irate Elise. It was clear to her, at least, that Leon and Elise had already had sex, but she wanted Leon to tell her.

"I know enough," Leon said. Artorias had been sure to give him some sex education, and his lessons had been about on par with what other young noblemen got in their childhoods in the Bull Kingdom. In other words, Leon was fairly familiar with the ins and outs of the reproductive act, though he was by no means an expert.

[Hmm...] Naiad responded with a teasing smile.

The others could tell that the two were having a conversation, but they all simply waited patiently for Leon and Naiad to finish.

[River nymphs like myself have fertile periods about once a month when they're young,] she explained. [As we grow older, however, this time is less and less frequent. As I am now, I only become fertile once or twice a year...]

Leon fought the urge to groan. She was fertile when she captured him, and that was only a few months ago.

As if just to add to his frustration, Naiad said, [I have no idea when I'll be fertile again, it might be months...]

"Why now?" Leon asked, trying to keep his side of the conversation vague so the others wouldn't pick too much up from it.

[As I said, people like you with Inherited Bloodlines have some fertility issues of your own,] Naiad responded. [The more I thought about this issue, the more I realized that we shouldn't wait to have you fulfill your end of the bargain, as it could potentially take a long time. Taking too long could be disastrous for me, so I came here earlier than I thought I would to begin as soon as possible...]

Leon hadn't the first clue what to say. It hadn't been enough time for him to look into his contract with Naiad, and Elise's own research hadn't turned up anything useful...

'I suppose we should just move on for now, it's not like we're going to start right now in front of everyone...'

[I want us to start tonight,] Naiad said, sending Leon's heart plummeting through his feet and deep into the ground.

"We... can talk about that later... probably won't be tonight, we'll have some more guests in a few minutes..." Leon said as he did his best to hide his frustration and anxiety. He thought he'd have much more time, years if he were lucky, but now Naiad was here before him and saying that she would probably be here for a long time.

Needless to say, Leon was quite happy when Naiad simply smiled at him and said, [I don't want to force this, but you did forge a contract with me... but I suppose another day or two won't matter...]

Leon nodded in gratitude, and Elise took the silence everyone else was stuck in to say, "Mother, is there any way to hide our guest's power?"

“Why?” Emilie asked. There shouldn’t have been much of a reason to do so, but Elise’s expression made it clear that she wasn’t joking around when asking.

“Just to avoid any complications, I think we’re all going to want to turn in early tonight...” Elise replied.

Emilie wasn’t quite convinced, but for the sake of appearances agreed, and she got to work scouring her soul realm for something suitable for Elise’s request.

Chapter 334: The Broken Villa

There wasn’t much Emilie could do to hide Naiad’s colossal aura, but she did have a charging amulet, a simple gold chain with a clasp that could hold a gem of moderate size. The amulet would then use the mage’s power to charge the gem with magic, reducing the amount of magic power that leaks out of their body and into their aura in the process. Emilie put a sapphire, the highest grade of magic-storing gem known, into the clasp and gave it to Naiad.

When the nymph Queen put it on, the gem began to pulse with power, and a tiny light within its depths could be seen. Simultaneously, Naiad’s aura noticeably grew dimmer, though it still hadn’t fallen to the point where Leon and Jordan could really tell what it was. However, Emilie could now perceive it, so Naiad at least appeared to be of the seventh-tier. Still absurdly powerful for the Bull Kingdom, but it wasn’t putting her mind-bendingly intense power on display.

Emilie appeared more than a little crest-fallen at how little the amulet seemed to work. She wanted to burst out and ask just how powerful Naiad was, but given the circumstances, she didn’t think she was in any position to make demands of this strange, freakishly powerful woman that appeared seemingly out of nowhere.

Naiad wasn’t human, though, that much was crystal-clear to everyone given how she acted. She wasn’t in any mood to talk, so despite everyone but Leon and Elise being quite willing to express their gratitude to her for killing those last few powerful vampires, no one was able to get her attention long enough to actually do so.

And so, after Emilie gave Naiad the amulet, the villa was almost completely silent until the first Legion knights arrived at the villa a few minutes later, more than half an hour after the vampires first attacked.

‘What a terrible response time...’ Leon thought. Thirty-plus minutes meant that the Legion had all-but abandoned the noble district to be run exclusively by the resident nobility. How the place hadn’t yet fallen into complete anarchy was beyond him. *‘Though, I suppose since the Legion headquarters is still within the city, it might discourage the nobility from trying anything too overt...’*

Leon’s thoughts were interrupted when the fifth-tier Legion knight in charge finally made his way through the courtyard and ruined front door to emerge in the living room.

“... What happened here?” he asked in shock and disbelief as he stared at the eight people sitting in the living room, his blade in hand and looking ready for a fight.

—

When Trajan arrived at Leon’s villa, the place was swarming with Legion soldiers. There wasn’t much remaining from the vampires, but what little was left still had to be recovered and the incident analyzed

and recorded. Other than that, the Legion was busy sweeping through the villa, which Leon and Elise would've both been dismayed and aggrieved by, though both had long since left the premises.

Seeing the place being ransacked, Trajan had to clench his jaw not to immediately start shouting in anger, but the knights he had in tow weren't so controlled. Minerva and several of Trajan's other fifth and sixth-tier knights went around ordering the Legion knights to stop. Trajan and his retinue were already upset that so many vampires had somehow infiltrated the capital, let alone assaulted one of their number, so seeing Leon's villa being taken apart by other knights wasn't something they were going to be quiet about.

"Your Highness!" the Legion knight in charge called out once he realized that Trajan had arrived.

"WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THIS?!" Trajan demanded as he saw the mountain of Leon and Elise's possessions piled up in the courtyard.

"Orders from the top, Your Highness," the lead knight responded. "We have to search this place for any sign of demonic activity."

"Are you saying that my knight had something to do with the vampires that attacked his home?!" Trajan demanded to know.

"I'm not saying anything," the knight respectfully replied, "all I'm saying is that we have orders from Sir Avidius to search this place for any sign of demonic activity, Your Highness!"

"By my authority as the Consul of the East and Prince of this Kingdom, I order all of you to stop this instant!" Trajan roared, his sixth-tier aura spiking and exerting immense pressure upon the Legion knights.

Fortunately for them, these Legion knights weren't particularly enmeshed in the politics of the capital, so they all stopped, for the most part. Whether or not any more knights would arrive who were more loyal to Octavius or the Central Consul, Trajan couldn't say, he simply wanted to make sure that no one would go digging around in Leon and Elise's things again.

If there was some genuine concern that Leon was involved, then the proper course of action would be to go through Trajan first, not ransack his home at the first opportunity. Needless to say, Trajan called bullshit on the entire thing, though he would never say it in such a manner.

When Trajan saw that his order was being followed, he retracted his aura and approached the leading knight.

"Where are Sir Leon and Lady Elise?" Trajan asked. Given what he'd found the knights and their soldiers doing, he was feeling extremely apprehensive about Leon's current condition. At the least, Trajan wasn't able to sense either Leon or Elise anywhere around the villa.

"They gave their statements and we let them go," the knight quickly replied, not wanting to anger the Prince any more than he already had. "All of the people here gave their accounts of what happened, and since we had no orders to keep them here, we allowed them to leave."

Trajan didn't pursue that line of questioning; he could already guess where Leon and Elise were right now if they hadn't been detained by the Legion. Still, he wasn't about to leave their villa unattended and risk letting Avidius' knights come by later to plant false evidence against one of his most trusted knights.

"All of you can leave, my knights will handle this investigation from here on out," Trajan said, his tone brokering no argument. Avidius would argue that Trajan was stealing his authority, but given the Prince's relationship with the high officials, he didn't foresee it being anything more than a pain in the ass.

The Legion knight had the good sense to order his people to leave and not further provoke the powerful Prince, while Trajan's knights began to sweep the premises for anything unusual. Trajan himself left Minerva to lock the villa down while he quickly made his way over to Emilie's estate, moving through the empty midnight streets of the capital fast enough to reach the estate several miles away in less than five minutes.

Despite the lateness of the hour, he was well-received at the estate and promptly taken to Leon, Elise, Emilie, and Jordan—the others who had taken part in the fight had gone home after the arrival of the Legion, and Naiad had been given a guest room to stay in while this mess was dealt with.

Leon was as stoic as usual, but within his mind, he prayed to his Ancestors and to every god worshipped by men for Naiad to stay in her room until Trajan left.

"Leon!" Trajan called out as he entered the room. Leon and the other three had been waiting for him in a comfortable sitting room in the main palace complex, and as soon as he looked up, Leon rose and bowed slightly in greeting.

"Your Highness," Emilie said with a smile. Officially, she was much higher ranked socially than Leon was, and it amused her that Trajan greeted Leon first.

Trajan nodded and got the rest of the greetings out of the way. Then, he turned back to Leon and asked, "What in all the hells happened?"

"We were busy celebrating Elise's birthday..." Leon began, and he quickly summarized the vampire attack as best as he could without leaving out any crucial details. He didn't mention Naiad, he simply stated that the vampires were defeated and left it at that, implying that he, Emilie, and Jordan managed to prevail in the end.

"Any idea why that happened?" Trajan asked.

"You know what I think about these vampires, that they're worshipping a single demon," Leon stated. "At this point, I've encountered followers of this thing twice, and come out alive both times. Maybe it's just angry and wanted some payback..."

"No other indications of their motivations?" Trajan asked with a skeptical tone. "Nothing to indicate why they would attack you, of all people, instead of someone with more authority in the government?"

"They weren't particularly chatty when they broke down my fucking door!" Leon replied, his fury at being attacked in his own home while surrounded by people that he mostly cared about breaking through his usual neutral demeanor. "They didn't say and I had no chance to ask. They're dead now, so why they did it is between them and their master."

Trajan sighed and leaned back in his chair. He hadn't seen much of Leon since the triumphal games months ago, and it was only now striking Trajan just how quickly Leon was rising up the magical tiers. He was nineteen and sixth-tier! He had power that Trajan hadn't ever seen in anyone who hadn't taken copious amounts of potions to boost themselves up the early tiers.

It seemed to Trajan that Leon was growing strong enough to more directly involve him in their affairs. He wasn't yet old enough for Trajan to trust him with leading any meaningful command, but ending his effective exile from the Royal Palace wasn't out of the question. Plus, it would keep him close, just in case something like this ever happened again.

"I understand that you think that they're all serving the same demon, but without concrete proof, there isn't much we can do about it," Trajan said as he closed his eyes and leaned his head back in exhaustion. He had been woken up after only getting a few scant minutes of sleep with this emergency, and he was truly feeling the fatigue. "What are you going to do about your home?"

"Have it rebuilt," Elise chimed in. "It won't be too long, a few weeks at most..."

"I also have a few ideas about the enchantments we can put up within it," Leon confidently stated. "Gonna turn that place into a damned fortress!"

"What about until then?" Trajan asked.

"They can stay here, as they've been doing prior to this," Emilie said. Leon and Elise had been in their villa for all of a single day, so it would hardly be that big of a deal to move back in. It would certainly inconvenience Emilie's servants to buy more furniture and clothing for Elise to replace what was lost, but Emilie paid them generously to deal with things like this.

Trajan nodded, at least confident that they wouldn't be attacked when in the Tower Lord's own home... though a crack appeared in that confidence when he remembered that the Tower Lord had been with them when they had been attacked. Regardless, now that they had been attacked once, he trusted Leon and Emilie to take the appropriate security measures for their respective homes from now on.

"I found the Legion going through your things," Trajan said. "I'm going to have a strong conversation with Sir Avidius tomorrow morning, as I think he might have been trying to strike at me through you, perhaps by planting evidence that you conspired with these vampires somehow, or perhaps trying to do something else nefarious. Regardless, I don't want him poking around in the home of one of my knights any more than I think you want him in your home..."

"What?" Emilie asked in shock, speaking for both Leon and Elise at the same time. Her tone was one of extreme fury, and Trajan couldn't help but shiver at its sound. Emilie was, after all, leagues stronger than he was, both magically and politically. He was a Prince of the Bull Kingdom, but she was the highest representative of an international organization that even the Four Empires had to take seriously enough to consider an equal in all but name.

"I put a stop to it, but I figured you four should know," Trajan said, nodding to Leon, Elise, Emilie, and the silent Jordan, though the latter's expression was one of abject rage.

“Thank you for bringing this to my attention, Your Highness,” Emilie said, a dangerous smile on her lips. “You won’t be the only person having a conversation with Sir Avidius tomorrow, something like this won’t stand...”

Trajan nodded in understanding. To target Leon at this point was to indirectly target Heaven’s Eye. He had no doubt that there would be repercussions for the Consul later that would strongly discourage him from trying to frame Leon in the future, and most definitely make him think twice in searching through Leon and Elise’s belongings.

“Report to my office tomorrow,” Trajan said, intent on ending the conversation so he could go home and sleep. He’d touched on the critical things, and anything further could wait until the morning.

Leon nodded. “Anything in particular we have to do?” he asked.

“A few updates, but other than that, nothing,” Trajan said. “I’m going to keep you near me for the time being, just in case. If you’re right and you’re being targeted... well, I’m not entirely sure what I can do about that given your... circumstances, but you can trust that I’ll do what I can.”

“You needn’t worry about protecting him,” came a voice from a nearby doorway that caused Leon’s heart to nearly stop.

When Trajan turned his head to see who was talking, he saw the gorgeous figure of Naiad in the doorway staring back at him. Her aura was intense and incomprehensible to him, sending a current of shock running up his spine, and he had to fight the urge to draw a weapon from his soul realm.

“Who... are you?” he asked.

Ignoring his question, Naiad put on the smile of a hungry shark with prey in sight and said, “You don’t have to worry about Leon, because if anyone tries to harm him, I’ll tear them to pieces...”

—

The first responders to Leon’s villa was a squad of ten, and they had all gotten a good look at everyone in the villa when they arrived, including Naiad. For the most part, none of them thought anything of it, but one man took particular notice of everyone there.

He saw Valeria, he saw Emilie, and he saw Naiad.

Once Trajan dismissed all of them, including those Legion knights that arrived after the first responders, this young third-tier knight left with the others, but he remembered everything that he had seen. After his shift was over, he went directly to the home of Justin Isynos to report what he had seen.

Justin knew that Valeria knew Leon in passing due to their connections with Elise, so that part didn’t surprise the former Exarch. What did take him by surprise was this mysterious woman who seemed to appear out of nowhere, since he was sure he already knew about the few connections Leon had in the capital. He sent one of his most trusted agents, the tall man, to get close to Emilie’s estate and see what he could see of Leon and Naiad. Emilie’s estate was within range of Justin’s powerful magic senses, of course, but the place had been warded to scatter magic senses, so Justin had to send someone in person if he wanted to know what was happening within.

He needed some kind of proof if he wanted to take more direct action, something that tied Leon Ursus to Leon Raime. Infiltrating the estate of the Tower Lord was risky and brazen, but he was growing firm in his belief that he was right and considered the risk necessary.

When the tall man arrived so late in the night that it was early in the morning, he found the estate quiet. Leon was asleep, as was Elise, Emilie, Jordan, Anzu, and just about all the others within, save for a few guards...

... and Naiad.

She wasn't wearing the charging amulet, leaving her aura bare for the tall man to see once the estate's defenses had been penetrated if he spared her more than a cursory glance. However, once he realized that she wasn't Leon, he moved on.

When the tall man's magic senses washed over her, Naiad easily noticed, and she released her own intense magic senses. She instantly found the seventh-tier tall man, hidden in a shadow in a corner of the estate close to Elise's wing. Naiad was in the main estate building, but once she started moving, she reached the tall man's location in a matter of seconds, only slowing as much as she needed to avoid ripping doors from their frames. The tall man was too confident in his skills in shadow magic and too focused on assessing Leon's current condition after the vampire attack that he hadn't spared Naiad enough time to realize the difference in their power. If he had, he would've run from the estate as fast as he could, but that opportunity had passed as soon as Naiad began to move.

The tall man barely had time to scream in terror as Naiad arrived before him, killing intent pouring out of her body that chilled him to his core. She reached into his shadow, grabbed him by the shirt, and pulled him out of the darkness so quickly he barely realized it was happening; such a thing wasn't something he'd ever considered possible, but that lack of belief didn't stop Naiad.

Naiad conjured a large globe of water, and as the tall man began to properly process what was happening and call upon his own magic, Naiad completely submerged him within her water. This water pressed itself deep into his body, entering any way it could.

The seventh-tier tall man was killed so fast he didn't even manage to get off a single attack before Naiad annihilated his body and scattered what few entrails were left throughout the grounds of Emilie's estate. He died miserable and in great pain. When he failed to return, the shocked Justin decided to play it safe and pull back his observance of Leon. The tall man was one of his best men, and if the tall man disappeared within that estate, then Justin was going to give it a wide berth until he had more information on Leon, Naiad, and the estate.

His conviction that Leon Ursus was the Leon Raime he sought grew, though he hadn't yet the information he wanted in his possession, and so he could do nothing but sit back and wait for an opportunity. So long as Naiad was around Leon, he would have to act with extreme care.

Chapter 335: Patience

"Are you sure you're ready for this?" Trajan asked as he looked Leon in the eyes.

"I am," Leon said without hesitation. The two were in Trajan's office the day after Leon's villa was attacked discussing what could be done to keep Leon safe. Their conclusion was that there wasn't much

of substance they could do, and Leon had no interest in security theater, so it was simply decided that he would spend more time in the Royal Palace while also being given time to devise his own security measures.

Trajan simply didn't want Leon attacked again. Given they had no idea how the vampires had made it past what few defenses the city had—there were no walls around the city and the only defenses of any meaning were around the Royal Palace and individual estates—about the only thing they could come up with was a greater response time from the Legion, even though it wouldn't have helped much during the vampiric attack given the power of the vampire leaders.

For all their discussion, though, as Trajan wasn't in charge of the local Legions, this topic was little more than idle speculation that neither believed would lead anywhere meaningful. Neither could do much in practice that required them to discuss with the other.

"Very well," Trajan said with a sigh. "I fully reinstate you in the Legion. I grant you the rank of Legate, as befits your sixth-tier power, and charge you to defend this Kingdom from all threats, internal and external."

Leon gave Trajan a strange look but carefully nodded anyway. It hardly mattered, though—he believed in always following through on promises, but he also wasn't about to hold himself to things he said in the moment when they became untenable. He wanted to live his life by ear, and not to tie himself down to a Kingdom he cared little for, even if there were those whom he respected that cared for it a great deal.

He needed to be flexible and adaptable, and he wanted to eventually look for his mother. He couldn't live the way he wanted to from under the thumb of an absent King.

Or maybe he just felt that way now because his words had backed him into a corner with Naiad, he couldn't say.

All of these things crossed his mind as he slowly nodded to Trajan. Leon said no more, and Trajan, realizing that that was as good a pledge of loyalty as he was going to get from Leon, sighed again.

"All right, boy, I'm sure you have a lot to do after your house was wrecked, go take care of it. I'll deal with the political horseshit that's going to come of it, don't worry about any of that."

"Thank you, Trajan," Leon whispered, and he departed from the office, sparing only the time to give the Prince one short bow after reaching the door. He considered himself lucky that Trajan hadn't asked much about Naiad. The only information that Trajan knew about her was that she was an incredibly powerful 'mage' who was now in Leon's corner, and Leon had expected some kind of interrogation on Trajan's part into who Naiad was. But the Prince reigned his curiosity, trusting in Leon's judgment and feeling some comfort in knowing that someone of Naiad's power was near the younger man and that she was clearly willing to use that power in his defense.

Of course, the Prince fully expected more information on her in time, but for now, with all the political instability in the capital that demanded his attention, he was willing to indulge Leon's natural tendency towards secrecy for a little while.

With that over, there was nothing more that Leon wanted to do than to go back to Emilie's estate and get to the real work he wanted to do. Just the day before, he had been planning on meeting with Anzu's Heaven's Eye beastmaster and begin Anzu's war beast training. Now that his home had been attacked, though, he had other priorities.

Heaven's Eye was going to have the villa completely rebuilt in a week, and probably more than that besides, so Leon had seven days to come up with the defensive wards he wanted. Already, he knew that there would be walls put around the entire villa and its property, so Leon wanted mostly the same enchantments within them that prevented people from jumping over them, plus more than a few earth enchantments to prevent any future attackers from simply knocking the walls down or tunneling beneath. There were also alarms, weak magic fields to disrupt invisibility, and a whole host of others, besides.

Those, he could let the Heaven's Eye people handle; his concern was the gate and the villa itself. While studying the magical arts of House Raime, he'd come across quite a few intriguing wards that he wanted to try, such as a series of lightning rods spread across the property that could strike interlopers with enough lightning to render them into a charred skeleton. He also knew of one that would do a similar thing to anyone trying to break down a door that he planned to put on the main gate. There was even one tantalizing enchantment with more offensive capabilities, that could hit someone from more than a hundred feet off the property with a bolt of lightning.

He didn't think Elise would go for most of the enchantments he had in mind given the infrastructure requirements would cut into her garden, but after being attacked in his new home, he still planned to transform the place into a fortress that could hold off an entire Legion if need be. No one else save for him and Elise would have such unfettered access to his property after he was done.

The more he thought about what he wanted, the more his mind turned to his and Artorias' compound in the Northern Vales and the obelisk that had stood in their courtyard. In that compound, he and Artorias had been surrounded by ice wraiths, banshees, and other creatures of the forest that would've loved to turn them into a tasty meal. Leon had begun to have similar feelings of being surrounded by enemies, and he wanted his home complete as soon as possible.

In the time it took Leon to think of all this, he had left the Royal Palace and returned to the streets of the capital. He didn't notice anything strange during the walk through the noble district—probably since there were so few people living within—but once he returned to the more populated western districts, he started to feel countless eyes upon him.

As he glanced around, wondering just who it was that was staring at him with such intensity that he could feel it, he found that nearly half of the throngs of people in the streets around him were staring. These were relatively crowded streets, but not so much that Leon was lost in the crowd; he could easily be seen, and after his performance in the triumphal games, just about everyone in the city knew his name, and a great many even knew his face. Since he had barely left Emilie's estate in the two months, and when he had he had taken a Heaven's Eye carriage, so he hadn't realized just how famous he was in the city. Along the entire walk back to the estate, he attracted stares and left excited whispering in his wake.

By the time he made it back to Emilie's estate, his heart was pounding from the anxiety of having just about every step he took observed by hundreds of people at a time. After Emilie's servant let him in, he had to take a few seconds by the door to catch his breath and calm himself down.

Unfortunately, at this moment, Naiad came strolling out from a nearby room.

[You're back,] she said into his mind with a wide smile on her face.

"I am," Leon acknowledged as he did his best to spare Naiad only as much of his attention as was absolutely required.

Disregarding Leon's curt attitude, Naiad approached him and said, [We should talk.]

"Yes, we should, but I'm not in a talking mood right now," Leon stated as he pushed past her to walk further into the estate.

[I'm in a talking mood,] Naiad said as she grabbed Leon's arm with a grip like steel. [We *need* to talk,] she repeated.

Leon fought the urge to glare and gave Naiad a proper look for the first time that day. Emilie had a tailor stop by in the night with some clothes for the river nymph, so Naiad wasn't continuing to wear Emilie's clothes. She was dressed in a simple outfit, a long-sleeved cotton shirt and leather pants, both monochrome blue with no embellishments. Leon guessed Naiad must have set aside her demands not to wear dead plants since he remembered her turning down the linen curtain the previous night. Though to be fair, it *was* a curtain, and he could understand her reluctance to wear it.

Naiad's face was serious, no playfulness could be seen in her at all. Her lake-blue eyes were narrow, and her mouth was turned into a slight frown. Gone from her bronze face was the hungry look that Leon had come to expect from his short encounters with her, and that unnerved him a little.

'What could be such an issue that someone as powerful as her is so solemn?' Leon wondered, and he decided to take a chance and relax, allowing Naiad to steer him toward her guest rooms and away from the estate's servants.

Once the door to her sitting room was closed and they were alone, Leon braced himself for whatever would come, expecting her to try and push him down, but instead, she carefully sat down in a nearby chair and said, [I killed a man last night. He infiltrated this estate, I found him and killed him. I guessed he was after you.]

Leon's eyes went wide with her first statement, and he only grew more agitated with the two following it.

"WHAT?!" he almost shouted, barely managing to contain his voice. He wasn't sure if there were noise-canceling enchantments around guest rooms, but regardless, he felt it would still be a bit inappropriate. "Why is this the first I'm hearing about this?! Have you told this to anyone else? Elise? Emilie? Do they know that you killed someone in their home?"

[You're the first I've told,] Naiad said, her serious expression finally dropping into a more normal smile. [I owe those other two nothing. You're the only person I have any obligation toward.]

"Emilie has given you clothes and a roof to sleep under," Leon said, his expression darkening.

[More like clothes that I've been forced to wear and a bed I've been forced to sleep in,] Naiad said. [I'm perfectly fine without either, there is a very nice-looking pond that I would've preferred to sleep in.]

"Whatever, sleep in the pond if you want," Leon said, resolving to speak with Elise and Emilie about the intruder immediately after this conversation was over. "Who was this person you killed?"

[I don't know, nor do I care,] Naiad replied. [He had powerful darkness magic, though. He was hiding in a shadow when I saw him.]

"If he was hiding in a shadow, how did you kill him? Darkness mages are supposed to be intangible when in their shadows..."

[Channel enough magic into your fingers and your fingers will reach them,] Naiad said as she closed her eyes and smiled in pride, causing Leon to stare at her for a moment as he contemplated the simplicity of her answer and the experience of fighting the vampire Bran, who had seemed so untouchable in his shadows.

"Nothing else you can tell me about this guy?" Leon asked, deciding moving was better for his sanity in the short run, though he was going to see if he could find a way to practice this 'shadow grabbing' technique.

[He was a seventh-tier mage,] Naiad said as she scrunched up her face in thought.

"Was he a vampire?" Leon asked, his mind turning back to Bran, the last darkness mage he'd fought.

[No, he was human through and through,] Naiad said. [I obliterated him completely, his body burst when I invaded it with my water magic. There's nothing left to examine, I'm afraid...]

"Wonderful," Leon sarcastically said. "I've had three different sets of people so far attempt to kill me in my life, and now I don't know if this guy is from one of those groups, was acting on behalf of another, or was on his own..."

[Tell me about these people who've tried to kill you...] Naiad demanded, her gaze turning vicious.

"Why do you want to know?" Leon inquired. He could feel a few ripples of killing intent emanating from Naiad, a tiny amount, but still enough to cause his legs to feel weaker than he'd ever care to admit.

[If they attack my chosen mate, then they will die,] Naiad stated like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Leon stared at her, his mouth opening and closing as he tried to think of some kind of response. He was flattered and insulted at the same time, happy that someone like Naiad was willing to employ violence on his behalf, but also angry because she was giving him no choice in the matter. Given what he knew about Justin Isynos, House Decimus, and Amon, he knew that having Naiad's help would be an incredible boon.

All he would need to provide in return was sex, at least according to his own understanding of their situation. Trying to look at it divorced from his feelings, Leon had to admit that it was a damn fine deal, especially given that, physically speaking, there wasn't a cell in his body that wasn't attracted to Naiad on a physical level.

It was just that absolute domineering nature of hers that put him off. She didn't ask, she demanded as if she were entitled to take what she wanted from him.

She had also saved his life, the life of his lover, and his lover's family and friends when the vampires attacked, not to mention how relatively reasonable she had been when they had made their first contract, at least from the perspective of a wild river nymph. She demanded, but she also relented when push came to shove, and that confused Leon to no end; he had no idea how to deal with her.

Looking at Naiad, dressed in her loose-fitting low-cut shirt and tight blue pants, Leon had to admit that if he didn't have Elise, he'd have probably already slept with Naiad, regardless of the consequences.

But he did have Elise, and though she gave him permission to seek other women—even insisting that he do so—he didn't get the impression from her that she wanted him to be with Naiad. A sentiment he could understand, to be fair. And Leon cared far more about Elise than he did for Naiad, no matter how many lives the river nymph Queen had saved.

"Look, Naiad..." Leon began before pausing from hesitation. "I... suppose that I'm... willing to fulfill our contract under specific circumstances..."

[Whatever those circumstances are, they don't matter in the light of our contract,] Naiad said. She was a patient woman, for what a civilized human would call a 'monster', but Leon's constant refusal was trying that patience. In the wild, her kind would just take what they wanted and treated mating much less seriously than many humans did; in her mind, she had been nothing but reasonable with Leon. Now, the time to pay that debt had come due, he had sworn to give her a child at the moment of her choosing, and she had planted her magic upon his Mana Glyph as a result. There was no getting out of this, or at least, none that either knew of.

"I get that you have the power to take what you want," Leon said as he slowly slid away from Naiad. He was sitting on a sofa, though, and there wasn't much room he could maneuver to without being obvious. However, it didn't matter how far away from Naiad he slid; if she wanted to assault him, then he was still perfectly within her range.

In fact, the predatory look in Naiad's face had come back, and Leon felt certain that she was only seconds away from launching herself at him.

"I have Elise, and I don't want to do anything that will harm her," Leon said, trying to continue, but he was interrupted by Naiad.

[It's just mating, your other mate isn't even here, there's no way this would harm her!]

"It would if we're not upfront with her!" Leon said, calling upon his magic power as he felt the air around Naiad start to churn and writhe with magic power. "I love her, and I can't betray her by having sex with someone without her!"

This gave Naiad some pause. She had started to lean forward, her hungry gaze slowly morphing into one of thought and contemplation.

[So...] she quietly said within Leon's mind, [you will stop resisting if your other mate participates?]

“I... uh, I, yeah, that would be fine,” Leon sputtered in surprise as he tried not to cringe his bones into dust from her phrasing. If he were to be honest, he didn’t think he could handle Elise and Naiad at the same time—not that he had been intending to try, he just wanted this whole thing over and done with while incurring as little pain and mess as he could manage. And he hated with every fiber of his being that this was something that Elise now had to endure, as it was his mistake that brought this on.

[Hmph,] Naiad said as she straightened up. [Then I will speak with your first mate. Regardless of how this turns out, I will take my due. If I don’t, then a Gorgon I will become, and that will *not* happen!]

Chapter 336: Elise and Naiad

Naiad was determined not to let Leon go, and her time was running out. She could feel her magic power slowing, which was why she had decided to call in Leon’s side of the deal rather than wait.

Normally, her magic power flowed through her body like a river, speeding up as she grew more and more powerful. However, she had noticed that that river of power had been slowing down for some time and only continued to decelerate at a faster rate as time went on. In other words, her water magic was starting to become more and more like slow, stone-like earth magic, indicating that her transformation from a river nymph into a gorgon had begun. Right now, her skin was still smooth and flawless, without a single snake-like scale to be found, but that was only a matter of time, whether months or years, she couldn’t know for certain.

When Leon had been brought to her by her lesser nymph, it had been like she had seen a light at the end of the tunnel, a way out that didn’t require her to expose herself to the world at large and run the risk of being killed for not being human—an all too common occurrence, given that lesser nymphs had the tendency to consider humans prey. When Leon had refrained from mating with her, though, it had taken her completely by surprise, and she ended up relenting to his human notions of love and sex rather than the wilder and far less consensual river nymph version.

She set off from her underground cave a little over a week before arriving at Leon’s villa, leaving her lesser nymphs to be taken in by other Naiads—she didn’t intend to return for a long while. As she left her cave, she had the conviction to take her due, regardless of Leon’s protestations, but she moved through several large human settlements on her way to the Bull Kingdom’s capital and she hadn’t been able to stop herself from stopping to observe the people, to ascertain the truth of what Leon had claimed.

At first, what she saw had infuriated her. She had followed a group of Legion marines that had disembarked from a Legion warship in Ariminium and gone to a brothel. Taking this as proof that Leon had lied to her about humanity needing time and trust to mate, she grew so angry that the water around her roiled and churned and capsized half a dozen small fishing boats in her vicinity.

She left Ariminium furious, intending to push Leon down, take what she felt was hers, and kill anyone in her way. She would stay as long as Leon failed to impregnate her, continuing until the deed was done and she no longer had to fear turning into a gorgon.

However, as she sped through the Gulf of Discord at a blistering speed, her anger cooled, and reason returned to her. She had only witnessed a single instance of human mating outside of when her lesser

river nymphs would mate with Talfar fishermen, and she decided to see if she could see more—just for educational purposes, it wasn't because she was simply curious about sex, that wasn't it at all.

At least, that was what she told herself.

She stopped next at a small fishing village—the same one, in fact, that Leon and Alix had visited before dealing with the smugglers right before the war with Talfar. There, she saw proper human courtship, or rather, as much as was possible to see in such a small village. She spent a day observing that village with her powerful magic senses, and she saw that some of the mortals that inhabited it did have sex completely without emotion, but most of the sex these mortals had seemed to be with loving mates. Naiad saw more proof that Leon lied about being incapable of mating with her, but she also saw proof of the love and of familial loyalty that he had spoken of just before they forged their contract.

She started to think that it was more complicated than she first realized. The life of a river nymph Queen was simple, solitary, and rather impersonal, after all, and such complicated social ceremonies weren't something that she completely understood. Still, Naiad was more than intelligent enough to realize that maybe Leon wasn't lying to her about human mating rituals after all.

By the time she emerged from the Naga River by Leon's home—concealing her own presence along the way so that Leon wouldn't be able to use their connection and know that she was coming closer—she had resolved to wait as long as Leon needed, though she wasn't going to leave him alone during that time.

Throughout her journey from the western regions of Talfar to the center of the Bull Kingdom, though, not once was she tempted to simply write Leon off and mate with someone else more easily tempted. She was a Naiad, and after seeing Leon's power, no other partner could compare. She was determined to give her daughters Leon's lightning, and there would be no settling for men with lesser, more *human* blood.

Still, when she finally met up with Leon, she found the vampires attacking him. That wouldn't do, so she killed them without hesitation—dead men can't mate, after all. Initially, she had thought that that would've been enough for Leon to comply and fulfill his contract, and yet, when she spoke to Leon after he returned to Emilie's estate the next day, he still refused. Even after revealing that she killed another potential enemy, he still refrained from giving her what she wanted.

It was clear to Naiad that she had to do something about that, she had to take away Leon's trump card and get his primary mate on her side. To that end, she now walked straight to the back gardens of the estate, to where Elise was supervising the estate's servants as they put her painstakingly grown herbs into pots to transport to her and Leon's villa.

When Naiad exited the estate into the expansive garden the entire group of a dozen servants froze—most of them were men, and she felt them staring at her with varying levels of both lust and fear of her obvious power. They were all beneath her notice, though, and she ignored them completely in favor of walking straight to Elise.

For her part, Elise rolled her eyes and barely managed to conceal a scowl upon Naiad's arrival and ordered the workers to get back to it. The order was hardly followed to the letter, as it was clear that

many eyes were still following Naiad as she walked over to Elise, though for the most part the two ladies were left alone.

[Let's talk,] Naiad said into Elise's mind.

"Let's not," Elise responded, her tone a few shades more hostile than her noble upbringing would usually permit. She drew a few curious gazes since it seemed to everyone else that she was talking to herself, but no one was so rude as to actually ask what they were doing.

[If you don't want to talk, then I shall simply take it as approval on your part and do what I please,] Naiad said with a mischievous grin.

Elise frowned, then said, "Fine." She then led Naiad back inside to her library, which was the closest unoccupied room, what with other servants taking care of other parts of her personal wing of the estate.

They sat down in nearby armchairs, but Naiad didn't immediately speak. Instead, she just slowly let her eyes take stock of Elise, as the river nymph Queen hadn't yet done so. The only person she had properly paid any amount of attention to since arriving at the villa was Leon.

Elise, feeling uncomfortably naked under the scrutiny of such a powerful person, asked with a tone of irritation, "What do you want?"

[I understand why he would take you as a primary mate,] Naiad said, mostly ignoring Elise's question. [You are a stunningly beautiful example of humanity, more than a match for most Naiad's I've seen... Decent strength, independent attitude, I get it...]

"Your point?!" Elise demanded.

[Ah, please forgive me...] Naiad said, simply spouting off some words that she'd heard many times on the way to the capital when someone had offended another, but she didn't really mean them. [I want to mate with Leon, and he won't do it without your approval. I have come for that approval.]

Elise's gaze grew sharper and a modicum of killing intent began to leak into her aura, but inside she was quietly proud that Leon was still resisting.

"Who do you think you are?" Elise asked out loud, her voice quiet but hateful. Her killing intent grew a bit sharper, but it was so weak compared to Naiad that the river nymph Queen barely even felt it.

Naiad cocked an eyebrow in amusement at Elise's question, smiled, and replied, [I am the woman who saved Leon, you, and everyone else who was there last night.]

"You didn't come here to save us, if you were pure in your intentions then I might be a bit grateful, but instead you came here to try and steal what's mine!" Elise retorted.

[I am trying to steal nothing,] Naiad replied, unfazed by Elise's comment. [I have no intention of usurping your position as Leon's primary mate, I simply want what has been promised to me. Besides, isn't life a fitting payment for life?]

"You mean about that gorgon thing?" Elise asked as she steadied herself and got her tone back under control.

[You know about that?] Naiad asked, a bit of concern entering her voice for the first time. When no answer to her implied question came, Naiad simply assumed that Leon had told her and clarified, [I suppose that, yes, I do mean the gorgon thing, but I also mean new life we were going to make together...]

“Meaning you want to stay with him?!” Elise asked in uncharacteristic alarm. She gripped the armrests of her chair so hard that they were crushed into dust under her fourth-tier strength.

[Not really, but he owes me a child,] Naiad replied. [As I said, I have no desire to supplant your position, just that Leon gives me the life that he owes. I don’t mind if you join us while that happens, too. While I’m here, I’d even help you two defend yourselves from interlopers, and given what I’ve seen so far, you two need the help...]

“Why him?” Elise asked in a commanding tone, quickly calming her alarm. “You could have anyone, so why him?!”

[You could have anyone, too,] Naiad shot back. [Why do *you* like him?]

Elise stared at Naiad, not intending to reply.

[Whatever,] Naiad said. She hadn’t expected a reply, but gave Elise the opportunity to, anyway. [I suspect that whatever might have initially attracted you to him was the same that piqued my interest: that powerful *blood*... I can’t help but want that blood for my own daughters, and there is no other blood that I have seen that can compare!]

“So, you don’t love him?” Elise asked with mild disapproval, ignoring the bit about Leon’s blood. “You insist upon him so much that it seems like infatuation to me...”

‘*Hahaha, ‘love’,*’ Naiad thought with more than a bit of scorn. There wasn’t room for love in the wild, and she had never once considered the possibility of falling in love with someone. However, she was passingly familiar with the concept from stories from her own mother and from her week spent observing the citizens of the Bull Kingdom on the way to the capital.

[Love is a strange thing to me and I’m not sure if I even know what it is. That being said, judging from what I do know about the concept, I can say with reasonable certainty that, no, I don’t love Leon. His blood, however, is something that I can’t, under any circumstances, pass up.]

As she said this, Naiad smiled and sat back, as if she were proud of what she had just said. It was true that she thought about Leon a lot since he had first been delivered to her, but occupying her thoughts wasn’t the same as love. Neither was the desire to be around him, in her mind, just that his blood was that attractive.

There was no doubt in her mind that that attraction would go away by the time she was with child.

“I’ll find you someone better!” Elise suddenly burst out, to Naiad’s entertainment.

[No, you won’t, not in the time I have,] Naiad confidently replied. She felt it was perfectly possible for Elise to find someone more attractive than Leon if given enough time, but Naiad didn’t have that time. More attractive in terms of power, at least.

Naiad wasn’t sure why that distinction was important to her, but it was.

“What about your other nymphs? The ones you command?” Elise inquired. “Surely you can’t be away from them for very long?”

[They’ll find other Naiads, there’s enough of my sisters around that my girls won’t be hard-pressed to find other Queens,] Naiad immediately replied, showing just how little it mattered to her if her other river nymphs were around. [Stop trying to get out of this, I won’t settle for anything less than the reproductive process. It’s the only way that’s guaranteed to eventually result in what I want, after all...]

The two stared at each other for a long while, long enough for Elise’s anger and frustration to cool a bit. Long enough for Naiad to contemplate simply leaving and taking Leon with her, regardless of what he had to say on the matter.

“Well, then...” Elise said as she rose to her feet. “That’s that, then. I can’t stop you, I can’t convince you not to follow through on this, you’ve completely tied my hands. I hardly have a say in this, do I?”

Naiad stared at Elise with a look of muted joy given where this was going, but she didn’t interrupt.

“After what you’ve done for us, saving our lives, how can I stop this?” Elise asked as she almost broke out into tears.

She didn’t want Naiad to have Leon, but she had also told Leon to start a harem. If she were to be honest with herself, then she would have to admit that from just about any practical standpoint, Naiad would be a boon, a godsend to their family.

It still felt dirty, though, and all Elise wanted to do was to continue to insist that Naiad couldn’t have Leon until the river nymph just went away. But Naiad clearly wasn’t going anywhere, and Elise had few practical options for dealing with someone as powerful as her. Besides, the only reason that Naiad hadn’t done anything so far was thanks to the restraint she had shown on her part so that Leon would willingly agree, not because of anything that Elise or Leon had done to stop her.

“My hands are tied,” Elise repeated in frustration as she collapsed back into her chair.

[So... then...?] Naiad slowly asked since it seemed like Elise was done.

“Do what you will,” Elise bitterly said as she stared the river nymph in the eye. “So long as Leon doesn’t object, then you have my permi-“

As Elise said this, Naiad’s face lit up in unabashed joy as the final obstacle between her and Leon cleared away. She interrupted Elise’s statement by springing to her feet, grabbing Elise by the hand, and dragging the surprised young woman out of the room.

“What are you *doing*?!” Elise demanded to know.

[It’s only appropriate for the principal mate to go first when the harem leader takes another mate, isn’t it?! At least, that’s what I’ve gathered so far from watching human mating rituals, and it seems to me like Leon will be a lot more willing taking you before me...] Naiad replied as she all-but hauled Elise through the estate at an almost blinding speed.

The two quickly arrived back where Naiad had left Leon in her guest room. The river nymph almost broke the door down in her haste to tell Leon the good news, and Leon just about jumped out of his skin

as the door burst open. He even had to fight the urge to draw his weapon and armor from his soul realm.

“What’s going on?!” he asked in shock as he saw Elise just behind Naiad, her clothes in relative disarray and her long red hair a little messy from how she had been pulled through the halls.

[It’s time!] Naiad excitedly announced. [Your first mate has assented, so it’s time!]

Leon looked to his lady for confirmation, and Elise slowly nodded, but she wasn’t quite able to meet his eye. That was it, then. If she had agreed, then there was little need to continue holding back; she had been his biggest reason for continuing to deny Naiad, and now she had seemingly acquiesced to Naiad’s demands.

He did his best to relax and mentally prepare himself for whatever came next. There would be no more arguments on his part.

[We’re doing this now!] Naiad said as she used her other hand to take hold of Leon’s arm and impatiently dragged both him and Elise into her bedroom, her forcefulness somehow taking Leon completely by surprise despite how she had acted until now.

Naiad immediately began to pull her clothes off her body as fast as she could, but Leon and Elise were far more bashful, far more nervous about this than the river nymph. Leon bought a little bit of time by closing the door that Naiad had left open, but that only gave him and Elise a few seconds to get comfortable with the situation.

Elise closed her eyes for a few moments, took a couple of deep breaths, then stripped down, with Leon not far behind her. She then laid down on the bed, putting her well-endowed and finely toned figure on display for Leon and Naiad, a slightly strained smile on her lips wordlessly inviting Leon to take the lead as Naiad watched in muted fascination—the river nymph Queen had assured Elise that she wasn’t trying to take Leon away from Elise, and this was her opportunity to prove it. So, she lay down next to Elise without a stitch of clothing on and watched as Leon approached the side of the bed.

Once he took off the rest of his clothes, Leon hesitated. He could feel Naiad’s eyes roaming up and down his body, and it was a bit difficult to get into the swing of things when under such close observation. But, when he focused on Elise, everything seemed to drift away. His anxiety disappeared in the green of his lover’s eyes, and when Elise held out her hands to him, Leon took the last step and joined the other two on the bed.

Chapter 337: Current Situation

Months after making his contract with Naiad, Leon began to fulfill it. Naiad had finally convinced him to have sex with her, and it only took having Elise there as well.

Of course, this meant that Leon started first with Elise, which Naiad could understand as she was his first mate. Still, she couldn’t help but feel a bit of impatience since her sanity and continued existence as a river nymph was on the line.

So, for the first few minutes, Naiad simply laid on the bed, watching Leon and Elise do their thing. They were a bit bashful at first, with little more than kissing and some light touching since Naiad was watching so intently, but eventually, they started to ignore her and go after each other much more

vigorously. Some of their moves even made Naiad feel a bit embarrassed despite her own readiness to mate, but not once did she look away.

After bringing Elise to climax, Leon turned to Naiad. She braced herself for what was to come, expecting that she would be joining with Leon with the same intensity as he had when he made love to Elise, but with Naiad, Leon took things a bit slower. He felt he had to, for the intensity with which he and Elise had sex nearly broke the bed, and Elise had just about passed out after Leon brought her to finish, effectively leaving Leon and Naiad alone at this point.

Seeing Naiad tense up in anxiety and anticipation, Leon didn't immediately get the deed over with, despite his earlier hesitation implying that he didn't want to do this. Instead, he started with light foreplay, stroking her shoulders and inching closer, getting her used to his touch. He gradually escalated as Naiad relaxed, his surprisingly eager hands moving on to more sensitive parts of her body, though he never once kissed her.

Having never experienced such things before, Naiad could barely lay still by the time Leon's hands made their way up her thighs. Her entire body felt like it was on fire, being far more sensitive and excited than she had ever known it to be. Her breathing was rough and ragged, and all she could see was Leon moving into place above her. His hands roamed over her body as he maneuvered into place, first to her breasts, then to her hips, and then to her legs.

'This is it,' Naiad thought to herself in her last moment of lucidity as she opened herself up to Leon.

She barely even noticed his first thrust; the moment he entered her, her magic, which had been slowing down within her for years, seemed to suddenly explode, rushing throughout her body like it hadn't for almost a decade. It felt so good that Naiad almost screamed, her eyes instantly glazing over, and though she never turned away from Leon, she barely even knew where she was anymore.

Everything that happened after was a blur. Naiad was seeing stars, and her reverie only grew more intense the more Leon moved. At the height of her pleasure, Naiad was barely even aware of herself, let alone Leon or Elise, all she could feel was her body floating in a sea of ecstasy. It wasn't until Leon pushed them both over the edge that she finally started to come back down and regain any kind of awareness of her surroundings. Even then, it took enough time that Leon had already turned away from her.

As her sight returned to her, Naiad felt like she hadn't in a long time, with energy pouring out of every cell in her body. Magic flowed freely throughout her, there wasn't a single hint that her water magic had been slowing into earth magic.

When her mind returned to normal and everything that had just happened came back to her, she lay by herself on one end of the large bed in her guest room. Leon had left her and returned to Elise, who had experienced pleasure similar to Naiad's, though she had completely passed out by the end.

Leon had taken her into his arms, cradling her like she was the most precious thing in the world, and unconsciously, she wrapped her arms around him and entangled her legs with his. It was a scene of absolute trust and intimacy, and Naiad couldn't help but feel some type of way when she glanced over at them.

She had been about to demand that they do all of that again but looking at Leon and Elise caused the words to die in her throat. Her body began to cool and return to normal, and she averted her eyes. She had no idea why, but there was some part of her that wanted to go over and join their embrace, but she refrained.

Still, she couldn't help but momentarily glance back every now and then as everyone rested from their exertions. Elise woke up after a few minutes in an ecstatic daze. She found herself embracing with Leon, and a smile of complete joy and contentment bloomed across her face. Leon smiled back, affectionately pressed his head into hers, and held her closer, to her delight.

They began to whisper to each other, ignoring Naiad entirely. The river nymph was a bit annoyed by that, but she couldn't bring herself to break that moment between the other two. So, she lay back in the bed and tried her best to ignore both of them and instead take stock of her current condition.

As she had already realized, the rate that her magic flowed through her body had sped back up to levels that were more in line with other beings that used water magic. She felt like she was almost overflowing with magical power since it had been more than a decade since her mana had acted as it should.

Her heart, which had been slowly calming down after being with Leon, suddenly began to exuberantly race as she realized what this probably meant. She could still feel Leon's power within her, so she knew that he had fully committed to his side of the bargain, but when she looked within herself using her magic senses, she didn't detect any signs of life beginning within her.

'I guess... then sex on its own can stave off gorgonism?' she wondered. Her mother had always taught her that the only way to remain a river nymph and not undergo the transformation into a gorgon was to have children, but from her reaction to laying with Leon, she knew that the transformation that had begun to her body more than a decade ago had been completely reversed in this short time.

She looked back at Leon and saw him and Elise pressing their lips together and a jolt of... something she couldn't identify ran through her mind. She felt like she wanted to be doing that with Leon, but for the life of her, she couldn't figure out why. She knew that it was something that humans did to express affection, but that couldn't be it, she was sure that she possessed no romantic feelings for Leon.

Naiad rolled a little closer anyway, and she felt a strange feeling of relief, due both to getting closer to Leon and knowing that they would have to do all of this again if he wanted to fulfill his side of their contract; she wasn't pregnant yet, and the deal wasn't simply to have sex, it was to have a child.

[So...] Naiad hesitantly began, drawing the attention of the other two. [I... suppose we'll have to figure something out, then...]

"What do you mean?" Elise asked with slightly less hostility than usual. The deed had been done and doing it a second time wouldn't be as bad, at least in her mind.

[How do we proceed? Do we need some kind of schedule?] Naiad asked, eliciting strange looks from both Leon and Elise.

"So... we're going to have to do this again?" Leon asked, his tone tinged with both excitement and apprehension.

[No child was made just now, but I could feel that the process worked, somewhat,] Naiad explained. [We'll definitely need to do this again.]

"I see..." Leon muttered. For his part, he would admit that having both Elise and Naiad together had been exhilarating beyond his ability to articulate, and the primitive man within him was demanding that he continue this relationship for as long as he could, and while he would hesitantly agree, this wasn't a decision that was solely up to him. He turned his eyes to Elise who met his gaze. He probably would've slept with Naiad long before this point if he hadn't already been with Elise, and it wasn't right to cut her out of this despite giving her consent.

She smiled at him, then said out loud, "If we're doing this again, it will be *all* of us..." She looked over at Naiad, whose face was also breaking out into a smile and continued, "I still don't trust you, nor do I even like you all that much. But... *but* this was incredible... and I wouldn't mind doing this again... and I don't want to leave you alone with Leon..."

Cutting Elise's ramblings off, Leon said, "I think we would all like this to continue, at least for the time being, no?"

The two ladies nodded at him, though Elise's was far more hesitant than Naiad's.

"Good," Leon said, and he looked back at Naiad. "I would like to, as well. I'm not entirely sure what we are, what everyone wants from this, or how this will end up, but I would like to continue. See what happens."

"Naiad wants a kid, though, so we know what she wants out of this," Elise said. "This'll be temporary, I think, you're going to leave once you get what you want, aren't you?"

Elise's brilliant green eyes bored holes into Naiad, and Elise was smiling with the certainty that Leon was hers and that his and Naiad's relationship was only temporary. An ephemeral thing that she could enjoy for what it was for as long as it would last. Naiad wouldn't be sticking around for long, and once the river nymph left, neither Elise nor Leon would see her ever again.

However, Naiad didn't rush to confirm what Elise just said. Instead, she took a moment to think, then said, [Don't get too comfortable in thinking that I won't be around, I think this will still take a while, so I won't be going anywhere anytime soon, and who knows what the future might hold?]

Elise's smile faltered just a little, but overall, her confidence in the transience of their situation remained unshaken.

Naiad, however, was more than a little shocked at what she had just said. Elise was right, she only wanted the child and to not turn into a gorgon, nothing more. That Naiad even floated the possibility of sticking around after that surprised no one more than Naiad herself, and her satisfied smile began to drop.

"We should get going," Elise said as she struggled to get out of bed—her legs were a bit weak from how intensely she and Leon had made love. Still, she was a fourth-tier mage, and that wasn't enough to prevent her from rising and getting dressed.

Leon followed suit, leaving Naiad alone in the bed. She didn't get up, but she didn't want either of them to leave quite yet. She wanted to be treated just like Elise, but she and Leon weren't close enough for that. Naiad didn't say a word as they took their leave.

When the door closed behind them, Naiad was alone, naked and colder than she had felt since she was a child, what little warmth that remained of Leon fading fast. She laid back in bed and silently stared at the side of the bed where Leon and Elise had been a moment before, her mind seeming to work both miles a minute and at a snail's pace as she tried to figure out just why she was suddenly feeling so attached to Leon. Whether this was a new feeling or just one that she was now aware of wasn't a question she considered.

—

Once outside of Naiad's room and no longer needing to project strength and confidence, Elise sighed in exhaustion and almost collapsed. Only Leon holding out an arm for her kept her on her feet.

"Ahhhh," she sighed as she looked to her lover. "Think you could've gone any harder?" she sarcastically asked.

Leon smiled in embarrassment, but he said nothing.

Pushing for more than just silence, Elise asked, "So, how was that for you? You were pretty quiet after..."

"Honestly, I never thought it would be so... *intense*," Leon replied, saying what was on both of their minds. "I was a bit concerned that I wouldn't be enough for the both of you, but I guess I was wrong..."

"You can say that again," Elise said as she stumbled a bit in the hallway. Fortunately, it was early in the afternoon and most of the work that the servants do in the estate was finished by noon, so there wasn't anyone around to see her in this state. "How long were we in there?"

"... An hour or two?" Leon guessed. That both lost track of time came as no surprise to either.

"I have to say, though, if every time is like that, then I'll find it much harder to object to her presence here," Elise stated. "Especially if she is going to add her power to ours, then what else is there to say?"

"Is she starting to rub off on you?" Leon teasingly asked. He wouldn't insist that Naiad stay if given the option, but with Elise now openly expressing some acceptance, his own desires to not have the river nymph around were rapidly disappearing.

"I still don't like her," Elise replied in a satisfied tone. Gone was her usual anger when it came to matters concerning the river nymph Queen, leading Leon to doubt how truthful Elise was being. "However, I don't think either of us can deny that what just happened was amazing!"

"Got me there," Leon said, almost shrugging until he remembered that Elise was still using his arm to help herself walk through the halls.

"So, what do you really want to do about this?" Elise asked. "At least for the time being, I don't mind if she stays, but when she goes, I expect you to start keeping an eye open for other potential wives!"

"Still going on about that, huh?" Leon asked as he averted his gaze and suppressed a smile.

“Of course!” Elise cried. “I can even help you get started!”

“Do you think I need that help?” Leon asked with a laugh.

“Yes you do!” Elise responded. “How about Valeria? What do you think about her? I, for a fact, know that she likes you, and I wouldn’t mind if you got together... with her...”

She trailed off at the end once she realized that Leon had stiffened when she brought up her silver-haired friend’s name, and at first, she thought that it meant that Leon did like her. However, when she glanced at Leon’s face, it was one of stony rejection.

“She’s a fine woman,” Leon neutrally said. “I’m sure she’ll make someone very happy, someday. Just won’t be me.”

“... Oh...” Elise muttered. She filed that away for later, as there seemed to be something that Leon wasn’t telling her. However, Valeria was one of her closest friends, and she wasn’t about to give up on Val becoming her sister-in-law just yet.

Once they reached Elise’s wing of the estate, Leon helped Elise back to bed where the latter collapsed. Leon wasn’t in such a shape, so he returned to work on the defensive wards he planned to add to their villa.

Neither realized that the entire way back, Naiad had watched them with her magic senses, a tight, unfamiliar, and deeply uncomfortable welling in her chest. There was nothing wrong with her, physically, as she confirmed multiple times with her own magic senses, but still, seeing Leon and Elise just leave after everything the three had just done hurt far more than Naiad ever thought it would.

Chapter 338: Foundations of the Mind Palace

After finally sleeping with Naiad and Elise, Leon spent quite a bit of time working on his defensive enchantments, but after a couple of hours, he had to call it quits. He packed up his things, left Elise’s wing of the estate, and went straight to one of the estate’s private meditation chambers.

These rooms were small, dark, and warm. They weren’t nearly big enough to properly practice magic in, but they were cozy and quiet. The walls were draped with thick black curtains that both blocked light and were magically soundproofed, so no one could hear what was said within, and those within could hear nothing that was happening outside.

For obvious safety reasons, there were a few lights that weren’t blocked by the curtains that would flash if any of the estate’s alarms went off, but under normal conditions could be turned off, leaving the room in whatever state of brightness the occupant desired. It was a fantastic place for peace and quiet, and Leon wished that he had learned of the existence of these chambers before—Emilie had, in a flagrant display of her usual flippant attitude, only informed him about these rooms the night before he and Elise moved out.

The villa’s defensive wards were the first thing on his mind when it came to its rebuilding, but a meditation chamber similar to this was also on his list of additions to eventually make to the villa.

Leon walked into one of the estate's half-dozen chambers and turned the lights completely off, leaving him in total darkness and total silence. He wanted peace and the feelings of isolation that came with the chamber, and that's exactly what he got.

The floor was thickly carpeted, and there were a number of large pillows and ottomans in the corner, ready for whatever the occupant of the room wanted to meditate upon. Leon took one of the ottomans, placed it in the center of the room, and began to meditate upon it.

For about five minutes, Leon enjoyed the quiet and the dark, and he took the opportunity to relax in anticipation of the work ahead of him.

He cast himself into his soul realm, opening his eyes in his magic body upon the throne of black granite in his throne room.

The place had changed in the weeks since he had first begun to work on it. His soul realm was as large as the invisible boundary of the Mists of Chaos, forming a sphere of open space around the island. His work after building a vault to store what he had absorbed into his soul realm had focused mostly on using these primordial mists to expand and build upon his island to fill in this open space. He had been thinking long and hard about what he wanted his Mind Palace to be, and his foundations were just about laid.

The island had become a mountain, a thousand feet tall floating in the void of his soul realm. The island itself was half a mile in diameter, a little more than half of what his soul realm's diameter as a whole was. The mountain was bare, grey rock; an ugly sight, but it was just the beginning. At the top was a flat space for Leon's marble platform and throne.

The dirt, grass, and red and white tiles that had once edged his island were still there, but now they had mostly been lost amongst the crags and boulders of the mountain. Still, Leon knew where the tiles, at least, were. He had a feeling that since they had been there when he had first entered his soul realm years ago when he awakened his blood, that there must be some significance to them, so he kept them around.

But he didn't enter his soul realm to ponder the origins of the tiles, he wanted to finish up work on the mountain.

However, as soon as he rose from his throne, he felt a pair of eyes upon him. About fifty feet down the mountain—there were comfortably large steps cut into the mountain allowing for easy, logical access from the top to the bottom—was another platform where Xaphan had taken residence. The demon's burning yellow eyes stared at Leon, making the young mage feel like Xaphan was smiling at him.

Leon jumped straight up, but he didn't return to the ground. He could fly in his soul realm as easily as he could walk, and it hadn't even taken much time to figure out. All he had to do was will himself to fly, and it didn't take that much willpower. In his soul realm, he was the Lord and Master of all he surveyed, and flight was hardly a taxing power within. However, it felt unsatisfying, more like the entire soul realm was moving around him than he was flying through it. His hair barely blew in the wind, his organs didn't shift with his acceleration, and his clothes didn't wave; Leon could fly around in his soul realm, but he barely even considered it flying.

Now, if only he could replicate it outside of his soul realm, in a place where he could truly feel the wind in his hair and smell the outside, then he would be happy. But to do that, he'd need a greater mastery of wind magic than his pathetic skills could muster. Needless to say, Leon was intending to put in some time studying wind magic in the near future.

Flying down to the demon's platform where Xaphan had been staring at him, Leon asked in an annoyed tone, "What seems to be so funny, demon?"

"I see you've begun to build your harem," Xaphan said, his voice filled with pride and taking Leon by surprise at how mirthless it was; Xaphan was being serious.

"Huh?" Leon asked in confusion.

"Adding such a powerful woman to your harem was a wise choice, I'm glad you got over your hang-up and lay with her," the demon replied. "It's a fine first step on your road to becoming a great mage!"

"That's just the 'first step' to you?" Leon asked incredulously. "It wasn't any other achievement, it was sleeping with a woman who forced her way into my life and manipulated me into bed, that was my 'first step'?"

"Yes," Xaphan answered without a trace of irony. However, before he could respond, a thunderous voice boomed from the throne further up the mountain.

"Great deeds can rarely be accomplished alone, boy," the voice said, and when Leon turned to see the source, he was unsurprised to see the Thunderbird staring back at him while she was perched atop his throne in her bird form. What was surprising was hearing her voice out loud rather than in his head; her beak wasn't moving, but her words were still audible and thunderously loud. "However, finding people worthy of unconditional trust can be a great challenge. In that respect, family is irreplaceable. Adding a powerful being to your family regardless of how it is done will always be the best way to strengthen you and your people—aside from gaining magical power, of course. And don't think too hard upon that 'manipulation', we all manipulate each other in one way or another. This woman was suffering, so hers was more blatant than most, but she's hardly the only person who's manipulated you into their bed."

"Is that why neither of you were particularly helpful when it came to dealing with her?" Leon sullenly asked. As pleasurable as it was to have sex with Naiad, Leon didn't love her, and he didn't think he was going to be asking Naiad for sex anytime soon. If she wanted to press the issue, then he'd comply, but he wasn't going out of his way for her.

"Such notions of love are admirable," the Thunderbird said, knowing exactly what was going through Leon's head. "But practicality shouldn't be discarded. This 'Naiad' woman is quite powerful, and if all it takes to keep her on your side is to mate with her, then it's hardly a taxing thing... And you need her strength if you want to survive long enough to rebuild the clan, and she can even help on that front."

Leon rolled his eyes, but he didn't respond. He hardly thought he was about to win an argument against a pair of beings as ancient as the Thunderbird and Xaphan, let alone beings as strong as an Ascended Beast from the Primal Age and a Lord of Flame, so he changed the subject.

"I was attacked by vampires again. I'd be willing to bet my shiny new left arm that it was Amon again," Leon confidently wagered to Xaphan. His statement, though, caused the Thunderbird to cock her head

in confusion and curiosity; she meant it when she told him that she didn't monitor every waking second of his, and she had no idea that he had lost an arm.

"Were you..." Xaphan whispered. He had long since stopped watching Leon's daily life, as he had much more important things to focus on, like his own healing. Even the tempest that was kicked up in Leon's soul realm as he drew upon his stored magic power wasn't enough to pull the demon out of his healing daze.

Leon sleeping with Naiad, though, that Xaphan noticed.

'*Figures...*' Leon cynically thought to himself.

"Amon never waited around when it came to his enemies; when he saw an opportunity, he would strike," Xaphan said. "I believe it likely that he'll try again. He's had eighty thousand years to infiltrate this plane and search for me, now that he's found me, he won't stop until I am finally killed."

"Even more reason why you should do what you can to accept that woman," the Thunderbird added. "She'll be a great boon if you ever need to defend yourself against beings as... *distasteful* as demons and vampires again..."

Xaphan momentarily glared at the Thunderbird, but he didn't say anything. He hadn't the ability to argue with the Thunderbird, so he refrained.

"But there is a greater boon that you need to seek, that of power," the Thunderbird continued. "You use lightning and fire, but there are other magical elements that you must learn of, namely water and wind."

"I suppose those elements would be useful if I ever want to match your feats and control the weather," Leon said with a smile of great anticipation. He was greatly looking forward to learning as much about his clan's magic as he could.

"You are aware of how lightning and fire mana is formed, but what about water and wind?" the Thunderbird inquired.

"Not a clue," Leon responded.

He needed to compress his magic power to form both lightning and fire, but lightning had to be compressed far more than fire and then allowed to arc throughout his body. Fire, on the other hand, only required moderately compressed magic power, but then Leon had to hold it in his chest and let the power slowly leak out like it was an inner fire that was spreading its heat to every corner of his body.

"To create water mana is very different from the two elements you're familiar with," the Thunderbird explained. "You must let it flow throughout you like a river. At first, it must be gentle and slow, like a small creek, but as you get stronger, your water mana will flow through you like the wildest of rivers. It will go through each individual part of your body, then flow out and move on to the next part, all in sequence."

"Wind mana is similar in that it flows through your entire body without compression, but instead of a gentle river carving a path through your body, it must be a tempestuous gale within you, flowing from your head to your toes and back again."

“As with both lightning and fire, as you get better at forcing your magic power to move in this way, it will impart the qualities of the magical element you wish to create onto your power, thus allowing you to create that element. Make sense?”

“I think I got it,” Leon said. The concept was easy enough to understand but understanding and applying were two very different things. “Which should I start with first?”

“I’d recommend water,” the Thunderbird said. “Given that your most prominent recent enemies used fire, I’d say water will come in handy.”

“Damn,” Leon whispered. He’d hoped for wind magic.

As if reading his mind, the Thunderbird said, “Wind magic is relatively weak, offensively speaking, but water magic will be a great help to your combat potential.”

“I suppose...” Leon said. “And water magic would be pretty useful when it comes to combatting fire magic, too...”

“Not as much as you might think,” the Thunderbird said with a cautious tone. “Many believe that water is like an elemental counter-balance to fire, but such things do not exist. There are no ‘opposites’ when it comes to the magical elements. Water can put out fire, to be sure, but just as easily can fire vaporize water. Magical flame burns hot, and when supplied with as much magic power as magical water, then neither can be definitively stated as ‘stronger’.”

“Huh...” Leon grunted. “I’ve read a lot of texts and stories that claim the opposite...”

“Your texts are wrong and stories are just that: stories,” the Thunderbird said. “When it comes to magic, all that counts are skill and power. There are no shortcuts worth taking and no easy advantages. Take, for instance, light and dark. They seem like opposites, do they not?”

Leon nodded in agreement. Dark couldn’t exist without light, and light would be meaningless without dark, after all.

“They are not, at least when it comes to magic,” the Thunderbird stated. “Both can be used for offensive, defensive, and movement purposes, but light’s greatest strength is in the arts of healing. Darkness magic, on the other hand, is best at creating illusions and manipulating the mind. Healing and illusions are hardly opposites.”

“So there would be no benefit to using light magic specifically to counter darkness or the other way around?” Leon asked.

The Thunderbird took a minute to think, then said, “No. As I said before, it all comes down to skill and power. There are no specific qualities about light that would make it more effective at dealing with darkness, and the opposite is also true. Similarly, water and fire are hardly opposites, even though fire produces heat and water magic can produce ice.”

Leon nodded again, deciding to agree with the Thunderbird. It seemed a bit off to him, but he was but a nineteen-year-old boy, essentially nothing compared to the Thunderbird, who had lived for so long that Leon was honestly scared to ask after her age.

“Hmmm...” the Thunderbird murmured, staring down at Leon. “Perhaps you need some brushing up on the fundamentals, then?”

“I think I’ve got them down pat, but if I make a mistake then feel free to correct me,” Leon said.

The Thunderbird rolled her eyes, then countered with, “Let’s go over some things first, just to be safe. What is ice magic?”

“A derivation of water magic,” Leon immediately answered with absolute confidence.

“Very good, you at least know about derivations,” the Thunderbird said.

Ice magic wasn’t an element on its own, it was derived from water magic and proved so useful that it was given its own term. Thus, it was called a ‘derivation’. It wasn’t a new element, it was just a highly specialized application of that element that happened to have its own term.

Similar to ice magic was shadow magic, which was a branch of darkness magic that was so popular and widespread that people would focus on it specifically, ignoring, for the most part, much of the rest of the applications of darkness magic in the process.

Leon wasn’t aware of it, but Justin Isynos and his subordinates had studied shadow magic, allowing them to move in their own shadows. They wouldn’t claim to be darkness mages, though, because they couldn’t manipulate the mind or conjure illusions. They simply hadn’t focused on those aspects of darkness magic.

Those were the two most popular derivations of elemental magic. There were other forms, of course, but few were so widespread or well-known as to be given their own terms. For instance, there was a derivation of earth magic that allowed blacksmiths to manipulate metal without heating it, and derivations of fire magic to produce heat, or to produce light without heat.

“I do have a question, though,” Leon said.

“What is it?” the Thunderbird asked, her tone softening a quieting down quite a bit. It was almost grandmotherly, though Leon would hesitate to say that out loud.

“Why are the seven magical elements broken up into two categories?”

“I assume you’re talking about the Primal elements and the Heavenly Elements?” the Thunderbird asked, seeking confirmation. Leon nodded, and she explained, “No real reason, I suppose. Light, darkness, and lightning can be combined to create spatial magic, so there’s that, but ultimately I think it was just a lot of very important people with fragile egos who wanted to extoll the virtues of their own chosen element to make them feel better about choosing that element to specialize in when they began their studies into the magical arts.”

Leon scowled a bit. He’d been hoping for something more esoteric or cool, but he supposed it wasn’t the most unheard of thing.

“How about combined applications of magic?” the Thunderbird asked.

“Enchantment based, can’t be done in the body...” Leon muttered, still disappointed by the Thunderbird’s answer to his question about classifications.

A living being could only utilize a single element of magic at any one time. Someone like Leon who focuses on more than one could learn to alternate quite quickly, but he was still limited to lightning or fire, not both.

The same, however, couldn't be said for enchantments. An enchantment, if properly made, could feature all seven of the magical elements, or any combination thereof. Something like nature magic, which was a combination of water, earth, and light magic, fell into this category. It wasn't a kind of magic directly 'cast' by a mage, it required a firm grasp on that school of enchanting to utilize. The spatial magic that the Thunderbird mentioned earlier, which combined darkness, light, and lightning would also be a combined application, requiring knowledge of enchantment to perform.

Alchemy could also be categorized as a combined application of magic, but Leon knew virtually nothing about the art, so he couldn't speak authoritatively on it.

The Thunderbird clicked her beak in mild approval. Leon knew the basics well enough even if he was misguided on some things. Those could be corrected in time, but not if he was dead, so she figured it was best to get started.

"Very well, you're not in school so we can end the quiz here."

"Thank the Ancestors," Leon said, eager as he was to get to something new.

"Now then, water magic..." the Thunderbird said, her lesson on water magic finally beginning.

Chapter 339: Thoughts of Vengeance

Leon, Elise, and Naiad's lives returned to something that resembled normal in the weeks following the attack on the villa. Naiad didn't coerce them into sleeping with her again, but she refused to leave, so when Leon and Elise's villa was finished being rebuilt, she ended up moving in with them.

Given how their villa had been destroyed, neither Leon nor Elise said much in protest. They had already had sex with Naiad, so it made little sense to reject her presence and accompanying protection now.

For a few days, Leon and Elise took the time to get truly settled into their new home, with Elise making sure her garden of magical herbs and other plants was well-maintained while Leon surveyed the work of the Heaven's Eye workmen, making sure that the defenses of the villa were properly made.

He also made sure that the trees and bushes that encircled the property and blocked the villa from prying eyes didn't have any holes or weak points, and he was happy to find that everything was functioning as it should be. The lightning wards were up and running; only a profoundly powerful mage would be able to breach their walls, and no one, regardless of power, would be able to sweep the villa with their magic senses from the outside—though those inside could still use their own magic senses to see outside, which was a feature that Leon didn't know existed, and he resolved to study this particular enchantment very closely. They were obviously a cut above the standard Legion camp enchantments that prevented spies from without seeing what was within, and if Leon could find some way to make this enchantment portable...

'Well, it's worth some study...' Leon thought to himself.

Leon and Elise were truly cut off from outside surveillance within the villa, and they enjoyed it to the fullest. After sleeping with Naiad once, they thought little of having sex wherever they wanted—they knew that Naiad could watch them wherever and whenever they got down and dirty anyway, so they figured that it was best to simply not think about it and do what they wanted. Naiad barely spoke to either of them during these first few days, so it was impossible to know if she did or didn't watch them.

Of course, Naiad *did* watch them, and quite intently, fascinated as she had now become after experiencing human mating first-hand. Every display of affection, every move they made toward and to the other was observed by the river nymph, and she enjoyed every second. She wanted to go and join the other two many times, but always refrained when she thought about how tenderly Leon would treat Elise afterward, and about how coldly he would treat her. Most times, he would barely even acknowledge her presence within the villa, and that brought more sadness to Naiad than she ever would've thought.

To a degree, she could understand. Human interaction was still new to her, and time spent together was important. However, her river nymph instincts were telling her that since they were now mates, then they should be accepting of each other, and the fact that Leon wasn't was distressing.

Even after several weeks, though, Naiad hadn't made a move to put a stop to this. She wanted to let Leon make the next move now that she had gotten him to sleep with her once, and since her magic power still coursed through her with all the speed that it should, she figured she had time. She didn't want to force things again. But this involved her squirreling herself away in her guest rooms and not giving Leon the opportunity to make a move.

For Leon's part, after surveying the rebuilt villa, he was far more interested in spending time with Elise and training his magic to worry much about Naiad. His training with the Thunderbird in his soul realm had paid off in a big way, and he was making progress with water and wind magic far quicker than he had fire—lightning was essentially instant after absorbing all of that lightning from the Cradle, so Leon refrained from comparing his current efforts with that.

During this time, he also put in some time in the Royal Palace. Trajan had assigned him to check in with Lapis every day, which Leon was happy to do since it gave him plenty of time to talk about the stone giants, and he also helped the Prince's assistants collate the data they received about the Legion's attempts to subjugate the vampires that had infiltrated the Kingdom. At this point, no one could deny that there was a serious problem, especially when one of Trajan's own knights was attacked in the very heart of the Kingdom.

Of course, the Consul of the Central Territories was livid about what he perceived as Trajan overstepping his bounds and ordering around Legions that weren't assigned to him, but in just a few months more than one hundred vampires had been found and slain, so he had little ground to stand on and was forced to hold his tongue. This threat had grown right under his nose, after all.

All-in-all, Leon had to say that things were quiet, peaceful, and relaxing. His problems seemed far away, he was with the woman he loved, and his friends were due to arrive in the capital in just a few weeks in anticipation of their knighting ceremony at the Knight Academy. Life was good.

He had no idea that his villa was under constant surveillance by subordinates of Justin Isynos. When the tall man was killed in Emilie's estate, Justin had been alarmed, to say the least. He'd lost another

seventh-tier mage, a man who was impossible to replace in such a remote land as the Bull Kingdom. His certainty grew that Leon was the boy he was searching for, but he decided to take things much slower and more carefully from now on.

A month after his villa was attacked, Leon walked into the Royal Palace as he had done dozens of times before. He expected that the day would be the same as it had been for weeks, meeting with Trajan and discussing the vampire threat, meeting with Lapis for a few hours, then returning home and either training or studying runes.

He was in for a shock, however, for as he walked through the halls of the palace, he happened to pass by the offices of the officials who supervised taxation of the nobility on his way to meet with Prince Trajan. The hallway he took passed right through the atrium attached to the taxation offices, and when he glanced over at the front desk, he saw someone he hadn't thought about in more than a year: Tiberias Decimius.

He had first 'met' Tiberias around the same time he had started in the Knight Academy. The noble had been in the Heaven's Eye Tower looking for Elise and taken issue with Leon's friendly relationship with her. Afterward, Leon hadn't thought much about the young nobleman, but Tiberias went out of his way several times to antagonize Leon, culminating in a pair of his family's assassins attempting to murder Leon on a galley as he made his way north toward Fort 127 after entering his squireship. He had acquired his invisibility ring after defeating these assassins.

After telling her about this, Elise had retaliated against Tiberias' family, essentially blacklisting them from all Heaven's Eye services that she was able to. Leon had never really followed up on that, but neither had he let go of his own personal desire for revenge against Tiberias.

The nobleman didn't notice Leon, and Leon quickly continued down the hallway. He didn't wonder why Tiberias was waiting by the front desk to the tax offices, all he thought about was killing the man. The assassination attempt Leon *might* have been able to forgive, as it was only directed at him, but Tiberias had also harassed Elise, though that mercifully stopped after Elise blacklisted his family. Still, the simple fact that the nobleman hadn't been able to take 'no' for an answer and kept trying to court Elise was reason enough for Leon to hate his guts, and that combined with the assassination attempt was enough for Leon to mentally sign Tiberias' death warrant.

Of course, right there in the middle of the Royal Palace was no place for that sort of business, so Leon put it out of his mind for the time being. There would be other chances, and his work with Trajan took priority right now, especially since the enemies they were dealing with were far more important and dangerous than House Decimius.

By the time he arrived at the Prince's part of the palace, Leon had wiped away any fury and anger that might have appeared on his face. As a stoic person by nature, no one had even the slightest clue that Leon had been thinking about murdering the son of one of the most powerful nobles in the realm.

When one of Trajan's assistants opened the door for the young knight, Leon found Trajan quietly working behind his desk, just as he had been for months.

"Your Highness," Leon said as he gave the Prince a short bow.

"Sir Leon," Trajan said, only smiling at the younger man once the door had closed. "Please, come in, I'd like to talk."

Trajan led the two over to the chairs and sofas by the hearth, completely abandoning whatever it was that he was doing.

"Isn't that stuff more important?" Leon asked with an eyebrow raised in curiosity, his golden eyes boring into Trajan's in both amusement and accusation.

"It's fine," Trajan said with a dismissive hand wave. "I was just looking over one of August's proposals. It's quite well thought out, to the point that I feel that I don't really *have* to look it over."

"What does His Highness want to do?" Leon curiously asked.

Trajan's chiseled face twisted in a smile and he said, "Perhaps one of the best thought out proposals he's had in a while. He's mostly let me take charge since we came back from the Horns, but ever since that unfortunate business in the arena, he's been trying to take charge a bit more. He realized that I'm not enough backing for him and that he needs to make his own moves, just as he had been doing before asking for my help..."

"And that proposal?" Leon asked again.

Trajan quietly laughed at himself; he'd let his pride in his nephew get the better of him. "A reassignment of Legions. He wants to get as many Legion soldiers out of the hands of his brother as he can, and his reasoning is quite sound. Those Legions in the west, south, and center led by common Legates he wants to move to the north or to the east, reasoning that those are the places that have received the vast majority of foreign incursions of late."

"Only those led by commoners?" Leon asked. "I assume that he assumes those led by nobles are corrupt or already in Octavius' pocket?"

"He does," Trajan confirmed.

"Can this be pulled off?" Leon asked.

"It can," Trajan said. "They haven't declared for either of the Princes, but if I ask the Chancellor, Chief Steward, and Spymaster to allow this, then there won't be much that Octavius can do. He can't have them removed from their offices without August's consent, just as August can't remove any of the nobles or knights on Octavius' side from their positions without Octavius' agreement. This is probably the only thing keeping the peace right now... Not to mention we have other plans in the works to take care of things that need to get done regardless of who's in charge..."

Leon nodded, fully willing to let the Prince rant a bit more, but as he trailed off, Trajan seemed to remember what he actually wanted to talk to Leon about and changed the subject.

"I did some digging into the city's defenses," Trajan began with a solemn tone. "I wanted to know exactly how so many powerful vampires made it so far into the city with no one the wiser."

"Find anything of note?" Leon asked, his own interest piqued at what the Prince just said.

Trajan paused for a moment, then sighed in dejection. “None,” he said. “The city has no walls, no *real* defenses to speak of. It’s never really needed such defenses, save for around the Royal Palace. Our rituals to detect demonic power *should’ve* found something, but it seems that the vampires must’ve hidden themselves well, for nothing was detected.”

Leon breathed a secret sigh of relief at his own demonic affiliation continuing to go unnoticed, but he was a bit concerned about these rituals. And now he had a perfect opportunity to dig for more information.

“What exactly do these rituals entail? I’m not too familiar with them...” Leon asked.

“They’re mostly just a collection of knights with great experience in dealing with and identifying demonic activity—specialists in demonology, in other words—taking a few potions or other consumables that can enhance magic senses, and then they simply *look* for sources of demonic power.”

“That’s it?” Leon asked in disbelief.

“Most rituals are just that simple,” Trajan said. “But, like I said, there are potions to aid in the detection of very specific things, and demonic power can be easily detected by those who know what they’re looking for. To be more specific, it takes a group of a dozen or so powerful sixth-tier mages taking these potions to perform this ritual with any reliability, and it’s quite draining from what I understand, so there’s some time for rest needed afterward before those who performed the ritual can repeat the process, perhaps as long as week even.”

“So, if it’s a magic senses-based ritual, it could *potentially* be subverted by the standard enchantments on many villas that disperse magic senses? The same ones that are put on just about every Legion encampment that gets built?” Leon asked.

“Yes,” Trajan said, pleased that Leon understood the complexity of the problem they faced. “We do our best, but the Bull Kingdom is large and possesses complex infrastructure. Nothing we do is ever going to be adequate, and that’s why, even now, after weeks of searching, we’re still finding the holes that these leeches have hidden in. I’m not even confident that we’ll ever find them all, especially if there are more of similar power to those you’ve encountered as of late...”

Leon frowned. So far, he’d been attacked by two seventh-tier vampires. One would be enough to upset the balance of power in a state like the Bull Kingdom, and he’d been ‘lucky’ enough to encounter two. Who knew what else might still be out there, hiding, waiting for an opportunity to strike. Who knew *how many* might even still be in hiding, hunting down Xaphan, and him by proxy.

It was a disturbing thought, to say the least, and Leon’s frown grew deeper.

“By the way, Leon, you never did tell me who that woman was who helped you with those vampires... She seemed incredibly powerful and confident that she could protect you from any future attacks, and you seemed to agree, so I let it be. However, I think I’ve been more than patient, and I would very much like to know who she is.”

Leon slowly nodded and averted his gaze as he thought about what he should and shouldn’t say. If he couldn’t trust Trajan, then there was just about no one he could trust, so he was inclined to tell Trajan

the truth. However, he couldn't be completely certain that Trajan wouldn't let this secret slip, as he did with his identity to the Paladins.

In the end, though, he knew that he couldn't keep everything a secret, but he decided to be a bit judicious with what he said.

"I met her in the wilderness when I..." Leon paused, momentarily at a loss for how to describe this without using the term 'deserted', "... when I attacked the Talfar forces that one time..."

"I see..." Trajan said, narrowing his eyes at this reminder of Leon's foolish recklessness.

"She had no love for the Talfar forces, so she gave me shelter for a little while. I suppose you could say we kind of... hit it off, and she eventually decided to come find me after the war ended..."

Trajan stared at Leon in disbelief, both in the story and in that Leon hadn't told him before this point.

"*Really?*" the incredulous Prince asked, not quite believing that Leon *happened* to run into an incredibly powerful mage after going AWOL.

"Really," Leon definitively affirmed.

"How strong is she?" Trajan asked. He was at the peak of sixth-tier power, but he couldn't make heads or tails of her aura, indicating a minimum of seventh-tier strength. He wanted to know just who she was and the limits of her strength, just in case.

"Early seventh-tier," Leon lied without hesitation. Naiad hadn't been completely up front with him about the power she possessed, but it was easy enough for him to see from her handling of the vampires that she was likely in the eighth-tier, if not higher. But he wasn't going to tell Trajan the truth and further complicate these matters.

"Seventh-tier..." Trajan mumbled. Incredibly strong, to be sure, but not unreasonably so. He decided that, for the time being, at least, to take Leon at face value and not to press for further details. The woman was on Leon's side and quite powerful, so it was always better to be over-cautious than reckless and risk offending them, especially since this woman didn't seem aligned with any organized power. Normally, though, he would've wanted to meet her more formally and try to entice her to join the Bull Kingdom, but since she was going to defend Leon, then Trajan let it slide.

"Need anything else?" Leon asked, eager as he was to move on from the topic of Naiad.

"Just one more thing about her," Trajan began, causing Leon's heart to sink into his feet. "What, specifically, is your relationship with her?"

Leon blinked, not quite sure how to respond. He could say they were lovers, but that was hardly true. He could say that he was indebted to her, but that would cause confusion and more questions. If he said they were just friends, then he doubted that Trajan would believe him.

In the end, with only a second or two to think, Leon went with the answer he thought would lead to the least amount of questions and help to move them on as quickly as possible.

"She's my girl."

Trajan's eyes nearly popped out of his skull in shock. No one in their right mind would ever say that Leon wasn't good-looking, but with his misanthropy, unfriendly demeanor, and solitary nature, a lady-killer he was not. In fact, Trajan was already quite amazed that he was with Elise, but he simply chalked it up to eccentricity on Elise's part. Now that he was told that Leon had a second lover, though, it just about shook Trajan's entire view of Leon.

"You... she... how did... *Really?*" Trajan sputtered.

"Yes," Leon answered, again without hesitation. He looked Trajan in the eye, his golden eyes not wavering an inch from Trajan's shiny black orbs. He was a realist and knew well enough how he came off to most people, but it still took a bit of work for him to not be too offended by Trajan's obvious incredulosity.

Trajan nodded and opened his mouth, but no sound came out. He blinked in surprise, and after several long seconds of astonished silence, he finally managed to say, "Well... well done..."

Leon smiled awkwardly and nodded along with Trajan. The awkwardness was extended for almost fifteen seconds as Leon remained silent and the Prince wasn't quite sure how to move on. So shocked was he that he didn't even realize that Leon hadn't even told him what her name was.

Finally, though, after both almost felt like they were about to die of old age from how long they had been sitting there in silence, Trajan just rose from his seat and said, "Follow me. There's something I want you to attend."

Leon got up as well, asking, "What is it?"

Trajan paused at the door, then turned to the younger man and said, "I want you to be a witness for the awakening of August's blood."

Chapter 340: Waking the Bull I

"You *what?*" Leon asked in disbelief and some muted anger as Trajan paused at the door.

Trajan stared at the heavy dark red oak door, enchanted to prevent both any unauthorized entry and to help keep their voices from leaking out into the room on the other side, where several dozen secretaries and assistants to the Prince were working.

If he were going to explain himself before dragging Leon to this ceremony, then it had to be now, Trajan knew.

After several seconds of staring at the door, Trajan softly explained, "This Kingdom is five thousand years old. It was born in the fires of war, when my ancestor, the eldest son of the Sacred Bull, the First Bull King conquered all of his neighbors."

Leon nodded. Artorias had told him this story many times in his history lessons.

"The one exception to this was the Great Plateau, where *your* ancestors, the Thunder Kings ruled," Trajan continued. "No matter how much we pressed, our men simply couldn't defeat you, not when your warriors were in such an advantageous position."

Leon smiled. Hearing of the dogged tenacity of his forebears brought an unexpected welling of pride in his chest. When the conquering Bull Kingdom army had come to their doorstep, they fought for their land, at least for long enough to gain favorable terms in the subsequent peace. Even after millennia of decline, after falling from one of the most powerful clans in the Nexus to mere regional petty Kings on the edge of a lower plane, it took a great deal to make Leon's ancestors admit defeat.

But Trajan wasn't done; he hadn't even gotten to his main point, yet. "Still, your loss was inevitable, the Great Plateau had only a fraction of the population and the Thunder King of the time hadn't the confidence that his children could continue the fight after he was gone. So, after decades of the Great Plateau being under siege, he negotiated the surrender of his forces in return for extremely favorable terms. Given how fierce the resistance was, the First Bull King agreed to just about all of them to bring an end to the war.

"These privileges included your family remaining the Lords of the Great Plateau, though their title of Thunder King would be replaced with that of Archduke. In terms of noble rank, House Raime was second to none but House Taurus, the Royal Family. They were wealthy, with tax exemptions, huge amounts of land with vast mineral resources, and a soaring population in the centuries after the unification of the Bull Kingdom.

"What also came was a great friendship between the last Thunder King and the First Bull King, these two rivals fought so long against each other that respect was inevitable. As a result, the First Bull King gave one more privilege to House Raime: a member was always present whenever a member of House Taurus' blood was awakened. For my Royal Brother, that was Archduke Kyros, and for me, it was Kyros' father, Matthaïos Raime."

"I'd never heard about that, before," Leon admitted with more than a bit of surprise. He supposed he could understand since House Raime's own far older and more venerable Inherited Bloodline gave them quite a bit more knowledge on bloodline awakening than House Taurus, but Leon didn't think that House Taurus knew about House Raime's own Bloodline. At least, it didn't seem that Trajan or any of the other Princes knew, Leon didn't know about the Bull King himself. After five thousand years, though, he could understand if House Taurus' knowledge on that subject was lost and why House Raime wouldn't be too keen on reminding the Bull Kings about their power.

"For five thousand years, every Bull King after House Raime negotiated their surrender to the Bull Kingdom has had a member of House Raime there to assist with the ritual," Trajan stated. "There has only been one exception: Octavius. Lord Alexander Raime was there to help with Prince Herculani's ritual, my brother's eldest son, but after Herculani's renouncement of his claim to the throne and the apparent extinction of your noble House, there was no longer a member of House Raime to assist with the ritual when it came time to awaken Octavius' blood about ten years ago."

"And you want to fix this by having me present?" Leon asked. "You want to appeal to this tradition? It doesn't seem to me that it's widely known that this was a thing, and besides, I'm not about to go shouting my identity from the rooftops, so as far as most people are concerned, I'm just a Valeman. In that respect, I don't see how my presence would be of help in any way..."

"There are those who know," Trajan said, reminding Leon of when he told the Bronze and Brimstone Paladins about him. "And in those cases, your presence would add legitimacy to August's claim."

"I still do *not* like this," Leon said with a deep frown. He didn't like it when Trajan revealed his identity, either, but the man was a Prince and there wasn't much Leon could do to refuse, especially since Trajan had kept him away from the palace for so long. However, Leon's patience with Trajan dragging him into these political games was wearing thin—his appearance in the Royal court, his presence at the triumphal games, and now this. Admittedly, the first wasn't exactly *because* of Trajan, but still. "This will be a private affair, I assume?" Leon asked, not quite up to flat-out refusing the Prince, despite everything.

"Of course," Trajan replied. "Just August, the two of us, and the Bronze Paladin to act as a neutral witness."

Leon clicked his tongue in displeasure, but he said no more. Since he'd never heard of something like this, he assumed that most people didn't know that this was a tradition, but the things that were well-known that he had no clue about were legion. At the very least, Leon began to periodically emit his magic senses and kept a close eye on everything around them as Trajan led him out of his office and through the palace.

Of course, the palace was enchanted to prevent this kind of spying, so Leon didn't see much until they left the palace itself and began to walk through the grounds and warren of administrative buildings. They weren't followed by anyone save for about a dozen of Trajan's assistants, at least as far as Leon could tell. After leaving the administrative buildings, the two walked alone, as the Prince ordered the assistants to wait on the outskirts of the palace complex for them to return.

They kept walking until they reached the seldom-used northern side of the palatial island. Here could be found the forest that shrouded the King's private villa, the old assembly chamber that Lapis had taken up residence within, as well as Leon and Trajan's destination, a shallow stone dome built over a round pit about a hundred feet in diameter. Inside, the place was nothing special, essentially just a staircase leading about twenty feet down to the bare stone floor. The entire place lacked any furnishings or decorations; it was an almost harshly stark and spartan place, lit only by a hole in the center of the dome—not that that darkness really meant much to mages as powerful as Leon and Trajan, though.

Neither of the two men descended the stairs. The room was empty, they were the first to arrive, so there was no point in waiting in the dark when the outside was warm and only a little bit cloudy.

Seeking to make some kind of small talk to help the obviously tense Leon relax, Trajan said, "You know, the current palace complex used to just be a castle that protected these northern buildings. There are a bunch more buildings just like this ceremonial hall on this side of the island, old places where court was held, and the early Bull Kings lived. They were scattered all over the island and were much smaller than the buildings we use now."

"Were they..." Leon muttered neutrally.

"... Yes..." Trajan answered, a little disheartened at Leon's lack of enthusiasm. Trajan would've honestly preferred to leave Leon out of this matter, but this was also for the sake of preserving peace within the Kingdom, and August needed something to go in favor for once if he wanted to survive what was seeming more and more inevitable.

'Not that Ursus would appreciate the distinction, I still insisted that he be here...' Trajan bitterly thought to himself, and he could only comfort his anxious and guilty mind by repeating to himself that this was all for the Kingdom.

"The old castle was later torn down to make room for the current palace," Trajan continued. "It wasn't easy, given how warded the old--"

The Prince suddenly stopped, as he could see a pair of figures approaching in the distance. From their auras alone, one fifth-tier and the other seventh-tier, he knew that it was August and Bronze. August was dressed quite simply, in a plain grey long sleeve shirt and loose black pants while Bronze was clad in his omnipresent bronze armor.

"Trajan!" Bronze called out as he and August hurried forward when they realized that Trajan and Leon had arrived before them.

"Titus!" Trajan shouted as he went forward to welcome his old friend and nephew.

Leon remained quiet and stood by the door while the others made their greetings.

"Sir Ursus," Bronze tactfully said to Leon as the Paladin approached the door.

"Sir Bronze," Leon replied, not feeling like he was familiar enough with the man to use the Bronze Paladin's actual name, but apparently that was enough as neither Bronze himself, nor August, nor Trajan made any attempts to correct him.

The four men, their brief greetings over, stepped inside the building. Trajan and August walked right down the stairs, while Leon and Bronze lagged behind a bit. Trajan walked with purpose, his every step taken with intent. August, however, was sweating, his eyes darted around, he nervously kept trying to crack his knuckles, and the only reason he kept walking down the steps was that Trajan was right beside him.

"Nervous?" Trajan asked him.

"How could I not be?" August replied. "What we're about to do will be one of the defining moments in my life, as well as being not sanctioned by my father. He could technically charge us both with treason for this if he- *when* he wakes up..."

"There must always be two who bear the blood," Trajan said. "Herculanus had his blood awakened years ago, but since he joined the blood priests, he won't ever have children or a landed title. We need another person who can awaken the blood of the Sacred Bull, just in case something unexpected happens to Octavius."

"Will Father see it that way?" August asked as they reached the floor of the pit beneath the dome.

"... He'll understand," Trajan said with a confident nod, though he felt much more unsure inside. But this wasn't the time to be speaking of uncertainties, he needed to project confidence to assure his nephew that everything was fine.

"For what it's worth," Bronze said as he and Leon reached the floor just a few steps behind the two Princes, "I believe His Majesty would agree with Prince Trajan. Of course, if His Majesty *does* charge both of Your Highnesses with treason, then I would be honor-bound to arrest you, but I do not believe

that His Majesty will do that. If Prince Herculanus had made his intentions known decades ago, then it would never have been in question if your blood would be awakened, since both Princess Stefania and Prince Antonius have bowed out of the running for the throne.”

“Thanks...” August said, his fears not particularly mollified.

Leon was, as usual, silent. He was curious about this awakening ritual, and now that he was here, he wanted to see it in action, to compare it to his own. To awaken his blood, Artorias had drawn runes upon his body with some kind of herbal paste, then fed him a potion to prepare his body, gave him the snow lion mana to drink after that, and then had Leon stay in a runic glyph drawn upon the ground while lightning spells powered by an ice wraith core channeled lightning magic into his body.

The strain of lightning tearing him apart on the outside and the lion’s mana ravaging him from the inside was exactly the kind of catalyst that Leon’s body needed to draw out the latent blood of the Thunderbird, and the power that flooded through Leon at the time was enough to push him from the first-tier to the second. Perhaps more important than that, though, was the vision that Leon received. He was pulled by his connection to the Thunderbird into his soul realm, four tiers before he was powerful enough to do so, and there he saw the Thunderbird for the first time.

Now, Leon was about to bear witness to another person awakening their Inherited Bloodline, and despite his initial extreme reluctance to attend, he was almost as excited to see the awakening process from a different angle as August was to undergo it.

“All right, then let’s begin,” Trajan said.