

Storm King 341

Chapter 341: Waking the Bull II

"All right, then let's begin," Trajan said, and August knelt in the center of the stone floor.

Leon watched in fascination, but so far, he was a little disappointed. It didn't seem like the same kind of runic glyph that Artorias had used for Leon's awakening was going to be used for August's. Leon's hopes for something spectacular were rekindled when Trajan reached into his soul realm and retrieved a few pouches of herbs and a glowing red potion in an index-finger sized clear glass vial.

If Leon's previous experience in this regard could be applied, then he figured the potion was likely mostly some kind of mana from a powerful beast. He couldn't do much more than guess, though, as he figured it would be rude to ask.

Fortunately, it seemed that August wasn't quite up to speed on this process, so he didn't have the same reticence to ask questions as Leon.

"What is all that?" the younger Prince inquired.

"Some herbs for you to smoke to prepare your body, and a potion to wake the sleeping bull within you," Trajan responded. He reached into his soul realm again, this time retrieving a shallow bowl. The elder Prince conjured a table from the stone beneath his feet with earth magic and began to grind up the herbs and mix them into the bowl.

"What's in the potion?" August asked with trepidation.

"The mana of a sixth-tier bull, plus a few other things to tame it a bit so you don't explode as soon as you drink it," Trajan said with a teasing smile, and August's face went pale.

Listening to this, Leon couldn't help but frown. He figured that August would've known all of this beforehand, but it seemed like the ceremony was a mystery to him. Leon, himself, didn't know about his own awakening process until Artorias had him undergo it, so he could understand a bit; it was natural that families with this kind of inherited power would want to control it, to keep it from spreading outside the House, but that also meant that they ran the risk of one day forgetting the process.

In fact, Leon had been quietly concerned about that, himself. He knew the rough details of his own awakening, but he didn't know the exact details, like the runes that Artorias painted on his body or the glyph that Artorias had carved into the mountain that Leon knelt in, and the books that Leon retrieved from his family's library beneath Argent Palace hadn't been nearly so helpful in figuring all of that out. He'd been worried that he would have to pay those archives another visit one day to truly have the details he wanted, but now that Leon could consult with the Thunderbird, he wasn't too concerned about that matter anymore—not that Leon was forgoing his plans to return to his family's archives, of course.

Still, Leon filed it away for later that he needed to speak with the Thunderbird about the awakening process. Better to learn it sooner rather than later, he never knew when he might need it. He was only nineteen, but he already had one river nymph trying to reproduce with him, and he had no idea when Elise might want kids, too.

"Everyone ready?" Trajan asked the room, though the question was mostly intended for August.

"I am," the younger Prince replied.

Bronze and Leon both nodded.

"Leon, come here," Trajan commanded, and Leon walked toward him, his face betraying none of the curiosity he felt. "Stand by August. You don't need to keep ahold of him but be ready in case he collapses."

Leon understood and went to stand just behind August's shoulder. He guessed this was a symbolic thing, a Raime being there to hold the Royal whoever in case they fell during awakening. He didn't appreciate it much, thinking that it symbolized House Raime being subservient to House Taurus as much as it was an expression of the friendship between their Houses and of House Raime's privileges, but he did as Trajan asked anyway. His loyalty to Trajan was personal; he possessed none of House Raime's traditional loyalty to House Taurus.

Trajan lay the bowl of crushed herbs at August's knees, then pulled out a lighter, a thumb-sized metal rod with a rune of fire inscribed upon it, and set the herbs alight. Immediately a cloud of smoke rose from the bowl and straight into August's face, and Trajan said to August, "Breathe deep!"

There was no time for August to hesitate. He took a deep breath, taking in as much of the herbal smoke as he could. His vision blurred, the color growing more and more vivid even as details bled into each other. He began to sway a bit, even in his kneeling position, and Leon placed his hand upon the thin Prince's shoulder to steady him.

"Now, drink this," Trajan said as he held out the vial.

August blinked a few times at him and made to take the vial, but with his blurred vision, he missed by several inches. He tried again, and again, missed, so Trajan simply took a step forward, held his breath to not inhale any of the smoke, and brought the vial to August's lips. The shining red liquid slid down August's throat in an instant, and Trajan stepped back.

A shudder went through August's entire body as the potion settled in his stomach. A violent aura erupted from his body, and his upper body began to shake. Leon held the Prince tighter, keeping him upright.

There was still some time left before this ceremony was over, but Leon's disappointment had returned. The aura coming from August's body was chaotic and wild, but it paled in comparison to the storm that Leon's awakening summoned. Lightning had shattered the peak of the mountain upon which Leon underwent his awakening, and even Artorias had been shocked at the strength and violence of the summoned storm. During the process, enough magic flowed through Leon that the serious injuries he sustained fighting the Snow Lion he killed were healed, he was knocked completely unconscious, and he was brought face-to-face with the Thunderbird.

None of that seemed to be happening to August. The Prince was awake, though not lucid, and while the magic that Leon could sense flowing through him was hardly something to scoff at, it wasn't nearly as much as Leon expected from the bloodline that had subjugated his own.

As he thought about this, something occurred to Leon. His father had told him that awakening bloodlines had been discovered with a lot of trial and error after strong Ascended Beasts had been disappointed in their inability to pass their power on to their human children. That much was plausible enough, but what Leon wondered was how the Bull Kingdom had managed to figure out how to do it.

Thinking on it as he stared down at August with his hand grasped tightly upon the Prince's shoulder, Leon found himself starting to be consumed by the thought of who might've taught the Bull Kingdom how to do this. It seemed to him like the First Bull King had his blood awakened before beginning his conquests, otherwise, he might have thought that his ancestor, the last Thunder King, might've had something to do with it after House Raime had been subjugated.

'Maybe they learned how from some leftover materials from the Thunderbird Clan's occupation of this plane?' Leon thought to himself. *'Or maybe the Sacred Bull just figured it out on its own...'*

The latter was certainly possible, but his impression of what he knew about the history of bloodline awakening was that even beasts that had achieved divinity, such as the Thunderbird, struggled to figure this out, and if the Sacred Bull were so powerful and wise to have done so on its own, then Leon questioned why it took the Bull's son to unify the region and not the Bull itself.

Leon couldn't help but wonder how involved his own family had been in these matters, how much the Bull Kingdom had been built upon the legacy of the Thunderbird Clan, and how much that contributed to House Raime's surrender to the First Bull King.

After several minutes, Leon sensed the aura emanating from August begin to die down, so he turned his thoughts away from the past. How a bunch of people thousands of years ago conducted themselves or found the information they had was hardly something that mattered much to him. What mattered now was finding out who knows what, not necessarily how they know.

Besides, it wasn't like Leon was particularly broken up about how things turned out. He'd long ago learned from Artorias to accept life as it was and not to waste time mourning what could have been.

August gasped, his hazy eyes clearing. Were it not for Leon's iron grip upon his shoulder, he would've collapsed, despite the entire experience lasting a scant few minutes.

Fortunately, his aura had changed quite a bit. August didn't rise to the sixth-tier, but his aura was far denser and more stable than it had been. He was still pale and very thin, but his aura now radiated from his body with a strength and vigor that it hadn't before. It seemed like the ceremony was a success, despite Leon's own dashed hopes to see something more spectacular.

It took August a couple more minutes to really realize where he was and what he was doing, but once his mind cleared, he immediately stood up and Leon happily took his hand off August's shoulder.

"How are you feeling?" Trajan asked the younger Prince.

August took a moment to answer, and he used that moment to stretch a bit, clench and unclench his hands a few times, and call upon some of his magic.

When he was ready to answer, August said, "I feel incredible! I feel like energy is just pouring out of me!"

"That's good," Trajan said with a wide smile. "You'll probably find yourself so bursting with energy that you'll be unable to sit still for a while, and you're going to rapidly gain muscle, so don't worry about that. Once your body gets used to your awakened blood, you'll calm down. Shouldn't take longer than a couple of weeks."

"Thank you, Uncle," August said, his eyes tearing up a bit. "And thank you, Sir Leon and Sir Titus! Thank you!!"

August was being completely sincere, but his earnestness was a bit embarrassing for Leon. He didn't really do much, so the Prince's gratitude was hardly something he felt he deserved. All they wanted was some small grant of legitimacy that his name could provide, and Leon greatly hoped that a time would never come when they would be forced to reveal that fact.

Of course, Leon could hardly blame the Prince for excitedly thanking him, Trajan, and Bronze so profusely—especially Bronze, since he made a rare exception and left the King's side. This moment was an important step in legitimizing his claim to the throne, and more importantly, was something that his brother would no longer be able to hold over him. Until the ceremony began, Octavius could've—and frequently did when bringing nobles over to his faction—said that he was the only true heir of the Sacred Bull, even if August was still King Julius' legitimate child.

"Please, August, that's not necessary," Trajan said.

"Agreed, Your Highness, this is nothing more than our duty," Bronze added.

"If it was your duty, then you wouldn't be here," August replied. "You didn't have to act as a witness, and for that, I will be eternally grateful."

"Did you see the Sacred Bull?" Leon suddenly asked, bringing the rest of the congratulations, thanks, and humble denials to a merciful end.

The other three stared at him completely taken aback at the bluntness of his question, especially while the Prince was still thanking them for exerting the titanic, *gargantuan* effort to simply be present.

"I... uh... yes, yes I did," August said, his expression turning significantly more morose and somber. "We spoke for quite a while..."

"How did you know about that?" Trajan asked, his eyes narrowing in concern and muted anger. He didn't think anyone knew that the descendants of the Sacred Bull could speak with their ancestor, and it could represent a huge security breach if Leon had heard of it.

"My father told me of it," Leon readily replied. "He said that he once asked His Majesty about this matter and that the King told him all about the vision he had when he awakened his blood."

"I see..." Trajan said, relaxing somewhat but not quite calming down completely. King Julius could, of course, reveal all that he desired to whomever he wished, but these were private matters of House Taurus and Trajan was a bit disturbed thinking about how many other people his brother may have told.

"I'm surprised my Royal Father would speak of something so delicate and private with anyone, even with his best friend's son," August murmured.

Bronze, for his part, was completely confused, as he had no idea this was a thing that happened. However, he expertly played it off and asked no questions or let on about his confusion at all. Wearing a full face-concealing helmet definitely helped in that regard.

“Was it a worthwhile chat?” Leon asked, somewhat jealous that their ancestor spoke to them during this process, while he had to ascend to the sixth-tier to earn similar treatment.

“It... was, or at least, the parts that I can remember were... I think...” August rambled. “I think those herbs might’ve messed with my short-term memory a bit because a lot of it is jumbled and hazy, but I do remember seeing our Honored Ancestor and speaking with him for a long time.”

Trajan nodded, but he said nothing. He didn’t want to discuss something so private in front of Bronze or even Leon, so he decided to change the topic.

“We ought to return to work, now, Nephew,” he said with some stiffness to his voice.

“Right,” August agreed. They had plenty of work ahead of them, and while it would’ve been nice to get some rest and process what had just been done, August knew that rest was a luxury he couldn’t afford right now, especially with what he was planning.

“Let’s get to it,” Trajan said, leading the other three back outside. Once there, Bronze parted ways from them and began to walk back to the King’s private villa, while the other three made for the main palace complex.

There were Legions to assign and a military expedition to launch, both of which the two Princes expected to meet a great deal of resistance.

Chapter 342: Making Plans

Following the short ceremony with August, Trajan, and the Bronze Paladin, Leon checked in with Lapis and then returned home. He found his Heaven’s Eye beastmaster training with Anzu, getting the young griffin used to wearing a saddle. As soon as Anzu saw Leon, though, the griffin instantly abandoned his training and bounded over to Leon, nuzzling against his human and celebrating that Leon had come home.

Leon laughed, played with Anzu a bit, then let the beastmaster get the griffin back to training.

Elise was working at the Heaven’s Eye Tower, so the only other person in the villa was Naiad. Leon knew she was there, but she hadn’t done all that much after sleeping with Elise and him, so he didn’t pay her too much mind. If she wasn’t going to come out of the guest rooms on her own, then Leon wasn’t going to insist that she do so.

But even with the run of the house, Leon wasn’t quite sure what to do. He had seen something that he couldn’t get out of his head, something that required his attention, and it wasn’t the ceremony with August. Rather, it was what to do about Tiberias.

Years ago, a pair of assassins working for Tiberias’ family tried to have him murdered as he made his way toward Fort 127 after his time in the Knight Academy. Fortunately, there hadn’t been any more attempts on his life, but one was enough in Leon’s mind.

Now that he knew Tiberias was in the city, Leon needed to figure out what to do about it. At the very least, he wanted to make another inspection of the villa's defenses and to warn Elise, but beyond that, he didn't know what to do. He could go to Trajan, but with the Prince's work in the Royal Palace, Leon hesitated to put more on his plate. Whatever he decided to do, he'd much prefer to take care of this on his own, if possible.

Of course, Elise had already gotten Heaven's Eye to retaliate for the initial attempt on Leon's life, which Leon assumed to be the reason why there hadn't been a follow-up attempts, but economic sanctions weren't enough for Leon. Hitting the Decimius family in the wallet lacked the catharsis that he greatly desired, that of taking vengeance by his own hand.

But that would be highly illegal. So was trying to have someone assassinated, but Leon doubted that justice would be served even if he had more evidence than he did. Maybe Heaven's Eye would vouch for him, but Leon didn't want to rely completely on them. Vengeance would be had by his own hand if it was to be had at all.

With a sigh, Leon walked into the recently-completed meditation chamber just off the villa's training room and sat down in the dark and the quiet to think. When he got himself settled, he closed his eyes and cast his consciousness deep into himself. He opened his eyes and was greeted with the sight of his mountainous soul realm, illuminated with the bright Mists of Chaos that surrounded it.

Xaphan was busy with his healing meditations and the Thunderbird was nowhere to be seen, both things that didn't bother Leon any; he craved silence, to work in peace while he thought about the issue at hand. He'd been training in his soul realm every day with the Thunderbird, after all, and he was grateful to get some time to work alone.

To that end, Leon took off from the marble platform and flew into the air.

The mountain hadn't changed much in the past few weeks. Were it in the physical world, it would be impossible to climb, even to powerful sixth or seventh-tier mages, with many sheer rock cliffs and long cracks and fissures running down every side of the mountain. It was essentially perfect in Leon's mind, missing only grass and trees on the lower slopes, and snow on the higher slopes.

And that meant it was time to begin construction of the Mind Palace itself. Leon had been planning this for a long time, so he knew exactly what he wanted to do. What was more, in his soul realm, he was the master of everything, as the Thunderbird and the many books he'd read had repeated to him ad nauseam. It was *his* world, *he* was the Lord and Master; he only had to have the will and the world would bend itself around him—with some help from the Mists of Chaos when needed, of course.

With a wave of his hand, Leon cracked the mountain almost in half. An enormous fissure ran from the mountain's roots and ended about two-thirds up the mountain, though it wasn't long enough to cut through the entire length of the island. Leon waved again, and the fissure widened, forming a long ravine from one end of the mountain to the other, and the mountain's cap almost seeming like a steep bridge above the ravine. With one last hand wave, the surface of the mountain closed up, sealing away the ravine in all but a few select places.

Leon's Mind Palace would be built in two separate sections. The first would be more conventional, a palace upon the mountain's peak, built in the white marble style that was so prevalent in the Bull Kingdom, and at its peak would be a small lantern chamber with his throne.

The second part would be built into this covered ravine, an underground construct in the style of his family's architecture—trapezoidal hallways, light projections in place of painted or tiled murals, and long multi-leveled galleries. In the center of the underground section would be a large open-air courtyard, with both paved and wild areas and lit by the few parts of the ravine that had been left open to the air, turning them into skylights.

Leon could see it so clearly that he felt like he could finish it in a matter of days. Plus, he felt it fit him to a T, a façade of the Bull Kingdom covering the true Mind Palace, that of an underground, hidden palace built in a style reminiscent of House Raime and Thunderbird Clan architecture.

All this shaking of the island as Leon carved out a huge underground space woke Xaphan from his healing trance, and the demon watched with a quiet seriousness that was quite unlike the demon. With some small insight into what Leon was doing, the demon watched everything that Leon did, but he made no attempts to speak with the young human or to give voice to what was on his mind.

Suddenly, without warning and without announcement, the Thunderbird appeared right beside him. Xaphan's omnipresent fires instantly died down in the Thunderbird's presence, but the monstrous bird was as quiet as Xaphan. Neither acknowledged each other's presence for the longest time, not until long after Leon had descended into the new ravine to begin work on the foundations of the actual palace part of his Mind Palace.

"We're... just going to let him continue like this? No warnings or anything?" Xaphan asked.

[If he succeeds, then he ascends to the seventh-tier. If he fails, then he will learn from this. Everyone makes mistakes, it's fine if we let him carry on, since either way, he will benefit from the experience. Besides, it's good to let him do as he pleases, at least for now. It will make him take the advice of his elders to heart more willingly.]

Xaphan frowned, but he didn't argue with the Thunderbird. She was millions of years older than he was, and it was her descendant that they were speaking of, but he wasn't happy about it. He felt like Leon needed to be reminded that Mind Palaces didn't need to be grand or complex things. They needed to reflect who Leon was, to represent him in as true a way as was possible.

He quietly, reluctantly returned to his healing trance, though, putting all of this out of his mind. The Thunderbird was in largely in charge of Leon's training, so he'd leave any explanations to her if Leon failed in his endeavor. Besides, Xaphan didn't know for certain whether or not Leon would fail; the boy could always surprise him.

—

When Leon finally resurfaced several hours after beginning, he found the Thunderbird waiting for him at the peak of the mountain, with Xaphan continuing to focus on his recovery. Leon swiftly flew back up to his throne to meet with his ancestor.

As he approached, the Thunderbird morphed back into her human form and stared at Leon as he approached in a way that somewhat disturbed her descendant.

“So...” Leon hesitantly began as he arrived. “... what’s up for today’s training?”

The Thunderbird, continuing to smile at Leon, asked him, “What is your Mind Palace going to be?”

Leon gave her a strange look, then asked, “Why?”

“A mage’s soul realm is an expression of who they are,” the Thunderbird said. “Is what you’re building appropriate for you?”

Leon was quite confident that it was, but with a being as powerful and venerable as the Thunderbird asking him this question, he couldn’t help but pause and take a moment to think about it.

After that moment was over, though, his answer was no different.

“I do,” Leon replied.

The Thunderbird cast her piercing gaze around the mountain, at all of Leon’s work during the past few weeks. “I suppose if that’s how you feel, then there’s nothing more to say, is there?”

Leon frowned, his own golden eyes surveying the mountain he’d built. He did genuinely feel it was appropriate, but he wondered what gave the Thunderbird the impression that it wasn’t. It was a question worth pondering if the Thunderbird thought it worth bringing up.

“Weapons training for today,” the Thunderbird said, conjuring a blade made of light. This sight surprised Leon the first time he had seen it weeks before, but the Thunderbird simply told him that at her age and power, light magic was hardly unknown to her. Lightning was her focus, with wind and water coming in close second, but she had passable knowledge in every magical element.

Leon called upon one of his training swords, causing it to burst from his vault and rocket through the air and into his hand. Given the Thunderbird’s power, he could’ve used a regular sword, but he didn’t have one of those—at least, he hadn’t any that weren’t made from the Thunderbird’s own mana and thus, useless for their current purpose.

They squared off, each unarmored and armed with a sword long enough to be used with either one hand or two. The Thunderbird smiled confidently at Leon, then slightly dropped her guard. Leon wasn’t going to miss this opportunity, so he charged as fast as his lightning magic-enhanced legs would allow.

He was so fast that he would’ve been a blur to mortal eyes, but to the Thunderbird, he might as well have been moving in slow motion. She was happy that he noticed the opening she made, though, even as she easily blocked him and pushed him back.

The two continued like this for about an hour, with the Thunderbird giving occasional instruction to help Leon refine his family’s hyper-aggressive fighting style, helping Leon to integrate some moves to take advantage of his power and preference for armor—essentially letting Leon forgo defense even more since his armor and magic power could handle his defense. By the end of it all, Leon felt dead tired, something he never would’ve thought possible to experience with his magic body until their training had begun. Despite this, if the Thunderbird had wanted them to continue, Leon would’ve gleefully done so; he loved sparring and learning new magics.

But they were still over, and Leon had to fight to not collapse in front of his own throne. Instead, he took a seat on the first step leading down the mountain.

"What's troubling you?" the Thunderbird asked.

"Nothing," Leon instantly replied.

"It's not nothing, I could sense some uncertainty in your blade. Your mind wasn't entirely here."

Leon sighed. Hiding something from his own ancestor was hardly a good idea, and besides, she could probably give him some good advice.

"Is it about that river nymph?" the Thunderbird asked with a smirk.

"No!" Leon almost shouted, before repeating much quieter, "No. I've... made my peace with her... at least, as much as I think I can right now. She's not been bothering me or Elise, so I think we're good on that front."

"She came to you demanding a child, then after mating with you once, she stopped talking to you completely?" the Thunderbird asked, seeking confirmation.

"Uh... yes..." Leon confirmed, though with it framed like that, he immediately saw what the Thunderbird was pointing out.

"If you think that you're good on that front, then you're in for a world of pain," the Thunderbird said as she rolled her eyes. "You know, I thought you would've been better with women since you had at least one of them who could stand to be with you, but I guess I was mistaken..."

Leon almost cringed his bones into dust. He knew the Thunderbird was right in her own mocking way, he had little idea what went on in the minds of most women. Taking Elise as an example of him having a way with women would be misleading, since Elise had been the primary instigator of their relationship, something which did bring Leon no small amount of shame and regret; he wished he could be more assertive so that their relationship could feel more equal to him.

But he could ruminate on that later, right now, he had something else to ask the Thunderbird.

"If someone tried to kill you," Leon began, getting the Thunderbird's attention and successfully changing the subject, "what would you do?"

"I'd obliterate them," the Thunderbird quickly answered. "No ifs, ands, or buts. If they tried to kill me once, then they'd most certainly try to do so again. Kill them immediately and be done with it."

"I understand," Leon replied, nodding his head. It was a sentiment he agreed with, though the reason he was hesitating with Tiberias was that if he were caught, he could very well be imprisoned, if not executed, for attempting to murder a member of the highest level of nobility, only a single rank below that of Royalty. Even though Leon didn't much care for the laws of the Bull Kingdom, having been raised in a place with only his father as an authority figure, he still balked at violating the law so blatantly.

Law and order was something that Leon agreed with on an intellectual level, but he had no great love for the Bull Kingdom or House Taurus which ruled it. In fact, he actually felt some small amount of resentment towards them for subjugating his family, despite his own personal loyalty to Trajan. As a

result, Leon's respect for their laws went only so far as he was willing to agree with them. He supported laws that kept the peace, but his desire for personal vengeance greatly conflicted with that, and he didn't know what to do.

"Who are you speaking of, specifically?" the Thunderbird asked.

Leon quickly narrated the events upon the galley with the two assassins, and the Thunderbird's expression barely changed throughout.

After finishing with the discovery by Heaven's Eye that the invisibility ring Leon had looted from the assassins had been commissioned by Tiberias' father, Leon added, "I honestly don't care that much that they tried to kill me. I'm not so hypocritical as to think that I'm untouchable and that while I'm so ready to kill, that others shouldn't be that way toward me. But as you said, they tried to kill me once, and they'll probably do so again, especially since I'm in a relationship with a woman that Tiberias has a history of unsuccessfully trying to court. In fact, I'd say that last bit went into the realm of harassment, though I suppose that would depend on Elise's opinion..."

"A conundrum, I suppose," the Thunderbird said. "You have joined this Kingdom, have you not? At least, for the time being?"

"That would be fair to say," Leon replied.

"This Kingdom, would it give you justice for the attempt on your life?"

"Given his father is a Duke, I doubt it."

"Then kill this 'Tiberias' human," the Thunderbird said, her face splitting in a vicious smile.

Leon nodded in agreement, but it didn't really address the main issue of why he was hesitating, which was that it was highly illegal and could result in severe repercussions for him, Trajan, and even possibly Elise.

"There's always a trade off when joining a society," the Thunderbird said, noticing Leon's hesitation and lack of resolve to do what he wanted, that being to kill his enemy. "A government expects your loyalty and your obedience. In return, you must expect protection and prosperity. Give and take. If one side only takes and does not give, then what reason have you to uphold the deal?"

"Not being an asshole?" Leon said with a morbid chuckle. "My father raised me not to look only to force to solve my problems, to not reach for my blade at the slightest sign of a problem. But in this case, there's essentially no other choice if I want this bastard gone."

"He has tried to kill you once, and if nothing has changed since then, he will try again," the Thunderbird said, her tone quiet and serious. "But your decision is yours to make. I have little power to aid you outside of your soul realm, so all I can do is offer my advice, and my advice is to end the threat as quickly and cleanly as you can."

"Mmm," Leon hummed, agreeing with what she said. He sat in thought for ten minutes mulling the situation over, and in the end, he rose from where he was sitting with a decision in mind.

He was going to kill Tiberias. He didn't know exactly when—he'd have to do some work before then to ensure he could pull it off—but his decision was made.

Chapter 343: Naiad's Offer

Kill Tiberias. That was the advice that the Thunderbird had given. There was no justice to be had in the Bull Kingdom for the young nobleman's attempt to kill Leon—not that Leon ever seriously considered seeking legal justice. There just wasn't enough evidence there, especially after he destroyed the bodies of the assassins with demonfire and told no one about the attack for weeks.

All he had was the invisibility ring and Elise's word that it had been commissioned by Tiberias' father, and that wasn't enough for a court of law to convict one of the highest nobles in the land. The Duke of Aurelianorum could always say that it wasn't his, or that one of his people went rogue, or that one of the rings went missing, or was stolen.

No, if Leon wanted legal justice, then he would be left wanting with little to show for it, and it could even go against him. Bringing Tiberias' family to court would only announce that he was still around and still a threat.

That his justifications coincided with what he already wanted to do was quite convenient, but Leon didn't devote too much brainpower analyzing that little detail.

'Better to just end Tiberias and be done with it,' Leon thought to himself, echoing something that resonated within him that the Thunderbird had told him when he consulted her about what he should do. Permanently end the threat, that's what he wanted, not to be tangled up in what could be a years-long investigation and court case that he doubted would go his way.

Still, even with his mind made up and his heart set on killing Tiberias, he still wanted to confer with Elise. Her family had already had Heaven's Eye retaliate against Tiberias' family, and what was more, Tiberias had been something of a nuisance to her before. Leon wanted her opinion as to what he should do next before he put thought into action.

Fortunately, in the time that Leon spent in his soul realm, Elise had come home. Leon emerged from the meditation chamber just as his lover collapsed face-first onto a couch in their living room after kicking off her shoes.

"Hey there, beautiful," Leon said with a smile and uncharacteristic cheer.

Elise was so exhausted that she barely managed to look up at him and smile back.

"Long day?" Leon asked. He'd somewhat lost track of time after working on his Mind Palace and training with the Thunderbird, but he was still a bit surprised to look out the window and see that the sun had set not too long ago.

Elise slowly nodded, and after taking a few seconds to just lay there and relax, she finally spoke.

"Pretty bad day, all things considered," she said, her voice tired and husky as if she'd been yelling at someone for significant portions of the day.

Leon moved closer and made to sit in a nearby chair, but as he did, Elise lifted her legs and made room for him on the couch, so he changed directions and sat down next to his lover.

“Tell me about it,” Leon said as Elise stretched her legs back out over his lap. Leon pushed her black silk dress up a bit and began to rub her calves, eliciting a few giggles and moans from Elise, preventing her from beginning immediately.

“Stop it, that tickles!” she cried with a wide smile on her face, and her upper body jumped up at his touch so quickly that it seemed like her fatigue had been completely forgotten—which was actually pretty accurate since, her being a fourth-tier mage, she didn’t get physically tired that easily. Her fatigue was more mental and emotional than physical.

Leon didn’t stop, and he kept up giving her a rough massage while staring at her with a teasing smile.

“All right!” she shouted as she swung her legs off of Leon and stared at him, her playful smile betraying the serious look she was going for.

“So, what’s up?” Leon asked.

Elise then proceeded to vent about her day, about the boring meetings with prideful nobles that she had to attend, how she had to manage a number of new attendants—including one particular braggart who had been giving the rest of the new attendants trouble—who had come in after some of the older and more experienced attendants entered noble households as spouses and concubines, and worst of all, how she had to see to the needs of a couple of high nobles who, while otherwise polite, didn’t stop staring at her in ways that made her uncomfortable.

The last part infuriated Leon, but he just sat back and let her express her frustration at having to work with these kinds of people. If she truly wanted those things fixed, if she thought that they were *worth* fixing in the first place, she had more than enough power and will to do so.

But then, she got to a part that really caught Leon’s attention.

“We had a visitor today who asked for me,” Elise said, her voice trembling in muted anger. “It was Tiberias. Apparently, he’s back in the city.”

“I know, I saw him at the Royal Palace today,” Leon said.

“What was he doing there?” Elise asked with concerned curiosity.

“Don’t know, I just got a glimpse of him waiting around the area where the King’s accountants deal with taxing the nobility.”

“Hmm,” Elise hummed in thought. “The sanctions we placed on the Decimius family hurt their finances badly, but it didn’t cripple them completely... Duke Decimius had to sell some land, but in almost two years, he’s been able to mostly recover with the vast incomes he still has...”

“What was Tiberias doing at the Tower?” Leon asked as he exerted a bit of effort to keep his killing intent from leaking out.

“Asking around for me, it seems,” Elise said, her face contorting in disgust. “After being told about it earlier today, I found out that he’s been coming quite a bit recently and bribing one of our head attendants not to throw him out.”

Leon blinked and reeled a bit in surprise, and not just because Elise had apparently saved the most infuriating news for last. He'd gotten quite used to thinking that Heaven's Eye was above just about everything that normal people wanted, so he hadn't considered the possibility of one of their employees being corrupt. But they were still just as human as everyone else, it seemed.

"Needless to say, I had that manager fired and blacklisted from all Heaven's Eye services as soon as I heard about it and repeated my instructions to have Tiberias removed should he show himself around the Tower. Still, it was hardly the best way to end the day..."

"I can empathize," Leon said as he pulled Elise closer to him. It took her by surprise, as Leon was hardly the most physically intimate person unless she took the initiative to touch him.

She liked it, though, and allowed herself to be pulled into his arms.

"I've been thinking for a few hours," Leon began, but he paused there, not quite knowing how to continue—he assumed that Elise had the same feelings about this matter as he did, which was why she didn't open up with her information on Tiberias right away. After Tiberias tried to have him killed, Heaven's Eye responded economically, since they had a policy of non-interference when it came to local politics. The only reason they did as much as they did to retaliate was because of his relationship with Elise.

In other words, he knew that he would receive no support from Heaven's Eye to kill Tiberias, but it wasn't their support he was after. He just didn't know if Elise would approve of his determination to kill the other noble, and that was what gave him pause.

[You're going to kill that man?] asked a voice in their heads that seemed to be coming from the other side of the room. When Leon and Elise looked over, they saw Naiad with their own eyes for the first time in days.

The river nymph looked perfectly fine, fully dressed and presentable—none the worse for wear despite her relatively long seclusion. Her attitude, however, was far calmer and more laid-back than either Leon or Elise were used to. She didn't have a hungry look in her eyes, her attitude was calm and curious, and with her eyes, she acknowledged both Leon and Elise. She seemed almost... human, rather than the staggeringly arrogant demigod she had been before.

[This man that tried to kill you, you're going to kill him?] Naiad repeated after a period of shocked silence.

"That's the plan..." Leon muttered, and Elise looked at him in shock.

"You *what*?" Elise demanded.

"I'm going to kill Tiberias Decimus," Leon said, confirming what Elise feared she'd heard.

"Things haven't changed since the last time we talked about this," Elise protested. "I get why you want to kill him, but think about this, first!"

"I *have* thought about it," Leon said. "I've *been* thinking about it for the past two years. The plan was always to kill Tiberias, but it was just a matter of *when*, not *if*. He tried to kill me once, I can almost guarantee that he'll try again."

Elise stared at her lover, but she couldn't deny that she wouldn't be at all grieved if Tiberias vanished from the face of the plane. Still, she didn't want Leon taking unnecessary risks.

Naiad's face broke out into the familiar smile of a predator who had just caught sight of a juicy snack. [When you go, I will accompany you. No harm will come to you.]

Silence fell upon the room as Leon and Elise blankly stared at Naiad, then at each other.

"... Huh?" Leon asked in surprise and confusion.

[I said that I would accompany you when you go to kill your enemy,] Naiad repeated. [My power reaches what you would call the eighth-tier, so I can't imagine there's anyone around here who could pose much of a threat to me—or to you, should I go with you...]

For a moment, both Elise and Leon reeled from Naiad's reveal of her power. However, they quickly recovered; it wasn't the largest surprise since they'd already seen her utterly thrash a seventh-tier vampire. It was still a terrifying reveal, conceptually speaking, but both Leon and Elise decided to concentrate on the matter at hand and revisit the matter of Naiad's power later.

"... Why?" Elise asked once she managed to recover from her surprise at Naiad's power, her confusion rivaling Leon's as to why Naiad would offer, though inside, her heart began to beat in excitement. With an eighth-tier equivalent being like Naiad present and covering for Leon, then there was hardly a need for her to be concerned for his safety.

[Does it matter?] Naiad countered.

"If someone is going to accompany me to kill someone, then trust is a necessary part of the deal, otherwise it would be best if you didn't," Leon explained.

[No it isn't,] Naiad disagreed. [You have enemies. We are now mates, at least for the time being, so it's only natural for us to kill those enemies together.]

After repressing a retort about not really being mates, Leon's thoughts ended up about in sync with Elise's, that it was best to have Naiad along if she was offering to go, just in case. Didn't make him happy, though; just because they had sex once didn't mean that Leon fully trusted Naiad.

'Still, though, she saved us from those vampires, but that was mostly out of convenience, I'd say...' Leon thought to himself.

Leon hesitated to give an answer and thought about this long enough that Elise spoke before him.

"You should go with him."

Leon stared at his lover in as much shock as he felt when Naiad revealed her power. Those were words that he never thought he'd hear fall from Elise's mouth.

"... Huh?" Leon repeated.

[Thank you,] Naiad simply replied. [I will keep Leon alive and kill your enemies. Leon, please tell me when it's time, and I will join you.]

With that, Naiad turned around and returned to her rooms, leaving a slightly somber Elise and a very confused Leon in her wake.

Seeing Leon slowly turning back to her, Elise preempted him by saying, "I don't want you to come back to me injured again. I don't think I can handle that. Besides, I have no more limb-regenerating herbs, so if you're so injured again, you'll be taking the long road to healing."

"I... I honestly can't argue with taking her along given her power and what I'm planning to do..." Leon reluctantly muttered.

"Loath as I am to leave you alone with her, I also know that she won't harm you."

"How can you be so certain?" Leon asked.

"Woman's intuition," Elise replied, smiling for the first time since Naiad appeared. "She's had many opportunities to bring harm to you before, and she hasn't taken them. Instead, she's done what she had to in order to survive, and I can't blame her for that... though not for lack of trying."

"Sounds like you're coming to like her," Leon said, cocking an eyebrow in surprise and intrigue.

"Not really," Elise replied, though she did take a moment to stop and think before saying so. "You're going to take her along?"

"I suppose I will," Leon half-heartedly said. "If an eighth-tier being is willing to come with when I'm planning to do something violent, who am I to tell them no? If things go sideways, it would be better if she were both willing to assist and in a position to do so. She seems willing, so I suppose nothing more needs to be said."

"When do you want to do this, then?" Elise asked with utter seriousness, giving this small conspiracy to murder one of the highest nobles in the land all the weight it deserved.

"Don't know, yet. I'm going to have to do some scouting, probably figure out where Tiberias rests his head, then the defenses of that place and how to get around them, then the actual plan of attack. Could take weeks to work out the details."

"I almost thought you intended to go out the instant it was decided upon," Elise stated in mild amusement. She was happy that Leon wasn't taking this too quickly.

"I almost thought you would refuse to let me go," Leon shot back.

"I was going to, but Naiad changes things," Elise explained. "Getting rid of Tiberias has been something I've longed to do for years, and now that we're both seriously thinking about this, I can't help but feel excited and look forward to its completion. Besides, what can the Bull Kingdom do to me if we fail?" Her last sentence came with a vicious smile and slight current of killing intent that Leon had rarely seen on Elise's face, not even when they had been attacked by vampires.

He honestly appreciated it when Elise showed her ruthless side. Made him feel better about how quickly he decided on the violent option.

"Good to see we're on the same page," Leon said, wrapping his hands around Elise's waist and pulling her closer on the couch.

“Then let’s get to work,” Elise said, her smile turning more loving and supportive. It was a smile that also possessed the absolute confidence of someone with the backing of a being with eighth-tier power and the single largest economic superpower on the plane.

“Your wish is my command,” Leon replied as he leaned down and sealed Elise’s lips with his own.

Chapter 344: The Ceremony

Four and a half months had passed since Leon returned to the capital. It had been two years since he had left the Knight Academy, and it was time for the strongest of the trainees from his cycle to graduate and become full-fledged knights.

This year’s graduation was unusually large, with all of the usual high nobles from his year who were already third-tier coming back for their knighting ceremony, plus a number of trainees from other years who finally managed to reach the required third-tier, and a handful of common-born trainees from Leon’s year who did the same. Third-tier power and two years serving as a squire were the minimum requirements to graduate from the Knight Academy, but Leon actually hadn’t met these requirements. He’d been knighted mere weeks after leaving, after all.

Still, to prevent this from becoming an issue, the Legate of the Knight Academy had asked Trajan to have Leon participate in the ceremony, to pay some lip service to the Academy he’d come from. While it hadn’t been against any official regulations, when the Consul of the North knighted Leon, it had been an insult to the Knight Academy, and it soothed some ruffled feathers to have Leon show up for the ceremony.

Leon was happy to do so, as several of his friends were there as well. Charles, Henry, and Alain had arrived in the capital about a week before the ceremony began, but without a way to get in touch with Leon, the four had yet to reunite—there had been rehearsals, but Leon hadn’t gone to those. As a knight of Prince Trajan and a sixth-tier mage, he was only required to be on stage and be honored, not do anything involved enough that it needed to be rehearsed.

And so, decked out in the same black and silver ensemble that Elise had picked out for him and that he’d worn to the Royal Court—with his snow lion coat, of course—Leon arrived at the Knight Academy parade grounds accompanying Prince Trajan and his Royal entourage. Elise had gone ahead of him with a retinue from Heaven’s Eye.

When Leon stepped out of Trajan’s wheel-less carriage, he found the parade grounds packed. They were in the south-west part of the city, in the same field where Leon had first taken the entrance test to join the Knight Academy, but even with that in mind, Leon hadn’t realized the grounds would be so crowded.

The grounds were covered in thousands of seats, and there was a titanic stage on one side of the field, big enough to allow two or three thousand people to stand upon it comfortably. After the graduation ceremony would come the commencement ceremony for this year’s trainees who were going off to their squireships, so Leon had some passing familiarity with this scene. Still, for his commencement ceremony, there had been about ten thousand attendees. Now, he estimated there were easily twenty-five or thirty thousand people filling the seats in the field.

“Seems like this is the place to be, today,” Trajan muttered with a hint of disapproval as Leon joined him—being higher-ranked than Leon, Trajan had left the carriage first.

"There weren't this many people last time I was here..." Leon observed, a misanthropic frown deeply etched onto his face.

"Makes a bit of sense," said Minerva as she joined the two from another carriage behind the Prince's, "there are three Princes attending this ceremony, so a lot of nobles and their retinues followed them here."

"*Three* Princes?" Trajan asked in confusion. He thought that he'd have been the only member of House Taurus to show up.

"Did Your Highness not read the report that was shared amongst us?" Minerva asked as the rest of Trajan's two-hundred-strong entourage filed out and joined their Prince and their sixth-tier Legates.

"I... *may* have skimmed it," Trajan admitted.

"Prince Octavius' squire, Gaius Tullius, was in the same year as Sir Leon, so he was obligated to come and knight Tullius. Since both Your Highness and His Highness were coming, Prince August felt compelled to come as well," Minerva explained.

"Would've been nice if someone told me," Trajan grumbled in a manner not entirely befitting a Prince.

"Someone *did* tell you. It was in the report that apparently wasn't read," Minerva said, though she lowered her voice for the sake of not appearing to openly criticize a Prince. They were surrounded by their own knights, but it was always best to be on the safe side in as politically charged a place as the capital, especially with so many courtiers and nobles in their immediate vicinity.

Trajan cringed a bit at his own negligence but entered the parade grounds anyway. He was the first of the Princes to arrive, so naturally he drew a lot of attention from most of the attendees. He smiled and greeted those who called out to him, but there were so many who did so that he could barely keep up as he walked toward the front of the seats close to the stage.

Leon was right behind him, doing his best not to appear too noticeable. However, he did feel a few pairs of eyes on him, and when he glanced around, he noticed another reason why so many nobles had felt the need to show up to this rather mundane ceremony: both Elise and Emilie were in the front row, their heads turned around to see what all the fuss was about. Leon knew the former was going to be there, but he honestly wasn't expecting Emilie to show up, as well.

Leon and Elise locked eyes and smiled at each other, but they did little else. There was a long aisle splitting the seats down the middle, and Elise and Emilie were sitting on the left side while Trajan and his retinue took the seats to the right. None of them save for Trajan, Leon, and Minerva sat in the front row, though, so as to save room for rest of the Royal Family and the highest of officials.

However, Leon wasn't seated long before a young second-tier mage came running up to his group. The mage bowed to the Prince and said, "Your Highness, there's a place reserved for you up on stage, if Your Highness wishes it..."

"Ah," Trajan said, a little embarrassed. He hadn't attended the rehearsal, either, and in fact, had never attended a ceremony from the Knight Academy, so he hadn't realized they'd reserved a seat for him.

The mage then glanced at Leon and asked, "Would I be right in assuming that you, Sir, are Sir Leon?"

Leon nodded.

“Sir, there’s a seat on the stage for you, as well.”

Leon scowled a bit. He knew that there was a seat there for him from the information he’d gotten a few days beforehand, but he’d been hoping to slither out of it. Unfortunately, it seemed that fortune would not smile upon him this day.

‘Damnit, damnit, damnit,’ Leon repeated in his head, the eyes behind him exerting tremendous pressure.

Leon and Trajan rose and made their way up the stage and toward the seats, each with great reluctance. There they sat with about ten minutes before the ceremony was scheduled to begin. As they sat there, there was a great deal of whispered speculation among the crowd concerning just what business Leon had up there, sitting in a place of such prominence. Many knew him by sight as one of Trajan’s knights and the man that Elise was in a relationship with, but those in and of themselves were hardly reasons enough to sit with Royalty.

The crowd had little time to speculate, though as five minutes later, August arrived with both the Brimstone Paladin and Roland in tow, creating as much of a stir among the present nobility as Trajan’s entrance. As August and his retinue of several hundred walked through the parade grounds, many Legion knights and lesser nobles called out their greetings to him, though not nearly as much as responded to Trajan.

When August reached the stage, he directly took a seat next to Trajan and quietly made his greetings, with Leon behind both of them. Roland and Brimstone then sat next to Leon, rather pointedly leaving only a single seat left for Octavius. The Paladins exchanged smiles with Leon, though his was forced at best. No one spoke much with such attention directed toward them.

Just as the ceremony was going to begin, with the Legate of the Knight Academy literally waiting in the wings for Octavius to arrive as the ceremony couldn’t start without him, the last Prince finally showed his face.

Much like with the two previous Princes, Octavius’ appearance seemed to electrify the crowd, and Octavius could barely walk for all the nobles that came forward to give him their formal greetings. Octavius failed to contain his smile of triumph at the response to his presence, and it took his retinue several long minutes to force their way through the crowd of nobles so the Prince could ascend the stage.

Octavius’ smile grew cold when he stepped onto the stage, though, and saw that there was no room for either the Earthshaker or Sapphire Paladins left. Fortunately, it was only for a few seconds as a pair of first-tier mages sprinted out from behind the stage with two more chairs. Still, the Second Prince was not happy, though he didn’t show it as he sat down next to August as if everything was fine and dandy.

Finally, though, with the theater of the Royal processions over and done with, the Legate came out to the stage with a magical microphone—a metal rod with an opal powering a voice amplifying enchantment—in his hand.

First came the standard ceremonies and speeches that everyone expected—welcome to the Knight Academy, proud servants of the illustrious Bull Kingdom, honor to the Ancestors, blah blah blah. Leon was practically bored to tears within five minutes and barely paid any attention at all, though he did his best to not make it obvious.

The speeches were over in relatively short order, and once he and his people were finished, the Legate stepped back to allow the trainees from the current cycle to take the stage. Leon was quite familiar with this part, as he'd done it just two years previously. The unit who won the FTX was right in the center, and the other nine units were off to either side. Unfortunately, it seemed that it was the Obsidian Cataphracts who'd won this year, and not the Snow Lions.

Following the commencement ceremony came the actual knighting ceremony for the returning squires. The trainees who were moving on to their squireships stepped off the stage and it was time for the returning squires to take the stage. Almost one thousand people emerged from the building behind the stage that the trainees had appeared from and began to make their way toward the stage with practiced efficiency.

The noble squires came out first, and Leon recognized most of their faces. Most of them recognized his, as well, and there were quite a few looks of confusion and some of understanding as the squires advanced toward the stage. Leon didn't know it, but his absence from the rehearsals had been noted by many of the returning squires.

Leading the pack were the most noble of the squires, those being the children of Dukes. Tiberias and Gaius were the only two whose names Leon actually remembered, and while he had few antagonistic thoughts left about Gaius, he had more than a few toward Tiberias. He expertly reigned in his killing intent, though, and watched impassively as they led the group toward the stairs at the front of the stage, practically parading the graduating squires before the immense crowd.

Following them came the children of lower nobles in descending order, from Marquis all the way down to hereditary knight. Most of the nobles whose faces and names Leon bothered to memorize were in the Counts group, namely his two fellows who led the Snow Lions, Castor and Alphonsus. Marcus and Alcander, who led the Steel Century, the men behind the alliance that tried to take down the Snow Lions at the end of the FTX, were also faces that Leon recognized, and who clearly recognized him in turn from the way they stared in shock at where Leon was sitting.

Leon also found a few other faces in that group familiar, especially the two who led the Deathbringers along with Gaius, but for the life of him, he couldn't recall their names.

As they walked past, Valeria and Asiya both smiled at him, though the latter was far more cheerful about it, even giving him a short wave. They were in the group of children of hereditary knights as their parents were foreign to the Bull Kingdom and held no landed titles, though they were still of noble blood.

Behind the children of the nobility came the commoners who were graduating. Leon's friends were in this group—as were a couple other Snow Lions that Leon recognized—and they all exchanged proud smiles and nods as they took their places upon the enormous stage.

“These young squires have served with faith and loyalty, honoring both their Ancestors and the Kingdom they call home!” the Legate said into his mic, his voice echoing throughout the parade grounds. **“Come, now, Sirs and Dames, and bestow upon them their just rewards!”**

At that signal, the knights that the squires had been assigned under rose from their seats and made their way toward the stage. There was one for every squire, about thousand knights in total, with the most noble of the squires in front and the commoners near the back. Octavius similarly rose and made his way over to Gaius right at the front of the group of squires.

The knighting ceremony passed quickly, with the squires taking a knee and their knights going through the motions. The knights listed the deeds of the squires during their two years, but with about a thousand people talking at once, Leon wasn’t able to pick out any details regarding anyone he knew.

Once it was done, the newly-made knights rose from their knees and stood proudly before the Kingdom. They were to be the newest generation of leaders in the Bull Kingdom, and the crowd thunderously applauded their approval.

Or they applauded for Prince Octavius, which Leon thought more likely, though there was certainly some genuine cheering in the crowd here and there.

“But these former squires and new knights are not the only ones deserving of honor...” the Legate stated, his rumbling voice quieting the surprised crowd. **“There is one more man who is graduating from the Knight Academy today...”**

Leon immediately began to sweat and shake in anxiety as the Legate turned his eyes in Leon’s direction. That one look filled Leon with more dread than he had felt in a *long* time, and his face immediately drained of color.

“Two years ago, Leon Ursus departed from this institution a third-tier squire, and today he returns a sixth-tier knight!”

Chapter 345: Reunions I

“Two years ago, Leon Ursus departed from this institution a third-tier squire, and today he returns a sixth-tier knight!” the Legate of the Knight Academy said, his voice resounding through the parade grounds and the ears of the tens of thousands of people attending the ceremony. But these people didn’t have the time to process their shock at such a rapid ascent in power as the Legate wasn’t done, yet. **“Not only that, he comes back to us a veteran of the short war with the Valemén two years ago as well as the war with the Talfar Kingdom just a few months ago! In the service of His Highness, Prince Trajan, Sir Leon Ursus has performed his duties admirably in the service of this Kingdom!”**

Leon wished he could just disappear. He’d had many an eye upon him before, but he didn’t think he’d ever be the center of attention for so many. Even when taking the stage, he’d attracted some curious glances from people who’d seen him at the Royal court or had heard about his relationship with Elise and Heaven’s Eye, but Trajan had still been the center of most people’s attention.

And now all that attention was fixed firmly upon him. What was more, he could feel the thousands of stares from the knights and former-squires on the stage, and since he personally knew many of those people, the weight of their stares almost exerted more pressure than that of the rest of the crowd.

Fortunately, Leon wasn't expected to do much other than suffer under this pressure, and after pointing him out, the Legate moved on. Still, those few seconds felt like an eternity to Leon, and he could still feel a great deal of attention on him after the Legate continued with the ceremony, which mostly consisted of dismissing the Kingdom's newest knights and their mentors from the stage, and then giving some closing remarks about the glory of the Bull Kingdom, House Taurus, and the Ancestors.

After that, the ceremony was over. The trainees moved on to their squireships, the returning squires had been knighted, and Leon had been thoroughly embarrassed in front of the whole Kingdom. On top of his performance in the arena just a couple months before, Leon couldn't even imagine how the people of the capital were going to talk about him now—not that he had much intent to actually find out, he'd rather never know for certain.

Of course, he understood why the Legate would elucidate his accomplishments, even if he hated the result. Since Leon was knighted without the Knight Academy's permission, the Legate had to stress what Leon had accomplished, and in doing so would also stress that Leon's knighting wasn't something to be done under normal circumstances.

In effect, the Legate said that Leon had ascended to the sixth-tier, had been taken into the service of the most prestigious and respected Prince in the Kingdom, and was a veteran of two wars. It was a little misleading of the Legate to do that, as when Leon was knighted, he was only of the fourth-tier and had just survived the Valeman attack in the Northern Territories. Misleading though it was, the Legate also said that only those Knight Academy trainees who could match what Leon had done would be allowed to be knighted outside of the Academy's knighting ceremony without repercussions.

Whether it would work or not wasn't Leon's concern, though. The ceremony was over, and the people were beginning to leave, and all he could think about was just how many people were still looking at him and talking about what he'd done in just two years.

Sensing Leon's anxiety, Trajan said, "Ursus, the rest of the day is yours."

Leon gratefully said, "Yes, Your Highness," and high-tailed it off the stage as quickly as he could while maintaining his dignity. Once he was mostly out of sight, though, he had to figure out what to do. Before leaving home for the ceremony, he'd told Elise not to wait up for him as he wanted to catch up with his friends and exchange contact information while they were still in the city. Now, however, he knew they were going to be around all the other people from the Knight Academy that Leon had known, and he wanted to avoid too many questions after the Legate's reveal of his career history.

In the end, Leon grit his teeth and made his way back toward the building his friends and all the other former squires had returned to after leaving the stage.

For their part, the Paladins and the Princes took their time, pausing to mingle with the nobility before leaving the parade grounds. Trajan had to fight off or otherwise placate nosy people who wanted to know more about Leon, which he was happy enough to do for his young protégé, but he shared similar feelings with Leon about wanting to leave and get back to work.

'Leave the glad-handing and political dance to Julius and August, I fucking hate this shit,' the Prince bitterly thought even as he plastered a smile on his face for the benefit of the nobles who were pestering him.

Leon was undergoing something similar, for as soon as he entered the building by the parade grounds, he found himself practically face-to-face with his old comrades from the Knight Academy.

"Leon!" Castor shouted; the brown-haired and blue-eyed noble was the first to greet him upon his arrival. He'd been the leader of the Snow Lions during Leon's time in the Academy, and it seemed he'd grown a bit in the two years since Leon had seen him last. He was now about as tall as Leon was, but his aura indicated he was still a third-tier mage.

In fact, from what Leon could tell, none of the other nobles who had gone to the Knight Academy along with him had ascended past the third-tier, with the sole exception of Valeria, who had made it to the fourth-tier.

Still, though, most of their auras were more stable than they had been, and Leon could tell that there were a few who were close to ascension.

Case in point, Castor.

"Castor!" Leon shouted as he walked forward with an arm extended. "Or, should I be saying *Sir* Castor, now?"

"Ah, that's right, we're both knights, aren't we?" Castor responded, his face splitting open in a wide smile. "It's fine, you can just call me by my name."

"Then do the same for me," Leon said, his own smile more narrow and subtle, but still apparent.

The two old comrades grasped each other's wrists. They weren't necessarily friends, but they were still old comrades and quite friendly with each other. The man that Castor had been speaking with, however, wasn't quite at that level with Leon.

Alphonsus stepped forward, his brown hair a bit darker and his pretty-boy looks having hardened a bit into a more rugged handsomeness.

"Sir Leon, it's good to see you," the young nobleman said, his tone almost neutral save for a slight undercurrent of uncertainty. His and Leon's relationship was amicable enough by the end of their cycle in the Knight Academy, but he, after two years of having discipline drilled into him by his assigned knight, could readily admit that he had been an unfriendly jerk to Leon back then, and that would be putting it charitably.

"And you," Leon said, holding his arm out to the other man, showing that no hard feelings were felt. It wasn't that powerful of a gesture under normal circumstances, but given Leon's own aversions to physical contact, it spoke volumes about his feelings on the matter, as well as showed how much more open he had become after two years in the Legions.

The two young men grasped each other's wrists, though Alphonsus was a bit hesitant about it.

Looking around, Leon could see a few more familiar faces from the Snow Lions, mostly those lesser nobles who had been second-tier at the time, and he gave them all polite nods, which were returned. He hadn't been that close to any of them, whether professionally or personally, but they all could respect each other's abilities and status as knights.

But even though Leon enjoyed seeing them all again, these young nobles weren't who he had come back to see.

"Leon!" came another voice booming from the crowd of new knights who were getting ready to be released in the wake of the ceremony. Unfortunately, Leon recognized this voice and knew that it didn't belong to someone he wanted to see, either.

Alcander burst through the crowd, his massive frame somehow growing even greater in the past two years—though given that he had been almost seven feet tall at the time, that extra size was mostly due to an increase in muscle mass, which two years ago, Leon wouldn't have considered possible given his already huge size at the time. Other than that, his square face, curly brown hair, and jovial-yet-challenging smile were all still exactly the same.

"Sir Alcander," Leon said, choosing to stick with formal titles with everyone until told otherwise.

"To shit with fancy titles!" Alcander roared as he pulled Leon into a bear hug.

Handshakes were one thing, but hugs were another entirely, and Leon gave the bigger man a light jolt of lightning in response. It wasn't enough to harm the third-tier nobleman, but it was enough to get him to stop and hold out his hand instead.

"I guess it's true, then, you *really* are sixth-tier... or at least, fifth-tier," came a fourth voice.

Marcus walked out of the crowd to give his greetings, a sly smile on his lips and his sharp gaze trained on Leon. His change was, perhaps, the last drastic out of all the people Leon knew back in their days in the Knight Academy. He was still a man of about average height, thin and unassuming, and other than the smile, his entire face was stony and rigid. He wasn't a man that smiled too often—at least, not unless he was having fun with some kind of overly complicated scheme or battle plan.

"Had some doubts?" Leon asked, holding out his arm for a fourth time, which Marcus gladly grasped.

"You have to admit, it's quite the exciting tale that my uncle told out there, about your power and what you've done in these two short years..." Marcus said, reminding Leon that he and the Legate were related.

Marcus came from a family whose head possessed the rank of Count. They were based in the Eastern Territories, and their struggles against their enemies and in particular, the northern tribes of stone giants—entirely separate and more disunited than the southern tribes which Lapis had come from—had given them enough experience in war that they had essentially written the book on warfare in the Bull Kingdom. More than half of the Legates of the Knight Academy were from Marcus' House, and their sons and daughters were all high-ranking knights in the Royal Legions, assuming they weren't administering a castle or garrison in their home county.

"That being said," Marcus continued as he stared at Leon, "I received word from my family about the stone giants being a bit more docile over the past few months. Apparently, the Diplomatic Corps managed to clinch a non-aggression pact with the southern stone giants thanks to some young knight, and this has even extended to some of the northern tribes of giants. There haven't been nearly so many raids lately for my family to fight off in recent months."

“Good to hear that,” Leon said, a dangerous smile plastered on his face. “*Whoever* that young knight was, I’m sure he’d be happy with your gratitude...”

“No need to step around the issue,” Marcus said, not caring at all that Leon didn’t want to reveal yet one more thing that he did during his time at the Bull’s Horns. “I know that you were that knight. You’ve brought my family and their soldiers some respite from the stone giants’ raids, and for that, I both thank you, and hold no doubt about what we’ve been told that you’ve done or that you deserve it.”

Leon stared at the man in embarrassment, though there wasn’t any anger in his gaze, either. It was embarrassing, but Leon wasn’t particularly ashamed of what he’d done in the Cradle, as it had worked out for everyone involved.

“Wait, what happened?” Alcander asked, and his inquiring gaze was mirrored in the faces of both Castor and Alphonsus.

Before any explanations could be had, however, Leon finally saw three young men and two women forcing their way through the crowds. His friends, Charles, Henry, and Alain, along with Valeria and Asiya, were here.

Chapter 346: Reunions II

Leon and his friends briefly grasped wrists in greeting, smiles on all their faces. It had been a little less than five months since they had last seen each other, but it was still a joy to see each other again.

“Good to see you, my friend,” Charles said.

“And you,” Leon replied.

“Indeed, it’s been too long,” Henry added. “We were talking about trying to find you or Alix while we were here, but we only got into town a few days ago so we figured we could just wait until the ceremony and see if you were going to be here.”

“Maybe next time we get separated, we should exchange contact information,” Alain suggested.

“Sounds like a plan,” Leon agreed.

“It’s better than hoping you were going to be at a ceremony you didn’t necessarily have to go to,” Charles stated.

“Yeah, since you were a knight already, we weren’t sure if you were going to show up,” Henry said. “In fact, I thought it more likely that you would skip it.”

“I was personally invited by Sir Aeneas,” Leon said, referring to the Legate of the Knight Academy.

“Though, it was through Prince Trajan that the invitation was made, not to me directly... Regardless, it wasn’t something I could easily skip. And for the record, it’s ‘Dame’ Alix now, she was knighted after we arrived in the capital.”

“That’s wonderful!” Alain said with a joyful smile on his face, and Henry and Charles expressed similar sentiments.

“Heyyy, Leon!” Asiya said, drawing Leon’s attention to both her and Valeria, both of whom had pushed their way through the crowd of new knights waiting to be dismissed. They’d actually come over at the same time as Leon’s friends, but Leon had yet to acknowledge their presence.

“Dame Asiya,” Leon replied, smiling at the bubbly Samarid girl. His eyes then turned to Valeria. As much as he didn’t want to spend time with her given her familial connections, he couldn’t just ignore her, especially since she was such good friends with Elise. “Dame Valeria,” he said in greeting, keeping it simple. He didn’t want to encourage Elise to get them together, as she’d suggested after they slept with Naiad.

“Sir Leon,” Valeria stoically replied, though Asiya could see Valeria’s eyes narrow and dart around in the tell-tale sign that she was struggling not to smile. “Still keeping up on your studies into enchantment?” she asked.

The two had interacted a couple times since Leon’s arrival in the capital, but it was only now, when so many people were around, that Valeria was able to ask him a question. Even then, it was out of her mouth before she could think about stopping it.

“I am,” Leon tersely admitted. The two had shared an enchanting class in the Knight Academy, and both knew that the other was quite skilled in the art, at least compared to others their age.

An awkward silence followed as the onlookers stared at the two who didn’t quite know what to say to each other. Leon’s friends watched in fascination as he interacted with someone as quiet as he was, Asiya fought off a fit of giggles as her own silver-haired friend floundered a bit in trying to talk to Leon, while the others that Leon knew from the Knight Academy stared at the two in disbelief that the two strongest members of their year were so hopeless in this situation.

Marcus was unable to stand the silence for more than a few seconds.

“Didn’t know the two of you were so friendly,” the young nobleman said. However, he didn’t give either Leon or Valeria the chance to respond, as he immediately asked, “Maybe you could tell us, Dame Valeria, how true my uncle’s claims about Sir Leon’s record are?”

Marcus, of course, knew that at least what the Legate claimed Leon had done after his transfer to the Bull’s Horns was accurate, but he didn’t know the finer details about Leon’s actions.

When Marcus asked this, many others around fell silent, even those who didn’t know Leon and were simply observing out of curiosity. The Legate called him out, indicating just how young Leon was despite his accomplishments, and they all wanted to know more about what he’d done to earn such praise, power, and high station.

“Far as I know,” Asiya said, helping her taciturn friend out by speaking up first, “what was told about Leon was all true.”

“Indeed, we were there at the Horns at the same time as him,” Henry added, completely disregarding the fact that most of the others were nobility and didn’t appreciate him speaking up in their conversation—he was a knight now, and technically, he was noble as well.

“I, for one, would love to hear about some of it,” Alcander said with an almost challenging smile directed toward Leon. The last time they had fought, Alcander had come away from it the loser. He, Tiberias, and

Gaius had all engaged Leon in the tunnels that the Snow Lions had fortified during the Knight Academy's FTX, and while Leon had eventually been forced to flee, Alcander had still been left stunned.

For two years, Alcander had been training. For two years, he had been looking forward to returning to the Knight Academy and challenging Leon to a duel. Unfortunately for him, Leon was somehow now a sixth-tier mage, effectively putting him far beyond Alcander's own abilities. The young nobleman doubted he'd ever get a chance to redeem himself through fighting Leon again.

"Yes, Leon, why don't we all head over to my estate after we've been dismissed, and we can catch up properly?" Marcus suggested, making it clear through eye contact that all of them, including Leon's common-born friends and the other newly made knights, were invited.

Most of them agreed instantly, as partying with a nobleman wasn't just going to guarantee the quality of the party, it could also bring them closer to someone who would inherit lands and titles—though most of them were more interested in the former rather than the latter.

The only two who hesitated were Leon and Valeria. If Leon had agreed, then Valeria would, as well. However, Leon wasn't the partying sort, and it took him a long few seconds of thought before he could respond.

"... Would it be all right if I brought my girlfriend?" he asked.

"No problem at all, bring anyone you like... within reason," Marcus answered.

"Very good, then I'll be there," Leon said. He was a quiet misanthrope through and through, but that didn't mean he couldn't attend a party for a few hours when it was being thrown by someone he held some respect for. Besides, Elise was far more social than he was, and he was sure she would be quite happy to attend the party with him.

Not to mention there was the good chance that Tiberias would be present, and that meant Leon had an opportunity.

He just hoped it wouldn't be too big. Unfortunately for him, what Marcus said next dashed those hopes upon the rocks.

"Good to hear!" Marcus said, and as he looked to Valeria, she, too, nodded her assent. She would also go. "I have some more invitations to hand out, but I'll see you there!"

—

Among the many thousands of people who had gathered in the Knight Academy's parade grounds, the vast majority were there for the Princes. However, several thousand were friends and family of those who were graduating or moving on to squireships.

Naturally, both Tiberias' father, Duke Euphemius Decimius, and Valeria's father, Justin Isynos were in attendance.

For their part, both men were stunned at the announcement of Leon's power and the inference of his age. Since the Knight Academy would only accept people aged sixteen to twenty, that meant after three years he was, at most, twenty-three; even for Justin, achieving sixth-tier strength was an incredible feat for someone so young.

However, Justin already knew who Leon was, at least on the surface. He was a nineteen-year-old knight serving Prince Trajan, and quite possibly the Leon Raime he was searching for. He wasn't about to make any moves against Leon without knowing more about him, though, since one of his most powerful mages was killed when he was sent to check up on Leon following the vampire's attack on his villa.

Euphemius, on the other hand, had little knowledge of Leon, and the Legate revealing his name didn't jog his memory. The assassins he'd sent after Leon had been coordinated by his son, and afterward, Euphemius hadn't been updated at all; not that he'd been waiting for an update for such a trivial matter—not to mention Elise's sanctions coming down upon his House several weeks later taking up the majority of his time and attention for the past couple of years. All he knew about Leon was what the Legate had just exposted for the entire Kingdom to hear.

The Duke was tempted to try and reach out to Leon and attempt to bring him over to Aurelianorum, but he doubted it would work. Leon was serving a Prince, and that was a far more prestigious post than serving a 'mere' Duke.

Euphemius had almost completely put Leon out of his mind by the time the new knights were dismissed and spilled out back into the parade grounds. In fact, it had been long enough that he had tried to make his way over to Elise and Emilie; they had done serious economic harm to him, and he wanted to know why. He was unable to get close, though, thanks to the heavy Heaven's Eye escort that were with both ladies preventing the *many* people trying to get close to them from doing so.

When he and Tiberias met up again, he was in a foul mood, though he did his best to conceal it.

"What's wrong, Father?" Tiberias asked after the two men embraced. Becoming a knight was expected of their family, and so such a small achievement on Tiberias' part passed without comment from either of them.

"Nothing," Euphemius curtly replied. "Let's be on our way, too many damned peasants walking around here..."

Tiberias had to agree, there had been far more commoners who were knight today than nobles, and so with the departure of the nobles who were there for the Princes, the parade grounds were mostly filled with commoner families.

"Yes, let's go home," Tiberias replied, though he paused for a moment when he spotted Elise. He made no moves toward her, but his eyes narrowed as he thought about the best way to get closer to her, especially after the sanctions levied against them by Heaven's Eye. "By the way, Father, I'll be heading over to the Aeneas estate in a couple of hours, there's going to be a party there to celebrate our graduation, and there's someone who will be going there who I thought long dead."

"Who?" his father asked, Euphemius' eyebrow cocking in curiosity.

"Leon Ursus..." Tiberias answered, his mask of affability and noble dignity giving way to hate and anger as they stepped into Euphemius' wheelless carriage.

—

"How's it going, kiddo?" Justin asked his daughter once Valeria and the rest of the new knights had been dismissed.

"Well enough," she answered. She quickly informed her father about the party that Marcus was throwing to celebrate their graduation.

"And you want to go?" Justin asked. She was an adult and had been for three years now. He had no place to tell her she couldn't, and he knew that, but he was curious after what he'd learned since the triumphal games.

"I do," she said.

"Are there going to be boys there?" Justin asked in a teasing voice, though his intent was anything but. He wanted to know if Leon was going to be there. He wanted to know more about the nature of Valeria's relationship with Leon, but he wanted to step lightly around the issue to keep his daughter from being unnecessarily hurt.

"A few," Valeria admitted.

"Anyone I should know about, as your father?" Justin asked, his tone growing ever more teasing as he tried to steer the conversation in the direction he wanted.

"No," Valeria tersely responded.

"How about any of your other friends?" Justin inquired.

"Asiya and Elise," Valeria said, her short replies not deterring her father in any way from pressing on.

"Ah, Elise," he said. "That was her boyfriend who was sent into the arena a couple months ago by Prince Trajan, wasn't it?"

"It was," Valeria confirmed. "He's a... he's a friend, too. I trust him."

"Do you?" Justin said, his tone taking on a more thoughtful quality, but before Valeria could give him a strange look, he quickly added, "I guess there *is* a boy there that I need to be worried about!"

"Dad!" Valeria shouted in anger and embarrassment; they were still out on the parade grounds, leisurely making their way back to Justin's own carriage.

"Oh, don't worry, little one," Justin said, his face breaking out into a wide smile. Despite all the suspicions he had about Leon, despite the death of the tall man in Emilie's home, he was still Valeria's father and he couldn't help but have a bit of fun at her expense, especially since she was now out on her own. "If you do get to know this boy better, please be sure to bring him around and introduce him, I think I'd love to meet him if you think so highly of him..."

"Will do..." Valeria noncommittally said. That was the last she intended to speak with Justin about Leon, and she quickly changed the subject to the current state of affairs in the Royal Palace, which Justin, as one of August's stewards, was privy to.

In the end, though, it wasn't Valeria who was left still thinking about Leon when the conversation was over, it was Justin. After he dropped his daughter off at the barracks for the Princess' Guard, he quickly returned to his home and canceled all his other plans for the day, foisting his official duties that he was responsible for onto his assistants.

He had a much more important duty to attend to: observing this party.

Chapter 347: Ambush Prep

If Leon took the time to stop and think about the problem, he'd probably regret agreeing so readily to Marcus' party invitation. It would likely consist of dozens, if not hundreds of other people, and he was rarely, if ever, in the mood to mingle.

Still, Tiberias was probably going to be there as well, and that presented an opportunity.

As soon as he got back home, he explained everything to Elise, who had gone back without him—as they had agreed on before the ceremony. She hadn't gotten home so soon that she had changed, though, so once she agreed to go with Leon to the party, she didn't change clothes.

She wore a tight red sleeve-less dress made of blood-red silk. Her hair was done up in a stylish ponytail that left much of the hair closer to her face loose enough to frame her features. Beneath her dress, she had indulged a new habit she had picked up after the attack on her and Leon's villa and wore black leather pants enchanted to provide excellent protection against physical attacks and more moderate protection against magical attacks. Her dress had been similarly enchanted, and she wore an onyx pendant studded with tiny rubies that had been charged with fire magic. If she wanted to, she could release five small fireballs using the power stored in those rubies—once he'd learned of these enchantments, Leon had suddenly felt like an idiot and had a great many more ideas for his own future enchantment work, but he pushed those out of mind for a while.

Just in case, though, Elise gave Leon a change of clothes for him to store in his soul realm. Elise didn't want to show up at whatever this party turned out to be and find herself overdressed.

Leon, on the other hand, cared little for fashion and changed out of his black and silver outfit as soon as he returned home. He went for a much simpler look consisting of plain grey pants and a white shirt. If anyone took issue with that, he'd thought, then it was their problem to deal with, not his.

Marcus had indicated to him that the party would begin two hours after the graduation ceremony. Leon's friends would show up at his villa a little early, and then they'd head on over. That still left Leon with about an hour to kill, but he used it wisely. First, he dove into his soul realm and evaluated the condition of his armor, weapons, invisibility ring, and stockpile of spells.

He had a set of generic unenchanted armor made of leather and cloth that would hide his features while still providing some amount of protection—courtesy of Elise—his invisibility ring had been completely repaired, and his spells were numerous enough that he could take on a small army if he had to. His primary set of black armor was in perfect condition, though it was too notable for him to use unless he absolutely had to. The only thing he needed to do once he returned to the physical world was to put his ring back on his finger.

Other than that, he bit the bullet and decided to check in on Naiad.

Leon walked over to the guest rooms that Naiad had been staying in, and as soon as he extended his hand to knock on her door, it opened, revealing the smiling river nymph.

[Need something?] she asked.

"I'm going to kill someone today, and you offered to help me," Leon replied.

Naiad said no more. She was already completely dressed, in contrast to her usual state of being, and followed Leon back into the main living room.

On the dining room table, Elise had laid out a detailed map of the noble district. The Royal island in the center of the lake was mostly unadorned, in keeping with regulations stating that no map of the island could be held in private hands, but the rest of the district had every road, every estate, and every small river and canal upon it, save for those that might have been built in the past few months.

"Ready for this?" Elise asked, her voice trembling a bit in anticipation and anxiety. Leon was used to death, but she wasn't, and Leon indicating that he was about to kill another noble didn't sit as well with her as she pretended.

Still, it was Tiberias that Leon wanted to kill, and since Tiberias had tried to kill him before, then Elise was willing enough to end the nobleman's life that she wasn't going to try and talk him out of it. Especially so since he'd refused to leave her alone for years.

"I am," Leon answered without hesitation.

[As am I,] Naiad replied, though she didn't think the question was directed at her. Regardless, Elise spared the river nymph any dirty looks and simply nodded.

"Good," the fire-haired woman replied.

For the next few minutes, Leon stared at the map. Elise had already marked their location, the Aeneas estate, and the Decimius estate. Over the past few weeks, Leon had taken to scouting out Tiberias' estate from afar, mostly watching it when he had some time and walking through the surrounding streets. He wanted as complete a picture of the layout of the district in his head as he could get. Unfortunately, much of that scouting was now useless since Leon intended to move the site of their attack. No longer would he need Naiad's help to kick in Tiberias' door.

After those few minutes were up, Leon pointed to a certain spot on the map and said, "Here."

The other two looked where Leon was pointing. It was perfectly discernible to Elise, but Naiad wasn't that great with maps, though she refrained from asking any questions.

"Why here?" Elise asked.

"Most remote location, and it's a good distance away from any of our estates," Leon answered. Most of the streets in the noble district were winding and not well-traveled. They were used almost exclusively by the nobility and their servants, and as such were well insulated from the hustle and bustle of the capital's outer districts.

The location that Leon picked was even more so than usual. It was a winding road that he figured Tiberias would have to take from his estate to Marcus', or at least on his way back home after the party was over. On either side were expansive, relatively well-forested estates, giving the road a feeling of privacy and seclusion even though the road was wide and there was plenty of grassy space between it and the outer walls of the bordering estates. The road could still be seen from the estates, and it was

more than within range of the strongest mages in the Kingdoms' magic senses, but that was what the generic armor disguise was for.

There wouldn't be many people around to stop him and Naiad, and it was one of the most secluded areas in the entire noble district. In other words, it was perfect for the killing of a nobleman.

[What should we do if the city's mages show up?] Naiad asked, her eyes locking onto Leon. [From what I've come to understand about humans, the Kings of this land won't appreciate the killing of their subordinates in their own city...]

"They won't, but we won't be caught," Leon said. "Legion patrols are rare in the noble district. Most estates rely on their own security. It took the Legion about half an hour to arrive at our estate after it was attacked, so I'd estimate we have about that much to accomplish our task. Shouldn't take more than about five minutes, but still, if it ends up taking longer, then we should bail."

Naiad frowned. [What about the guards around these estates? Can we expect them not to attack us when we go about our business?]

"They won't get involved, assuming they even notice in time," Leon said. "These estates are large, and it would take noble's security a good few minutes to show up. If they do..." Leon almost said that Naiad was free to kill them, but he thought better of it. Killing Tiberias was bad enough, he didn't want to add to that crime any more than he had to. Besides, those guards had done nothing to earn his wrath, and he could even understand if they wanted to intervene in his killing of Tiberias. "... If they do, then we'll cross that bridge when we come to it..."

At that moment, Leon heard some whooping and amazed gasps coming from outside; his friends had arrived. He wasted no time and pulled the map into his soul realm. It was evidence and he didn't want to leave it lying around. Fortunately, since ascending to the sixth-tier, it was incredibly easy to pull things into his soul realm. Instead of wrapping it in his magic power and pulling it in that way, all Leon had to do was take hold of the map with his magic body and just pull it into himself.

To be more specific, Leon's intangible magic body 'overlapped' with his physical body, and all he had to do to draw something into his soul realm was to be in contact with it. If his magic body were to be projected for any reason, then it wouldn't work, though, as it needed access to his soul realm through his heart. He needed both his physical and magic bodies working together, otherwise he would be stuck with the much slower way he'd been doing it in the past.

The map vanished into his soul realm in less than a second, whereas if he were of the fifth-tier, then it might've taken a couple of minutes.

[Who are they?] Naiad asked, her tone sounding hostile as her voice resounded in Leon and Elise's minds. Her aura spiked and she glared at of the nearest window at Henry, Alain, and Charles.

"Friends," Leon replied, and Naiad seemed to relax a little, though she didn't bring her aura back down to normal conditions. She was ready to use her magic at a moment's notice.

Leon went over to the front door and walked outside into the peristyle surrounding the courtyard. His friends had entered through the unlocked main gate and were still in the front yard practically gawking at the villa and the vibrant garden that Elise had surrounded it with.

Seeing him, the three were put a bit at ease—there were no signs in the noble district, so they weren't entirely sure they had the right place—and ran over.

"Leon! Is this place really yours?!" Henry demanded to know, his look one of awe.

Leon responded with a smile and a head nod.

"It's a beautiful place," Alain said.

"Indeed, I can't help but feel a bit jealous," Charles added. "How much did this place cost?"

"Does it matter?" Leon asked, an eyebrow cocked in amusement.

"A bit," Charles said. "As a knight, don't I now have to keep these things in mind?"

"No one's forcing you to," Leon replied.

"Regardless, this place is amazing!" Henry marveled.

"Come on in," Leon said as he invited them inside the villa itself.

Their appreciation of the place didn't stop upon entering the villa, with its marble floors and luxurious furnishings. It wasn't nearly so decorated as most noble homes or even the government buildings in the Bull Kingdom, but it had a simple, yet extraordinarily comfortable charm that the three couldn't help but respect and appreciate.

And then they saw Elise and Naiad, and everything seemed to freeze. Even Alain, a man with three fiancés, couldn't help but stop and stare in abject shock.

"Hi there," Elise said with a friendly smile and a wave. Their reactions were a bit extreme and it embarrassed her, but she covered it up well and gave them a friendly smile—it wasn't a new reaction for her, though she was far more used to it being played a bit less honestly, as nobles would sometimes exaggerate their own reactions to her appearance to try and curry favor.

Naiad, on the other hand, barely looked at them, treating them like they were tiny beings below her notice.

Alain was the first to recover, and he returned Elise's greeting with as much respect as he could. "Hello, My Lady," he said, smiling at Elise and slightly lowering his tall and muscular frame in the slightest of bows.

Charles was next, and he did likewise, giving Elise a warm greeting and managing not to make himself look too foolish. Henry took a bit longer, and he didn't conduct himself as well as the other two.

"Ummm... h-hi..." he sputtered. He could barely even look at Elise, let alone Naiad, as every time he tried, he could feel the weight of their auras bearing down upon him. In terms of magic power, he was the weakest person there, and Elise's fourth-tier and Naiad's eighth-tier auras were immensely heavy; he wasn't able to gracefully handle that pressure.

"This is Elise... and Naiad," Leon said, walking over to both ladies and formally introducing them. He then did the same for his friends, though Naiad basically didn't pay any attention at all, though Leon felt certain that every movement of theirs was caught in her magic senses. She was too proud and too

powerful to acknowledge them, but she never once truly ignored them. River nymphs were fairly territorial, after all.

After introductions were over, Elise excused herself and took Naiad into another room, claiming that they had some last-minute preparations to take care of. In reality, after the extreme reactions Leon's friends had, she wanted them to talk things out for a few minutes before they all left for Marcus' party.

As soon as the door was closed behind the two ladies, Henry's eyes went a bit wild and he turned to Leon and asked, "What in all the hells?!"

Leon gave him a strange look, silently asking what he was talking about.

"Hey," Alain said, drawing Leon's attention away from Henry. "We all knew that Leon was dating a girl here in the capital, though that was years ago. This isn't that great a shock, is it?"

"You know, I kind of expected her to not be real," Henry said. "I especially didn't expect to find *two* ladies here. And double especially not two ladies who're fourth-tier!"

"I think I'm with this idiot," Charles said as he threw an arm around Henry and his other around Leon's shoulders, ignoring Leon's usual dirty look from unwanted physical contact. "I think you've got some explaining to do, buddy..."

Chapter 348: The Party

Leon told his friends about his relationship with Elise. They had already heard some things about her when the four were at the Knight Academy, but since none of them had actually met her, none had expected to suddenly meet her at Leon's place—Leon hadn't warned them ahead of time, giving them only the directions to his place with the intent to catch up there, not at the Knight Academy parade grounds.

Apparently, not even the occasional reference Leon made to Elise back at the Bull's Horns had been enough to convince the other three that she was both real and still with him. Charles had once seen the two together, but it had been a long time since then. In fact, as Leon was quickly made aware once he finished telling the others about him and Elise, it wasn't so much her beauty and power that had stunned them in the beginning—though that was certainly a part of it. Rather, it was suddenly learning that Leon's girlfriend was a real person and not some esoteric concept that Leon could occasionally refer to.

The more troubling explanation was Naiad. Leon hadn't the intent to tell the truth about her, that she was a river nymph Queen and that she was a stunning eighth-tier being rather than the assumed fourth-tier. However, making something up on the spot wasn't really Leon's strong suit, so he gave a few vague details that they'd met when Leon had been transferred to the Horns and they hit it off after that.

Telling people that he and Naiad were a thing was starting to become a habit, he noticed. Telling people that they had an intimate relationship made for a convenient excuse to not tell them much else—and wasn't that far from the truth, as a matter of fact—but he still felt a bit iffy about it. He realized as he gave half-truths to his friends that there would come a time when he, Elise, and Naiad would all have to sit down and hash this thing out, preferably after he, Elise, and Naiad all spoke one-on-one.

But an hour before Marcus Aeneas' party wasn't the time for that conversation. Hearing that Leon was essentially done with his explanations, Elise exited the guest rooms where she had been holed up with Naiad and asked, "How's it going out here?"

"Just about ready," Leon had answered, and the other three were suddenly too nervous around her to say much. Her status as the daughter of the local Heaven's Eye Tower Lord tended to do that to people who were much farther down the social ladder than she.

With that awkward silence, Leon hurried everyone out of the door. They were going to be a bit late as it was, so Leon, a person who hated being late with a passion, got them moving. They didn't leave through the front door, though. Instead, they left out the back and walked down to the river. Marcus' estate was in the northern quarter of the noble district, whereas Leon and Elise's were in the southern quarter, but both were on the Naga River, so the two had decided not to walk or take a carriage.

Consequently, Leon's friends found themselves once more shocked when they found a small Heaven's Eye yacht waiting for them at the private dock, though somewhat less shocked as a whole than when they met Elise and Naiad. Or rather, met Elise; Naiad didn't say so much as a word to them, and, picking up on Naiad's unfriendliness, none of the three wanted to ask too much about her.

On the short cruise up the river, Elise took the opportunity to ask them about their lives. Alain, having three kids and three fiancés, had the most to say. He was renting a relatively large place in Ariminium, which he could only afford because two of his wives-to-be had taken jobs as well, with the third staying home to watch over the kids. Now that he was a knight, however, they were about to have a lot more money coming into their household. Other than that, his kids were happy, healthy, and had become quite the handful now that they had learned to walk. Fortunately, having so many pairs of hands around the house made taking care of the kids relatively easy.

Alain even mentioned that his family had come with him to the capital, and that he would likely be using the leave time he received after being knighted to take his family back to his and Henry's home village so he and his ladies could be properly married. As he said this, he gave Leon and Elise a strange smile, one whose meaning Elise clearly gleaned as she gripped Leon's hand a little tighter, but Leon didn't quite know what Alain was on about. It took a solid few minutes for Leon to realize that Alain was *very* pointedly not asking about Leon and Elise's future plans when it came to marriage, and Leon gripped Elise's hand a little tighter in turn.

Charles went next. He'd broken up with Jeanne, his girlfriend that he'd met when he and Leon had first come to the capital before the Knight Academy held its entrance tests for their cycle, and he hadn't found any other long-term girlfriends since. That put him in roughly the same boat as Henry, who was trying to rock the single life as much as he could. Unfortunately for him, though, he wasn't nearly as much of a lady's man as he tried to portray—he had less luck than Charles in finding one-night stands, let alone a woman who could stand to be around him longer than a few weeks.

By the time they arrived at Marcus' estate, the ice between Leon's friends and Elise had been thoroughly broken—in no small part thanks to Elise's own aptitude for being social that she, as a noble as highly ranked as she was, possessed. Leon was mostly silent during the entire conversation, but no one really expected him to talk all that much anyway.

Marcus' servants, stewards, and estate attendants were ready to receive visitors from the river, and there was already another yacht parked in the Aeneas' significantly more expansive private docks despite the earliness of Leon's party's arrival. It had been stamped with the crest of some noble House or other, but Leon didn't care enough to closely scrutinize it; the only noble he cared about who was going to attend was Tiberias, and he was about ninety-nine percent certain that Tiberias would be arriving by carriage since the Decimius estate had no access to the river.

The group was shown inside and taken to the wing of the estate where the party was located. It was an extremely expansive estate, so it took a few minutes of walking to reach it, but when they did, they found it practically jumping off the ground. Dozens of relatively young and strong mages were in the roughly fifteen-room wing of the estate, and with their recent knighting, they were going wild. Marcus had a local band playing, and the smallish crowd was getting rowdy enough that a mosh pit was all-but certain in the near future.

But that was in the case of the common-born knights—Marcus had truly invited *everyone* who had been knighted along with them, Leon realized, though there weren't even a hundred people there, yet, despite it being past the time for the party to start. In fact, Marcus, Alcander, Leon, and Elise were the only nobles who had arrived so far, and the rest of the sixty or seventy other people were common-born.

Perhaps because of this, Marcus gave Leon and Elise a very enthusiastic greeting and invited them over to the corner where Alcander had been spending their time. To Leon's friends, though, Marcus gave only the most obligatory of greetings, though he at least did so with all the enthusiasm and energy he gave to Leon and Elise. The three then went and joined the rest of the common-born knights while Leon and Elise let Marcus steer them away from where the party itself was happening.

Leon honestly couldn't tell if he liked this or not. On the one hand, being away from the crowds was exactly what he wanted, but being in a place where Marcus and Alcander could grill him for more than the cursory details of his previous two years was hardly the most enticing replacement.

Still, Elise was there, and she effortlessly did the lion's share of the talking, letting Leon be his usual quiet and introverted self. This, of course, didn't stop Alcander and Marcus, but it did take quite a bit of the pressure to be social off of Leon's decidedly more untamed shoulders. He'd been in the Bull Kingdom for more than three years, now, but in his heart of hearts, he was still a man of the wilds, a person born and raised as far away from government and societal structures as was possible. In other words, even in his time in the Bull Kingdom rubbing shoulders with high nobles and royalty, he still had little patience for gatherings such as these.

Still, he endured as best as he could, since he knew that Elise had more of a taste than he did for these sorts of social functions.

Over the course of the next hour, a couple hundred more people showed up at Marcus' estate. Leon and Elise had been fairly early, relatively speaking, so plenty of common-born knights arrived after them, while the nobles tended to be fashionably late so they could make grander entrances. As per his usual attitude, Leon barely even acknowledged their presence. Elise, however, was very conscious of greeting these nobles and made note of their attire, and when it became clear that they were treating this as a

more casual get-together, she dragged Leon over to a bathroom so she could retrieve her clothes from his soul realm and change.

When they got back to the party, Leon felt a hint of killing intent wash over him, as well as the attention of almost every noble in the room. They had been gone a long enough time that all but the truly late nobles had arrived, and more than three hundred common-born knights had, as well. However, his senses were sharp enough that he knew exactly where that killing intent had come from: the tall, black-haired and black-eyed boy sitting next to a few other nobles whose names Leon didn't know.

Tiberias Decimius had arrived, and despite how cheerful and happy he appeared to everyone else around him, Leon could tell that the nobleman was infuriated at him.

Knowing what was to come, Leon let his stoicism drop just enough for the tiniest hint of a smile to appear on his lips, though it was essentially imperceptible to everyone else. He kept his emotions under control, though, and betrayed none of the killing intent he held for Tiberias. He was going to kill that man after the party, and he didn't want to give himself away with a stray wisp or two of killing intent reaching Tiberias' senses.

However, Tiberias wasn't the only noble who had arrived in the fifteen or so minutes it took Elise to change out of her fancy clothes, both Valeria and Asiya had shown up and Elise started almost dragging Leon over to them. She tightened her grip on Leon's arm and flashed him a tense smile; she had seen what he had, too, and she wanted to be as far away from Tiberias as she could.

Seeing her strained look was more than a little curious. Leon knew that in terms of social skills, Elise had him outclassed.

"Hey there!" Asiya said as Leon and Elise sat down next to her and Valeria.

"Hey!" Elise responded with a beaming smile.

Leon, however, remained lost in thought. *'Was it something Tiberias did to her to make her so nervous? Or is it what I'm going to do? Or was she worried that I might give up the game too soon?'*

Valeria nodded in greeting, and nervously shifted a bit in her seat as Elise subtly had Leon sit between her and her silver-haired friend. Once they were seated, a few more noblemen wandered over, including Marcus and Alcander. Fortunately, though, they had all had enough of hearing about Leon's exploits and began to brag about their own—possibly for the sake of some of the only women in the noble section of the decidedly male-skewed party.

Marcus and Alcander had both been conveniently assigned to the same unit, a Legion in the Central Territories. Obviously, neither had seen as much large-scale conflict as Leon had, but they had spilled a fair amount of blood in the two years since leaving the Knight Academy. Notably, a rural guild had been extorting small villages for silver and livestock, robbing travelers on the road, and in general acting more like bandits than the usual magical handymen they were supposed to be. Marcus and Alcander's unit had been sent to arrest the perpetrators and bring peace back to the area.

Things didn't go so well, and in the end, the guild hall had to be taken by force at great cost to the guild mages. Much like Leon's experience with rebellious guilds, though, it was mostly the higher-ups in the

guild that were to blame, and as soon as they were arrested or killed in the fighting, a majority of the surviving guild mages surrendered.

Other than that, their time was mostly taken up by additional training, drilling with their Legion and familiarizing themselves with the way that they would be expected to conduct themselves once they were knighted.

Leon barely paid attention. His interest was piqued a bit when Alcander mentioned that they had been sent out on a vampire hunt once, but his interest was quickly lost when it was revealed that the two vampires Marcus and Alcander apparently killed were wind users and thus most likely not a part of Amon's schemes. At the very least, though, he was glad that Alcander wasn't pestering him for a duel like he used to in their Knight Academy days.

'Thank the Ancestors for small mercies...' Leon thought to himself as he did his best to not make it obvious that he wasn't paying much attention to what the others were saying. Even more, he did his best to ignore Valeria's presence, especially after Elise floated the idea of him becoming romantically involved with her after sleeping with Naiad.

Throughout all of this, Leon felt Tiberias occasionally give him a wrathful look, though it never lasted long enough to count as staring. It never even lasted long enough for anyone else to notice. In fact, Leon only noticed because he was keeping his magic senses projected so that he could monitor the nobleman, just in case.

On occasion, he saw Tiberias' gaze shift from him to Elise, and it lost none of its wrath. If Leon had to guess, it would be because Tiberias was furious that Elise chose Leon over him, though Leon would readily admit that he had no evidence for that guess. It made sense to him, though.

It seemed that Tiberias wasn't all that into the party after seeing Leon and Elise come back. He was there for a grand total of about an hour before he made his excuses and left. Leon watched him intently until he left the wing of the estate where the party was happening.

Leon waited only a few more minutes before he, too, rose from his seat, startling the other nobles around him. He'd noticed several other people coming and going, so he didn't think it would be too suspicious if he were to leave right now, even if it was quite abrupt.

"I'm afraid I have to go," he said. He almost left right then without offering any further explanation, but he paused when he realized that that would mean dumping the explanation into Elise's lap, and he refused to do that. He then added, "I have a bit of extra work I have to take care of back home training my griffin with his beastmaster, I apologize."

With that, Leon turned and left, pausing only one more time to smile and wave at Elise as she and the others—including a slightly put-off Valeria—said their own goodbyes to him.

In a way, he was somewhat grateful to Tiberias. Now, Leon could both kill him and ditch the party. Still, he felt Elise's angry eyes boring holes into his back as he walked away. She knew why he was leaving after seeing that Tiberias had also left, but it didn't stop her from being irritated that he was leaving just like that.

He could apologize later. Right now, he had a nobleman to kill.

Chapter 349: A Taste of Revenge to Come

He'd left Elise at the party without any warning. They'd spoken about this and Tiberias' early departure had taken him by surprise, but as Leon left the Aeneas estate, he couldn't help but feel terrible about it. He'd even left his friends, and though he felt bad about that, too, his regret was marginal at best compared to how he left Elise.

Still, he had a job to do, and apologies could come later.

Fortunately, the party was large enough that people were still arriving, and others were leaving just as Leon was, so it was hardly a thing of note that he was leaving at the same time as Tiberias. Should any investigations take place, then he was just one of several people leaving around the same time.

Leon kept an eye on Tiberias as much as he could. In his lessons with the Thunderbird, it had been revealed to him that once his magic body had been completed, the range of his magic senses had been extended to the limits of his soul realm. The more his soul realm grew the farther he could see with his magic senses as a result. Over the course of laying the groundwork for his Mind Palace, his soul realm had grown to about a mile in radius from his throne, so that was the limit of his magic senses.

Of course, a circle with a two-mile diameter meant that enough fell into his senses that he simply couldn't make sense of it all, even with the mental enhancements that came with adapting his brain to magic to reach the fourth-tier. Leon still needed time and a great deal of magic to assist his brain in processing such a vast amount of information.

Tracking Tiberias, however, didn't require such an unfocused use of Leon's magic senses. Rather, Leon could keep projecting his magic senses in a significantly more directed way. Instead of a circle with a two-mile diameter, Leon only released his magic senses in Tiberias' direction and only far enough to keep the nobleman in his sight.

There were a few hiccups since in the noble district more than half of the villas were inhabited by people with enough financial or magical resources to ward their homes against magic senses, but Tiberias never left Leon's sight for long. Even when the nobleman got into his wheel-less carriage Leon was able to track him with relative ease—it seemed even the Decimius family couldn't ward their carriages against magic senses, or at least, Tiberias' carriage wasn't deemed at a sufficient enough risk to warrant the expense. They were in the capital, after all, there was little to no chance that there would've been anyone with a deep enough grudge against their family to break the peace in the city.

However, they had attempted to murder just one such person. Leon had little care or respect for the Bull King's authority, even if he largely agreed with the need for law and order. As a result, it was with no hesitation that he ran as fast as his powerful lightning magic could propel him while still keeping Tiberias in range of his magic senses. Fortunately, Leon's invisibility ring had long been fixed and Tiberias didn't seem to be in any great hurry, so Leon was able to both remain unnoticed and rapidly outpace the carriage.

Leon only let his invisibility lapse once he reached the place where he and Naiad were planning on ambushing Tiberias. However, Leon didn't see the river nymph waiting for him as he approached. He wasn't concerned, though, Naiad had offered to help him so he had no doubt that she would be there.

She was simply an eighth-tier equivalent being, and he assumed she had some method of hiding from his senses that he didn't know about.

Upon arrival, Leon immediately double-checked Tiberias' position, and after ensuring that his ring would have the five minutes it would need to cool down and be ready for when he next needed it, Leon let his invisibility drop.

Instantly, a small muddy puddle, otherwise innocuous and beneath just about anyone's notice, began to ripple and rise from the ground. In seconds, Leon found himself staring at Naiad who had emerged from the puddle. He almost expected her to be angry that she had to wait in such an undignified way, but she seemed fine. He guessed that since she lived in an underground lake, she wasn't too concerned about such trivialities as a muddy puddle. She didn't even seem dirty, so he figured he was overthinking things and put it out of his mind. If she wasn't upset, he wasn't going to be upset on her behalf.

"You ready?" Leon asked once it became clear that Naiad was more interested in staring at him than she was in any greetings.

[I am,] Naiad replied.

"No one saw you come here?" Leon asked just to be sure.

[I can move with impunity through these lands unnoticed,] Naiad stated matter-of-factly.

"Good to hear," Leon responded. He might've asked a few more questions, but Tiberias' carriage was approaching, and he wasn't of a mind to start any long conversations until after they'd assassinated the nobleman.

It seemed Naiad didn't share that mindset, though, for as soon as Leon replied to her, she asked, [I can see him coming, but what if he doesn't come this way? That map had several different routes to take for him to go home from that estate you two were just at, some that are still open to him.]

Leon nodded, sharing her slight apprehension at how easily Tiberias could disrupt their plans by simply taking a longer way home. The noble district had been built on a hilly plain surrounding the lake in the center of the capital, and roads wound all over and between the district's estates. Tiberias was spoiled for choice as to the routes he could take, assuming he was even going home in the first place.

Still, Leon hardly considered it a problem.

"If he takes another way, then we'll simply wait until night falls and hit his estate, as we planned to do from the start," Leon said like it was the easiest thing in the world. Given that the only response he got from Naiad was a head nod and a light smile, it seemed she agreed with his attitude. She was strong enough that she doubted any defensive wards on the Decimus estate would be able to keep her and Leon out if they absolutely had to get into the place.

It didn't seem like it would come to that, though, since Tiberias' carriage continued to make its way toward them.

[Out of curiosity, do you know how many people are with the boy?] Naiad asked.

"Not for certain, but given that it's only a single carriage, it can't be too many..." Leon said. However, his gaze dropped for a moment to the ring on his finger that he'd taken from the corpses of the assassins

Tiberias had sent after him in the wake of their departure from the Knight Academy two years ago. “That being said, there could be a few invisible guards keeping an eye on their Young Lord, so while we can only see a single carriage, there could easily be more guards than we can see...”

[I understand,] Naiad said. [As it is, I can sense four people, including that boy you want dead.]

“I sense the same,” Leon said. As the son and heir of a powerful Duke, he’d expected Tiberias to have a bigger entourage, but the young nobleman had only what seemed like two guards and the carriage driver with him. Even in as secure a place as the capital, having an entourage or a retinue of knights was a symbol of prestige, but Tiberias lacked one that others of his social rank might consider appropriate.

Leon’s suspicion grew, and he felt like his answer to Naiad’s question about the number of people on Tiberias’ side was more accurate than he might like. Invisible guards hardly contributed to prestige since, well, no one could see them, but they still fulfilled a crucial function in keeping their charge alive.

“Let’s assume that there’re invisible guards, just to be safe,” Leon said, and Naiad nodded her agreement. Her instincts were quite similar to Leon’s own, both being products of the wild. Neither were going to assume anything that might leave themselves at a disadvantage, even with the titanic power difference between Naiad and Tiberias’ fourth and fifth-tier guard.

[I’ll follow you,] she said. [If anything tries to harm you, I will kill them, so act as you please.]

“It’s appreciated,” Leon said, a vicious smile spreading on his lips as he watched the carriage approach. After pulling his sword and the generic nondescript armor that Elise had picked up for him to conceal his identity out of his soul realm, he quickly channeled magic power into his ring, bending light around him and rendering him invisible. Taking her cue from Leon, Naiad melted down into water, becoming nothing more than a puddle on the ground.

Just a few minutes later, the carriage reached the location Leon chose for the ambush. It seemed that Tiberias was returning home by the fastest route he could take, which only made Leon smile even wider. In such a secluded place, with trees blocking the view of the road from the distant estates, Tiberias and his people were sitting ducks.

Leon didn’t launch his ambush quite yet, though. This part of the road was long and winding, and Tiberias’ carriage had only just entered into this ‘corridor’. Instead, Leon used his magic senses to ensure that they were alone—they were, there were no people on the road besides him, Naiad, and Tiberias’ crew—and to examine what kind of defenses the carriage had. He’d given it a cursory examination as Tiberias was leaving the Aeneas estate, but he had been in a bit of a hurry to reach the ambush point and so hadn’t taken a closer look. Now that he had a few minutes to spare as Tiberias’ carriage approached, Leon decided to take that closer look.

The carriage was heavily warded against physical attacks. In other words, it would take serious force to damage it. However, it wasn’t nearly so warded against magical attacks, with the only serious element that the carriage’s makers seemed to focus on being fire.

The wards were well put together, worthy of being on the vehicle of the son of a powerful Duke, but Leon couldn’t help but shake his head at the lack of thoroughness. His own skills in enchanting had come a long way in these three years, and he already felt like he could do a better job of it than whoever designed this carriage’s defenses.

Of course, he wasn't privy to their material and educational restrictions, what with the Thunderbird and Xaphan in his soul realm and his girlfriend being the daughter of the Heaven's Eye Tower Lord, but he couldn't help but feel confident and a bit cocky about his skills.

As the carriage approached, Leon found that it wasn't warded to keep sound in the carriage from leaking out, which was just one more oversight that he rolled his eyes at. The carriage was about to enter the range of his magic, but he decided to take a moment to listen.

"Young Lord," began the fifth-tier guard in the carriage, "it wouldn't be wise to antagonize Heaven's Eye right now. His Grace has only recently gotten the House's financial situation stabilized, but it wouldn't be difficult for Heaven's Eye to cause additional harm if they so desired."

"Fucking cowards, fucking pieces of shit," Tiberias cursed, his mask of noble serenity dropped completely now that he wasn't in public. "Who do they think they are?! Blacklisting *us*?! And not once telling us *why*!"

"It is a dishonorable act, indeed, to not even tell us why they did what they did," the guard said, his tone more exasperated than sycophantic or conciliatory. Leon figured his role in House Decimus was probably more than he assumed, given how casually he was speaking with Tiberias. "However, it doesn't change the fact that this plan of yours involving Lady Elise will not end well. Heaven's Eye *will* retaliate if you try and kidnap the daughter of the Tower Lord from her home and murder her lover!"

Leon's vision went red. He didn't hear Tiberias' entitled and indignant response, his mind cleared of everything except killing the nobleman. Magic power flooded from Leon's soul realm, rushed down his right arm, and formed a brilliant spear of golden lightning. This broke Leon's invisibility, but Leon didn't care. As soon as the spear had formed itself, he hurled it with as much force as he could manage, aiming for the driver of the carriage.

The lightning bolt rocketed across the few hundred feet between Leon and the carriage, exploding upon the chest of the startled driver. The poor man didn't even have time to scream before lightning ripped his body to shreds.

The guard beside him didn't come off any better. The carriage was wreathed in lightning from that single bolt, hurling him out of his seat and searing his flesh. Thunder resounded in his ears so powerfully that his eardrums tore, leaving him deaf and bleeding from his ears. He was effectively incapacitated, but that wasn't enough for Leon. Another bolt of lightning hit the fourth-tier guard a moment later, shredding what little armor he had left and leaving him little more than a charred corpse on the ground.

The carriage itself was almost shaken apart. Both the front and back axles snapped, the wooden frame warped and burned in the lightning's heat, and the two inside were thrown around and smashed into the carriage walls hard enough for a few of Tiberias' bones to break, despite the cushy padding within. Additionally, the harness tying the two horses to the carriage was obliterated, and the terrified beasts immediately took off away from Leon as fast as their legs could carry them.

With that, Leon's mind began to clear. He looked around at the damage he'd done, but he barely cared. His left shoulder ached as mana rushed through his body, but as Leon rested his left hand upon the handle of his sword, he felt the smallest of shocks that instantly relieved the pain.

Leon smiled. He didn't know the Adamant weapon could do that, but he couldn't stick around to properly appreciate this happy development; the thunder summoned with his lightning had likely alerted the entire noble district to what was happening, so he had to move quickly. Even after the attack on his home shocking the entire noble district, the Legion wouldn't reach this location for at least ten or fifteen minutes, and Leon wanted to be long gone by the time they did. Legion response times wouldn't change much after a single incident, no matter how shocking it was; the nobles in the district were loath to accept the Legions messing around in what they thought of as their domain.

He strode confidently forward, moving fast enough to not be taking his time, but slowly enough to ensure that he wasn't rushing into a trap. His magic senses remained locked on the two inhabitants of the carriage, but he also widened the area to keep an eye on his surroundings just in case there were a few invisible surprises.

No one revealed themselves, so Leon gradually picked up the pace. He knew that the fifth-tier mage within the carriage had seen him and was already trying to get Tiberias out of the carriage, and he wasn't going to let that happen.

Leon reached the carriage in seconds. With a swift kick, he snapped the door off its hinges. His earlier lightning bolt had shredded much of the wards securing the carriage, so the wards against physical attacks were largely useless now.

Before Leon could enter the carriage, a gout of fire erupted from the carriage, enveloping him in its entirety.

And Leon couldn't have cared less. He was a skilled fire mage himself, and even if he was of the same magical tier as the guard inside the carriage, he doubted this one blast would've harmed him.

Leon tanked the blast, coming out none the worse for wear once it died down. He took a moment to savor the fear he could see in the eyes of the fifth-tier guard before answering the man with a fire attack of his own. However, Leon's own attack was far more contained; it wasn't an undirected blast of fire, it was more like a beam of fire that blasted a hole in the man's chest, annihilating his internal organs as well as punching a hole through the carriage and leaving a small crater in the paved road beneath it.

He then turned his attention to Tiberias. The nobleman seemed like he wanted to say something, but Leon gave him no opportunity. He raised his hand and let loose with a blast of lightning. He didn't bother forming a lightning spear from it, he simply let golden lightning flow from his fingers and into the other man.

Forming lightning into his spears increased the potency of the magic, essentially compressing the magic into a smaller, more contained form. The more the lightning was condensed, the more powerful it became, and it was an exponential growth rather than linear. As far as Leon knew, only his family possessed the skill in lightning magic to consistently create such bolts. All others who used lightning magic—at least, in his limited experience in the Bull Kingdom—could only reliably do what he was doing now, namely releasing their lightning in uncontrolled blasts. A few talented individuals figured out how to do similar things, creating less compressed, less powerful lightning bolts, but none had been able to replicate the feats of House Raime, even with what had been left behind by the Thunderbird Clan.

Lightning coursed through Tiberias, slowly tearing him apart. It wasn't a controlled bolt of lightning, but it was still magic power from a sixth-tier mage, and Tiberias was only of the third-tier. The nobleman tried to scream for help, but his body seized up as he opened his mouth. He couldn't move a muscle as lightning ravaged his body. He felt his circulatory system burst, his organs fry in his torso, and his muscles lock.

Lightning destroyed everything it came across, but Leon made sure it was relatively slow. Tiberias' eyes popped in his skull, his tongue was fried, his teeth shattered. His heart was saved for last, and Leon took great pleasure in its destruction.

The final burst of lightning liquefied Tiberias' brain. If Leon left right after destroying the nobleman's heart, Tiberias still would've died in seconds, but Leon wasn't going to leave the job unfinished. Lightning coursed through Tiberias' brain, finally killing the young man who, if Leon were to be honest, probably couldn't even feel it at that point.

In the end, Tiberias wasn't able to say a single word. He died miserably in his carriage without even knowing his killer's name.

There was an instinct to incinerate Tiberias' corpse, but at this point, there would be little point. The assault was flashy enough that it had likely caught the attention of many powerful mages. Besides, there was a small part of Leon that wanted people to see what he had done, like it was some kind of message.

A message of what, Leon didn't know, but it felt good to leave Tiberias' fried body there, still identifiable despite the plentiful lightning burns.

Leon turned away from the carriage, his job complete. He had been so into killing Tiberias that seeing the corpses of two more guards on the ground around the carriage was the first moment that he realized that he and Naiad had been correct to be cautious. Both had been killed with an ice spike through the throat, but when Leon looked around, he couldn't see Naiad.

The ice spikes were her handiwork, of that he had no doubt, but the river nymph was nowhere to be seen.

Chapter 350: Surprising Power

The river nymph was nowhere to be seen—not that he had been expecting her to be, given her skill in concealment. Two guards equipped with invisibility rings had been killed with ice magic behind Leon, so he knew that she was still around, but now that Tiberias and his guards were dead, she had seemingly vanished, leaving not even a puddle by the road.

With a sigh, Leon set about looting the bodies for anything that could be taken. He trusted that the eighth-tier Naiad was fine, and he had little time besides. His lightning magic was bright and loud; the entire noble district probably heard what he had just done.

To that end, he figured that looting the bodies would make this seem like a robbery. He doubted anyone would seriously believe that given that this was the middle of the noble district and Tiberias had some powerful guards—one fifth-tier and three fourth-tier, including the two invisible guards—but he wasn't going to make it easy.

Plus, he wanted the rings or whatever made those two guards invisible, which he assured himself wasn't the *real* reason he was digging around in their pockets.

He figured he had ten minutes before the Legion could arrive. The real time was probably closer to twenty, but he wanted to leave as soon as possible, so he erred on the side of caution. Besides, he couldn't guarantee a Paladin or someone else of that caliber wouldn't come down and complicate this. No one had for the vampire attack on his home, though, so he was confident that he still had a few minutes to spare.

Leon scoured the dead and the carriage for whatever could be taken, and he was pleasantly surprised by what he found. Two more invisibility rings, several thousand silver coins, and four expensive-looking swords from the guards all went into his soul realm, and Leon stuck around no longer.

However, just as he was about to activate his own invisibility ring, he saw in the estate right next to the ambush point a great pillar of ice erupt from the villa's roof while a huge serpentine dragon made of water wrapped itself around it and carried someone to its peak.

—

Naiad watched Leon dispatch the carriage driver and the first guard with great interest from her puddle. His lightning was potent, and there was a strength in it that sent a shiver running down her spine. Whether that was fear or something else entirely she didn't know, but it was captivating.

Her decision to have Leon as her mate was reinforced in her mind, as there was no way she was ever going to let that power go.

Despite her seeming inattention, though, Naiad kept a close eye on the surroundings. When Leon kicked in the door of the carriage, Naiad saw a pair of guards appear behind him—revealed from a few stray sparks that bounced off his armor when the guard in the carriage tried to hit Leon with fire magic—so she instantly fired a pair of ice spikes that hit the guards in their necks, severing their spinal cords and killing them both before they could so much as widen their eyes in surprise, let alone do something to Leon with their drawn blades.

Naiad rarely used ice magic. It was derived from water magic, but Naiad greatly preferred using actual water when she used her power. Given that she was a creature of the water, that was natural, as solid objects like ice were much less effective in the deep underground lakes and rivers of her home, at least compared to using the water itself.

Still, when above ground and out of the water, she could fire off a couple of ice spikes in an instant, whereas any equivalent water magic might take a fraction of a second or two longer. Naiad wasn't particularly sentimental, and when it came to killing her enemies, she didn't play around. She used the fastest, most efficient method she had available.

If her mouth hadn't become water, she would've smiled in pride at how quickly she killed those guards and in derision at how easily they fell. It might've even been comical if anyone had been there to see it since a pair of ice spikes had seemingly appeared out of nowhere above her puddle by the side of the road and so quickly killed a pair of fourth-tier mages.

It had been a long time since she had to seriously fight, perhaps even as much as a few decades since her last battle until her aiding Leon's return to the Bull's Horns and again at his villa during the vampire attack. It was exhilarating to once again use her magic in such ways, especially so since her magic flowed through her body with little effort. Even weeks after finally sleeping with Leon, her magic didn't seem to be slowing back down.

Under normal conditions, she might take that as a sign that either she was already pregnant, or that sex was all that was required to drive away her gorgonism, prompting her to leave Leon since he seemed to resent her presence. However, she could tell that she wasn't pregnant, and she wasn't going to risk leaving and feeling her magic slow down again a few months or years down the road. She wasn't about to abandon Leon, only to later come crawling back. If she did, she might have to resort to force, and at the rate he was growing, that wouldn't necessarily work out so well for her.

No, she fully intended to stay for as long as she could, for as long as Leon and Elise would let her.

As she thought about these things, she suddenly felt a subtle wave of magic wash over her. She was still in her puddle form, but she knew exactly what that was: magic senses, and from a powerful mage, stronger at least than the Paladins she was keeping an eye on. Naiad released her own magic senses back in the direction the wave had come from, noticing a suspicious man on the roof of one of the nearby estates watching what was happening. He was cloaked in shadow, but she saw him all the same, her eyes piercing through the inky black veil of darkness like it wasn't even there.

He was clad all in black, had his face concealed, and his eighth-tier aura towered over all those she had seen so far in the Bull Kingdom. In fact, to her knowledge, the only other aura that she had ever felt that could exceed his was that of her own mother back in Saron.

Needless to say, her guard immediately went up. They were of similar power, and that meant he was a grave threat, especially to the weaker Leon. Naiad burst out of her puddle faster than even Leon's lightning magic could take him and sprinted through the trees, over the outer wall of the vast estate, and toward the mysterious watcher so fast she practically flew.

—

Justin Isynos wanted to keep an eye on Leon. However, he ran into an issue regarding Leon's power, that being that no one he could send to watch over the boy at this point could do anything of substance without exposing themselves to his magic senses. It would take a powerful mage who could watch him without discovery and who possessed enough skills to not be seen in turn by Leon during their observation.

Normally, Justin could have some of his weaker subordinates keep an eye on Leon's house from a warded location and have a few spies in the Royal Palace keep an eye out for him that way, but when Leon was on the move, Justin needed more than a bureaucrat or a weak mage hiding behind defensive enchantments. Unfortunately, with the loss of both the tall man after the vampire's attack Leon's villa and the loss of Timotheos years ago, he was left critically short-staffed in that regard.

This left him with two potential subordinates: the blond woman and the short man. The blond woman, Rhea, was coordinating his spies in the Kingdom, so she hadn't the time to spare for such a task. Alexandros, the short man, was on a mission in the Northern Vales personally continuing the

investigation into the disappearance of Timotheos and his entire team, so he wasn't anywhere close to the capital to perform this task.

And that left Justin himself. He was the only man capable of keeping an eye on Leon without serious risk of discovery, so he handed off much of his work in the Royal Palace to his secretaries and assistants—while simultaneously vowing to hire more of these subordinates to free him up to do more of this kind of work—and took off for the Aeneas estate.

The estate itself was quite well protected, but that meant nothing to a man like Justin. He easily infiltrated the place and kept Leon in sight for as long as he could. He was more than a little disturbed with how close Leon seemed to be with his daughter, but Justin kept his emotions under control. Valeria was a grown woman, now, and Justin wanted her to live her own life and not be caught up in his own work. Still, he knew that he'd have to talk with her about Leon again one of these days, to warn her not to get too close to the young man, and maybe even to press for information.

But that could wait until he at least had more information, more *confidence* that Leon was his target. Justin occupied himself with simply observing Leon's behavior during the party while wishing he was more skilled in darkness magic. He could avoid detection with his shadows and move extraordinarily quickly with just his meager skills with the element, but stealth and speed were not the main draws of darkness. At its core, darkness magic manipulated the mind, creating illusions and trapping people in their own heads, among other things. Justin had heard that at more advanced levels, it was even possible to read people's minds, control them like puppets, or even force knowledge into someone else's head.

Of course, Justin knew that if he wasn't mistaken about Leon's ancestry, then it would hardly help in this matter. The Thunderbird's 'holy' lightning was famed in the Nexus for its ability to scatter darkness magic and power in defending the mind.

Justin followed Leon when the latter left the party. He passed no judgments on the younger man for his abrupt and curt departure, and he kept a healthy distance between them, ensuring that Leon wouldn't realize his presence. Like this, Justin saw Leon high-tail it to the ambush point and wait with Naiad.

Naiad's emergence from her puddle took Justin completely by surprise. He could see that she was an eighth-tier equivalent being, just like him, so he immediately put more distance between himself and her. He didn't think she'd be able to see him, though. Still, her aura was magnificent to behold; her power was clearly potent and a major threat to Justin.

He immediately understood why the tall man disappeared. If Leon had a woman like this on his side, then there wasn't much Justin could do to harm him without bringing every ounce of power he could possibly muster down upon Leon, likely destroying any standing he had with the Powers That Be in the Bull Kingdom in the process.

Justin had known that Naiad had appeared seemingly out of nowhere, but to be told of her power from his weaker subordinates and to see it with his own eyes were two very different things. It made him contemplate retreating and relying on more conventional—and *riskier*, given how many people he'd have to hire—ways to keep an eye on Leon. Additionally, it called into question much of his current information network if this woman could pop into existence like she seemingly had. There had been no

warning, no possible clue of which Justin was aware that this woman had been around before the recent vampire attack on Leon's estate.

Although, now that Justin was thinking about it, depending on how long she had been watching Leon's back, it might explain Timotheos' disappearance in the Northern Vales. Timotheos' team would've been largely untouchable by most people in these parts, but if they had encountered the woman up there, then they likely would've met their deaths at her hands.

Justin gritted his teeth in frustration, knowing that things were far more complicated than they seemed. If Leon Ursus was Leon Raime, then it would take a serious operation to take him down, especially in light of Justin's recent losses and his unwillingness to recruit and curry favor with the stronger members of the local elites. It would likely take every person he had left that he trusted to do the job of killing the boy. Making matters worse was Leon's relationship with Valeria, which Justin wasn't privy to. Justin had no idea how to deal with that.

As he thought about these things, Leon began his ambush using magic that, while admittedly surprisingly powerful, wasn't too remarkable from that of an average lightning mage, Naiad killed the invisible guards, and then noticed him. So wrapped up in his own thoughts was he that he didn't even notice Naiad speed toward him, passing through the trees on the side of the road and over the walls of the estate that Justin had been watching from. He didn't see her charge until she was right in front of him, preparing to reach into his shadow and pull him out of it.

In a panic, Justin let loose with a quick blast of ice. It wasn't as powerful as it could've been, but it still obliterated the roof he and Naiad were standing upon and showered her in thousands of tiny blade-like ice fragments.

Naiad was too powerful for this attack to harm her in any meaningful way, but she was still sent reeling due to the speed with which Justin was able to respond to her appearance. She didn't retreat, but her stagger bought Justin enough time to let loose with another attack.

He sent his magic power coursing down his legs and into the ground, creating a platform of ice upon which sat his shadow. This platform then burst out of the ground and carried his shadow a hundred feet into the air. Without additional information, Justin hesitated to fully commit to fighting Naiad, so his immediate concern was to escape. With his darkness magic, he was confident that he could retreat unseen, even with this massive monument to their blisteringly quick engagement. In fact, he was hoping that Naiad would hesitate to close with him with such an obvious symbol of their battle now rising into the air.

However, this wasn't enough to stop Naiad. She knew that this pillar of ice wouldn't draw any more attention than Leon's thunderous lightning, so she instantly responded with something eye-catching of her own. She raised her left arm, transforming it into water. This water then fell upon the ground, where it exploded into the form of a great serpentine water dragon. The dragon rose, wrapping its body around the ice pillar as it did so.

Naiad stood upon its head, regenerating her left arm in the moment it took for the dragon to reach the top of the pillar.

The top of the pillar was wide enough for both Naiad and Justin to stand a comfortable distance apart, but Justin hadn't yet emerged from his shadow. Still, Naiad's response to his magic and the water dragon wrapped around the pillar prevented him from escaping without leaving the shadow—his shadow had to remain somewhat connected to the ground, he couldn't use it to fly or to jump—so he waited for her to reach him.

When Naiad stepped off the dragon, she did so with a wide, challenging smile and staggering confidence. She was ready for whatever Justin would use next, and her killing intent poured out of her, informing Justin just what she was willing to do if they truly fought.

Justin had to grudgingly admit that Naiad had him beat in this area. His aura had spiked, his magic power flooded his body, but Naiad's killing intent still hit him like a brick wall; his hands began to shake, and his magic power noticeably slowed within him.

Before Naiad could continue and attack him first, Justin suddenly asked, "Who are you, and why are you attacking me?"

Intrigued, Naiad raised an eyebrow and said directly into Justin's mind, though at this point Justin was about all out of shock, [I could ask you the same. Why are you watching me and my mate kill our enemies?]

If it weren't already apparent, Justin now knew without a shadow of a doubt that Naiad was firmly on Leon's side, and he knew that her power easily rivaled his own, if it didn't outright exceed his. He couldn't help but sigh, both due to her power making it prohibitively difficult to reach Leon and because of Valeria's apparently close relationship with him.

Still, Justin's power lay not only in the magical kind, and his mind worked lightning-quick.

"That young man is a friend of my daughter," Justin quickly and unthinkingly said. "I was only trying to evaluate him, to see if he's worthy of that relationship. If he were an evil person, I would want to know so I could protect my daughter from him."

Naiad nodded in understanding, though she didn't lower her guard in the slightest. At their level of power, to do so when in such close quarters would be suicide.

[Makes me nervous when you don't show your face,] she said, her tone dangerous and threatening. What she wanted was clear.

Justin weighed the risks of exposing himself here. About five minutes had passed since Leon had begun his ambush, but that was enough time for powerful eyes to turn in their direction. The last thing he wanted was to be seen here. If he absolutely had to fight, though, he was certain he could take Naiad in a straight fight, but it would be flashy and destructive, and there'd be no way he could maintain his cover if he went all out.

He acted immediately. He'd gotten too used to being essentially untouchable here and panicked when Naiad showed her dangerous power; with more time to think, he knew that his panicking mouth had already said too much and to say any more would only compound that mistake. However, permanently silencing Naiad wasn't a guaranteed—or even *feasible*—option, so his priority was to escape as quickly and painlessly as he could.

To that end, a pair of ice spikes about three feet long burst out of his shadow toward Naiad, one aimed at her head and the other at her heart. Naiad simply held up her hand, stopping both ice spikes in the air with a dismissive smile. However, both ice spikes then exploded and vaporized, bathing the top of the ice pillar in thick, light-obscuring mist.

Naiad dissipated this cloud of mist almost as soon as it appeared, but that most brief moment of time was enough for Justin's shadow to slip over the edge of the platform and blast a hole in Naiad's water dragon with a blast of ice from the pillar they stood upon. Justin's shadow slipped down through this hole, back down to the remnants of the estate's roof, and disappear into the city.

Even with Naiad's powerful magic senses, Justin seemed to vanish. Darkness magic was the best option for mages seeking stealth, and Justin showed this trait off quite well. Naiad scowled as she waved her hand once more, shattering the pillar of ice into millions of pieces that further disintegrated as they fell; the pillar of ice seemed to collapse into snow and melt away into the wind. Naiad herself didn't fall to the ground. Instead, her water dragon repaired itself almost as soon as it was destroyed and got under her feet to gently lower her back down.

She momentarily considered trying to track Justin down, but since he was far more preoccupied with escape than with battle, she decided to play it safe and link back up with Leon instead. She guessed that he would want to know what had just happened.