

Storm King 41

Chapter 41: The Prison in the Mountains IV

"What's your plan?" asked Leon.

[Come... closer... Then... explain...]

Leon frowned. Xaphan's voice had been extremely weak from the start, but now he could barely hear him. He jogged back into the labyrinthine halls of the prison from the locked exit. He followed the flow of magic in the walls, and after about half an hour found himself again in front of the sealed door down which all the magic disappeared. He was almost certain that Xaphan was somewhere through this door, and that this was as close to him as he could get.

[Thank you... This communication technique... is exhausting...]

"Seems quite useful, though."

[It is indeed... Perhaps I will teach it... to you... should you help release me...]

"Speaking of which, your plan?"

[You must go to... the central enchantment hub... There... you can unlock... these doors...]

"Why do these doors need to be unlocked? Couldn't I just unlock the exit instead?"

[No... This prison was built... for me and those... like me... The exit... is locked... because all the magic here... is being used... to contain me... Release me... and the doors... will unlock...]

"Hmmm." Leon didn't quite believe Xaphan, but his explanation did make sense. If the doors were simply locked, then there would still be runic circles on the inside of the exits. But, that still left something he was curious about.

"If there isn't enough magic left powering these enchantments to open the doors, then how was I able to enter in the first place?"

[The enchantments outside... are for emergencies... like critical magic depletion... in the main magic crystal... powering this prison... The door still works... but the enchantments needed... to open from the inside... don't...]

"What? Why the hell are the doors designed that way? Why aren't there emergency door openers on the inside? Wouldn't that make more sense?"

[This is a prison... not a fortress...]

Leon frowned. He had to admit that Xaphan had a point. A prison is supposed to keep something in, rather than everything else out. If a prisoner got loose, or the enchantments couldn't be powered anymore, then the doors would lock and the prison lord could wait for reinforcements. He supposed he could understand that attitude, though it didn't diminish his anger.

Leon sighed. No matter how angry he might be at the design choices the architects of this prison made, he couldn't change them. He simply has to deal with what's in front of him.

“So, this enchantment hub, where is it?”

Rather hearing a response from Xaphan, Leon felt the slight twinge of pain in-between his eyes again, and the map of the prison complex appeared before his eyes. He felt his attention being called towards a large circular room in the center of the bottom floor. With a quick scan through the map, Leon decided on the best route, bypassing a few nonfunctional gateways, and promptly turned around and started walking.

[Can I take this... to mean... you will help me?] Up until this point, Xaphan’s resonant voice had been largely emotionless, with an even tone and as measured a cadence as he could manage. In fact, if Leon had to describe Xaphan, he would’ve said he sounded defeated and resigned to his fate. But with this one question, Leon heard something a little different. He wasn’t too experienced dealing with other people, but he felt that it sounded a little hopeful now.

“Still thinking about it.” Leon was inclined to release Xaphan, but he wanted to save the final decision for when he could look Xaphan in the eye.

He continued walking through the seemingly endless hallways of the prison in silence. Xaphan didn’t disturb him, he needed to save his magic power.

As he walked, he analyzed the map Xaphan had given him. The top floor looked like offices and enough living quarters for thousands of people, while the second floor down held larger rooms, like meeting halls and the prison lord’s chambers. The third floor seemed to be the nerve center of the prison, with armories and the enchantment hub.

Leon was looking forward to exploring these armories, but when he arrived a while later, he found them all cleaned out. This made sense, as if even the living quarters were empty, then the weapons were most certainly gone.

The only place left for him to see was the enchantment hub. He quickly made his way there, and found himself in front of an intimidating door, with a bright flashing red runic circle at chest level. Leon tapped the circle, which promptly vanished with a short arcane ring.

Leon waited in front of the door long enough to start getting nervous, thinking that it wouldn’t open when he felt a rumbling beneath his feet. A crack appeared at the top of the door, releasing an incredibly bright light, and the door slowly sank into the floor.

The room beyond was so bright that Leon had to close his eyes and stop magically enhancing his eyes in order to not be blinded.

When he opened his eyes, he saw an enormous cavern, perhaps a quarter mile in diameter and perfectly spherical, with a comparatively small platform in the exact center. The walls were covered with bright glowing multicolored glyphs and magic formations, so many and so detailed that Leon was unable to focus on any one by itself. There were millions of runes that seemed to flow into each other and even seemed to be slowly moving, rotating on independent axes around the central platform.

In the center of that platform was a huge glowing dull orange spherical crystal and a number of magic control panels that lined the edges. Leon could sense an enormous amount of magic power contained

within the crystal, with that power spiraling out and feeding the countless enchantments that covered the walls.

He felt momentarily nauseous, as the magical aura of the room was overwhelming to his third-tier senses. After a few moments of weakness, however, he steeled himself and walked into the room.

The walkway leading to the central platform was wide and sturdy, made of the same dark grey metal as the rest of the prison. There weren't any railings, but Leon could see small holes on the edges of the walkway as if railings had existed at one point but were now missing.

He hurriedly crossed the platform, consciously blocking out as much of the magical stimuli that surrounded him as he could so as to not vomit and reached the platform.

He had intended to examine the enchantments in the hub, but the map given to him by Xaphan was clearly not to scale, as he could barely lift his head to see the titanic dome covered in so many runes that he could barely make out even a single recognizable enchantment. Instead, he took a deep breath and turned his attention to the crystal. He had no idea where else to start, but this seemed as good a place as any.

Now that he was closer, he could see tiny runic circles placed at regular intervals all along the surface of the crystal. All the magic emitted by it was flowing out through these runic circles. Leon guessed this was to control the amount of magic being emitted by the crystal, but there was something odd here.

He examined the first runic circle closer and determined to the best of his third-tier senses that the circle could handle far more magic than was currently flowing through it. This crystal was absolutely on its last legs, that much was becoming clearer the more Leon studied it. The sickly orange hue it had taken on was proof enough that it was dying.

But, that being said, there was still a gargantuan amount of power left in the crystal, more than enough to power the main enchantments locking Xaphan away for far longer than Leon could estimate.

Leon then turned his attention to the control panels on the edge of the circular platform. He didn't have the slightest idea what anything did, as there were no instructions or labels with the runic circles and magic glyphs covering the panels. He only had a very basic understanding of enchantments, so trying to decipher them was out of the question as well.

He sighed and decided to ask for help. "Xaphan, I don't suppose you know what controls I need to open those doors?"

Xaphan didn't answer verbally, but he sent a vision to Leon of the correct runic circles and glyphs to activate. After one last moment of hesitation, Leon followed the instructions then hurriedly walked out of the room. The door rose up, sealing the hub immediately after Leon left.

Leon took a minute to recover from how overwhelming that room was, then didn't waste any more time returning to the door leading to Xaphan.

"So, Xaphan, what exactly did I just do?" Leon asked on the way.

[You initiated my release.... Well... you are unlocking... all the cells... But I am alone... down here...]

"Just initiated? What are the other steps?"

[There is another... enchantment control hub... down here... You need to input... the same commands there... that you just did...]

“And that’s it? You’ll be free?”

[No... You will need... to release my final chains... in person...]

Leon nodded, confident that Xaphan could see him, and hurried along.

When he arrived at the large door leading to the cells, he was quite happy to find that the instructions Xaphan gave him were correct; he opened the door with a simple tap on the runic circle.

The door glowed with a bright white light, then vanished in an instant. Beyond was a large octagonal chamber, about half as large as the enchantment hub. The only thing within was a console in the very center with a single magic glyph glowing brightly on it. Leon already knew from the map that the entire floor of this chamber was a magic lift that would take him down to the cells, so he didn’t hesitate to walk over and activate the glyph.

There was a slight tremor in the floor in response. The tremor didn’t fade, however, and the entire floor began to descend. The descent started slowly, but rapidly gained speed, until Leon started feeling slightly unsteady and had to grab onto the console to maintain his balance.

He descended for what seemed like ten minutes, but eventually, the lift slowed down. The enchantments powering it seemed to be a little faulty, however, as it didn’t slow down fast enough, and slammed into the ground, throwing Leon to the floor. Fortunately, he wasn’t injured, but he rose to his feet a little angered and embarrassed.

He didn’t dwell on it, though, and after checking to make sure the lift was still functional, he made for the only door he could see. His map showed five cells, and the secondary enchantment hub directly before. To get there, he needed to make his way through a two-hundred-foot-long tunnel with five more security doors. The doors were unlocked, though, only serving to slow him down a little.

Something he did notice that had him a little concerned, though, was the temperature. The entire prison complex was already quite warm, warm enough that Leon had taken off his lion’s coat, but now it was getting to be very hot. Leon even noticed that he was starting to sweat, something that rarely happens to mages past the first-tier.

“Xaphan, what’s up with the heat in this place? Do you have any idea?”

[That... will become clear soon.] Leon was very close to Xaphan now, close enough to know that that pause was due to hesitation, not the exertion of mental communication. That certainly felt off to him, but he was very impatient to leave this place and continue heading south. He was already rather behind schedule on that front, so he just wiped the sweat from his forehead, frowned, and pushed on.

The secondary enchantment hub wasn’t nearly as large as the previous one and didn’t have an enormous crystal in the center. Consequently, Leon wasn’t hampered in the slightest when he arrived. He quickly repeated the same runic circles and glyphs he had before and made for the cells. It was time to meet Xaphan face to face.

Chapter 42: The Prison in the Mountains V

Within the secondary enchantment hub were five doors, all leading to separate cells according to the map. Two of the doors were open, showing short tunnels and empty cells several hundred feet away.

Two more doors were destroyed, matching the damage Leon had seen by the exits, with one rent and torn apart, and the other with a perfectly round hole knocked out of it. Leon could see that those cells, too, were empty.

That left the last cell, the one in the middle.

Leon walked over to the runic circle in the center of the door and activated it. The door descended into the ground, and Leon walked through.

The temperature grew hotter and hotter the farther Leon went into this tunnel, and he grew more and more anxious along with it. His left hand went to rest on the sword at his belt. His hand was shocked when it touched the metal pommel. Just static, Leon figured. He paid it no more mind but was strangely comforted by it.

He arrived at the last door, the final obstacle between him and Xaphan, and hopefully the final obstacle between him and continuing south. He reached out his right hand, keeping his left on his sword, and opened the door.

He was blasted with hot air as the large door opened, and he squinted from the sudden onrush of tears it brought. He could hear the crackling of flames, and he could sense that all the magic flowing through this prison was concentrating here. After an almost painful few seconds, the door finally fully opened, allowing Leon to see inside the cell, and he was left staring in awe and fear.

The octagonal cell wasn't too large, barely taller and wider than the passageway. It had a row of magic panels off to the side, and a raised platform in the center. From the ceiling came half a dozen massive tree roots, each thicker than Leon was tall, and several rows of magic barriers between the walls and the platform.

But, above all, what drew Leon's attention was what was on the platform. It looked vaguely like a human body, but easily twelve feet tall, and completely enveloped in flame. This fire was thick, and radiated an intimidating power, while also obscuring most of the details Leon might've been able to discern about the figure within. What he could see, however, were the tree roots, impaling the figure and forcing it into a kneeling position.

Artorias had told Leon stories about beings like this before, but not even he had ever seen one. He had taught Leon enough to identify it, though.

"You're... a demon."

"Indeed I am." Xaphan no longer needed to speak with Leon mentally, as the young man was now in the same room as him. His voice was still incredibly deep, but it had lost its remarkable resonance. "Does this change anything, young warrior? Does seeing me now like this terrify you so much, that you will give up on leaving this prison?"

Leon shook himself a little. He was a little ashamed, one look and he had lost his reason. He attempted to discern Xaphan's power, but he couldn't quite make it out. Leon slowly walked forward, trying to get

a better read on Xaphan. The demon himself just patiently waited for Leon to finish, as it wasn't like he was going anywhere.

As Leon approached, he was able to see through Xaphan's aura a little easier. He felt that the demon was stronger than he was, to be sure, but still weaker than the fourth-tier. But, that made Leon frown in confusion. Whoever built this prison had invested a great many resources into it, far too many for just a single third-tier demon.

"You seem too weak, barely above me in raw power. Yet, you are imprisoned here and are in possession of at least one very advanced communication technique. I have a few guesses that would explain this, but I'd rather just ask you: Why are you here?"

"I wasn't so weak when I was summoned and captured. In fact, my strength is what led the Storm King's mages to summon me. They wanted to force me into a contract, to add my power to theirs. I refused." Xaphan was very proud once, but he had been locked in place in this prison for far too long to retain any arrogance. If Leon asked, he would answer as best he could.

"But if you were so strong, then why weren't you able to escape? It looks like the mages who summoned you held two others, but they managed to break out."

"I was the strongest, and so the strongest enchantments held me. I never knew my fellow inmates, but even when my restraints were new and well-maintained, I could vaguely sense their power. And I wasn't impressed. My bonds have lasted far longer than theirs, and have taken far more from me. You see these roots, they have leeches almost all of my power. I have been left with barely enough to communicate with you while you're still in the prison complex."

Silence followed. Leon wasn't sure what to do, and Xaphan let him think. Neither spoke for several minutes.

"Should I remove your restraints, there will be enough magic in this complex for me to open the doors?"

"Yes."

"But what will you do if I do decide to release you? What's to stop you from trying to kill me?"

"I will not attempt to harm you," Xaphan immediately replied. Leon didn't seem convinced and looked at Xaphan skeptically. "I am a demon; my word is my bond."

Xaphan had been helpful so far, but Leon barely knew him, they had only met less than a day ago. Artorias had some choice words for those who study demonology, and none were polite, so Leon wasn't too keen on releasing Xaphan now.

However, the memory of being thrown across his house, of being helpless while his father fought off those invaders, of being powerless to save him, Leon would never forget these things. He needed power, he needed to get south. To that end, an idea occurred to him.

"Make a contract with me," he said.

Xaphan was stunned. He was about to immediately answer no, but he stopped himself. He'd been trapped for so long, this might be his only way out. But, he was firmly against lowering himself to accepting a contract from a mere third-tier mage.

"The Storm King himself, one of the most powerful human mages in all of history, wanted to forge a contract with me. I refused him..." said Xaphan.

"...And look where that got you, locked far beneath the earth for, how long exactly?" Leon interrupted, to Xaphan's annoyance. The demon glared at the young man but continued regardless.

"... What could you possibly offer that would be of worth to me, in exchange for my service?"

"You will never leave this prison without my help. Judging by your current strength, compared to what you claim it once was, you have fallen a long way. You'll eventually waste away to nothing if you don't find a way out. You've helped me thus far, so I don't think you're confident that you can escape with your own power."

Xaphan couldn't really deny anything Leon just said. He had largely accepted that he would die down here until this young brat had arrived. He didn't want to die, especially not when a chance to live was right in front of him. But, he still couldn't quite accept it.

"Where would you go if you are released? You were summoned, but could you return home from here with your power? Even if you did, could you still live as broken and feeble as you are?" Leon wasn't going to let up on him, though. He kept pressing, waiting for Xaphan to answer. "I don't claim to know much about demon culture, but I have heard of their insatiable demands for blood sacrifices, for the worship and adulation of human thralls, of the enmities between various demon-worshipping cults. I have also heard of the antipathy most of humanity has towards demons, thanks to the actions of their followers. If you did escape under your own power, how long would you last without support?"

"I am offering you something, Xaphan. I am offering you a chance to recover your lost power, I am offering you my support and help, and most of all, I am offering to take you away from this prison."

Leon let his words sink into the demon. He hardly noticed the sweat on his brow or the extreme heat of the flames on the raised platform. He just stared at Xaphan, subtly tightening his grip on his sword. But, after half a minute of waiting, Leon spoke up again.

"I suppose you won't accept, then? Perhaps I should just kill you right here." Leon drew his sword, and let his killing intent spill out. His aura spiked and hit Xaphan. The demon barely moved in response—not that the roots allowed for much movement—easily dissipating Leon's killing intent with his own potent aura.

"You think you can harm *me*? I could tear you to pieces, boy." The flames surrounding Xaphan intensified, completely obscuring the vague shadow within.

"Really? Would you care to put that to the test from all the way over there? Your current strength isn't so far removed from my own that you would walk away unscathed even if you won, and then where would you be? All alone in this world, wounded, and surrounded by humans who would gladly end your life in a heartbeat."

Xaphan glared at Leon, but the young man smiled back, clearly anticipating a fight. They stayed like this for another minute, before Xaphan's flames died down to their previous intensity. He clearly lacked the power to sustain them and Leon smugly smiled even wider.

The flame demon hated this. He had denied his own summoners, but this boy would think to command *him*? But, try as he might, he knew that everything Leon had said was accurate. He didn't have much choice. He could either live, or he could enter a fight that he had a good chance of losing.

Xaphan grit his teeth, and asked, "And the terms of this contract?"

Leon lowered his sword, but he didn't sheathe it. "You will provide me with some of your power, teach me what you know about magic, and advise me to the best of your ability. In return, I will allow you to rest and heal within my soul realm and will do my best to provide you with the resources you need to regain your strength. We will never betray each other, and we will be full partners, acting in the other's best interest in addition to our own. What do you say?"

Xaphan had to admit, it wasn't that bad of a deal, especially in his current situation. Leon stating that they would be full partners was definitely an unexpected plus, and one that Xaphan appreciated.

"... Very well. However, I must first know your name if we are to be partners."

Leon sheathed his blade and restrained his killing intent. "My name is Leon. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Xaphan."

Xaphan ground his teeth in annoyance, but he continued anyway. "I, Xaphan, Lord of Fire and Prince of Demons, accept the contract proposed by Leon. I will support him to the best of my abilities, with power, wisdom, and knowledge."

"And I, Leon of House Raime, accept the fire demon Xaphan as my partner and will support him in regaining his former strength and power. No blood sacrifices though. Anything overly 'demonic' will probably end with me, and you by extension, killed. This is a partnership for mutual benefit, so we should refrain from such unappealing methods."

"I would not ask you for blood sacrifice, anyway. I understand the need for discretion, especially while you are still so weak, and I regain my power."

The contract was complete. A bright golden thread shot out from the shadow in the flames, and sped into Leon's chest, forging a connection between the young man and the demon. Leon could sense Xaphan through this connection, and Xaphan could sense Leon.

Due to this connection, Leon immediately felt the heat recede, even though he knew that it didn't. He simply had an immunity to Xaphan's power now, and the heat from the demon's flames could no longer touch him.

He smiled and walked over to the enchantment control consoles by the door. Xaphan easily instructed him on removing the restraints, and the roots impaling Xaphan and keeping him pinned down withdrew. For the first time in a very long time, Xaphan was finally able to move again. He struggled to his feet and watched the tattered remains of the other wards and enchantments that imprisoned him on the platform fade away.

He felt elation, and quickly jumped down, landing directly in front of Leon. His landing wasn't all that graceful, given his relative weakness, but neither minded. They just looked each other in the eye, and then Xaphan disappeared in a rapidly shrinking ball of fire. This fireball shrunk down to the size of a fingernail and shot into Leon's chest.

Leon felt an incredible burning sensation, but it was oddly pleasant. It faded as quickly as it came, and he knew that Xaphan was now taking up residence within his soul realm.

Chapter 43: Leaving the Prison

“Xaphan? Can you hear me?” Leon had felt Xaphan enter his soul realm, but he wasn’t clear as to how he could communicate with the demon. Artorias had told him that he would need to form his magic body before he could enter his soul realm with his own power, which meant he would need to be a sixth-tier mage. That would be a long time from now, Leon reckoned, longer than he was particularly willing to wait.

[I can hear you, young mage, but do me a favor, and don’t speak out loud when talking to me. You are my partner now, and if my partner looks insane, then that also reflects upon me.]

“Well, then how should I speak to you?” Leon demanded with a little frustration.

[You can direct your thoughts toward me.]

“You can read my mind?!”

[No. Perhaps you could think about what I just said, rather than immediately doing what I just asked you not to do? Now, direct your thoughts to me, and I shall hear them. Don’t focus your mind on speaking to me, and I won’t hear you. It’s that simple.]

Leon clenched his jaw in anger but forced himself to calm down.

[Can you hear me, you short-tempered demon?] Leon asked, within his mind.

[I can. Good job, you didn’t look so ridiculous that time.] Leon wasn’t sure, but he thought he heard the sound of condescending clapping.

‘Yeah, this is going to be a wonderful partnership. So glad I did this.’ Leon thought sarcastically to himself. He sighed, and walked out of Xaphan’s cell, with the distinct feeling of having made a terrible mistake.

He was immediately encouraged, though, when he saw the hallway had lit up with the same magical white flame in the bottom corners of the slanted walls that he’d seen in the prison lord’s chambers. These lights illuminated the entire hallway with a gentle indirect light that Leon quite liked. Now, he wouldn’t have to constantly direct mana towards his eyes.

[Looks like you were telling the truth, demon. Without the need to maintain the wards in your cell, this prison now has magic enough to turn on the lights.]

[Of course, I was telling the truth. I’m a demon, not some half-baked populist politician.]

[Damn, where is all this coming from?] Xaphan had been nothing but patient and courteous up till now, but he seemed to be growing more arrogant by the minute ever since forming that contract, leaving Leon a little taken aback.

[Perhaps it comes from being threatened and coerced into a contract during a moment of weakness by some little brat who hasn’t even seen two decades. And maybe you simply didn’t hear any of this while I

was still guiding you towards the exit of this forsaken place using an exhausting communications technique.]

[Well, when you say it like that, I sound like an asshole.]

[You *are* an asshole.]

Leon frowned and continued to the lift in silence. The lift itself wasn't damaged at all, despite its rough stop earlier, so Leon immediately activated it, and spent the time it was returning to the first floor allowing his magic power to course through his body.

He was a third-tier mage, which meant that the next step for him was for his organs and brain to adapt to magic. Having his mana constantly inundate his head and core with magic was the best way for him to train right now. Once he made it to the Bull Kingdom, he could look into finding some pills, potions, or spells that might accelerate the process, but for now, he was stuck with basically the same methods he'd been using since his father first had him begin his training.

Leon was also trying to get a feel for any power that Xaphan might have provided him with. And, at least in the time it took for the lift to arrive back at the first floor, he was unable to sense any changes to his power.

[Hey Xaphan, I thought I would gain some power by making a contract with you. In fact, providing me with power was one of the provisions of the contract.] He felt some irritation directed towards him coming from his soul realm before the flame demon answered.

[I can't give you what I don't have. How long do you think I have been stuck down there, wasting away? I have no power to give you, and I won't until I've spent some time recovering. Until then, you will have to make do with my wise counsel.]

Leon sighed in dejection, something he felt he would be doing a lot more of now. But, he pushed that out of his mind. Since the exit was most likely unlocked, he could leave right now, but he doubted that he would make it very far before needing to stop. He wasn't too sure what time it was, given how long he'd been down in these sunless caves and prison passageways, but he figured it was probably getting late. He was very tempted to simply return to the prison lord's chambers and go back to sleep, to leave in the morning fresh and ready. A few minutes later, after his empty stomach started growling, he decided to indulge in that temptation and went directly back to the prison lord's chambers.

Xaphan clearly wasn't in a hurry, or possibly even paying attention, because the demon didn't say a word even as Leon choked down some food and jumped back into that luxurious bed. The young man had lived a hard and rather solitary life, never knowing comfort that came even close to this, so he savored each minute until falling asleep.

It was only the prospect of leaving this prison that got him out of bed when he awoke. To his delight, he found that the bath was working again, so he took the opportunity to clean off the sweat, dirt, and grime that had accumulated since he had left the Forest of Black and White.

So, with breakfast in his belly, a clean body, and a rested and refreshed mind, Leon made for the exit.

On the way, he tried asking Xaphan a few questions, as there were things he was curious about. He also hoped that the demon would be in a better mood, and would be willing to answer them.

[Hey, Xaphan, I have a few questions, if you would indulge me.]

[*Sigh* ... What is it?]

[What can you tell me about this 'Storm King'? You've mentioned him several times, as did a note from the prison lord.]

[Well, I don't know much, I barely interacted with humans even before his little minions summoned me.]

Leon's face contorted in disbelief. [How could you be so strong that, according to you, one of the most powerful human mages ever wanted to forge a contract with you? Don't demons gain most of their strength from blood sacrifices and human worshippers?]

[Of course not! We can certainly augment our powers with those things, but we grow and increase our strength and magic in much the same ways you humans do, through training and practice. And the odd spot of killing and devouring other demons and compatible elemental creatures. Besides, I've never been too keen on blood sacrifices.]

[You readily admit to violence and cannibalism, but draw the line at blood sacrifice? Good to know.]

Xaphan just ignored that comment and continued regardless. [To answer your question, the Storm King was an incredibly powerful mage who ruled basically this entire plane at one point. I couldn't tell you how strong he was, as I never saw him in person, but if his subordinates were anything to go by, then he completely outclasses anything in this tiny corner of the universe by many orders of magnitude. Kind of weird that he'd actually conquer this plane of all places.]

[What do you mean by that?]

Xaphan paused, before asking a question of his own. [How much about the layout of this universe do you know? I'm guessing it isn't that much, given how weak and alone you are...]

Leon grit his teeth in irritation. [Why don't you just say it, then?]

[Hmph. There are countless billions of planes in this universe. Some are small, a few dozen miles across, just barely large enough to build a small city and have enough space to feed it. Some planes are much larger, hundreds of thousands or even millions of miles end to end. This plane is rather average, not even one hundred thousand miles in diameter.]

[All the planes in the universe have at least one star and moon orbiting them, which are the stars you see at night. The climates of the planes themselves can vary wildly, with entire planes made up entirely of fire, water, or possibly light, in contrast to this one, which has a fairly even mix of just about every magical element.]

[But, one thing they all have in common, despite their differences in size and elemental makeup, is that they all point towards the center of the universe. The brightest star in the very center of the sky, 'up' for every plane in existence, is the Nexus. That is the playground for the truly strong, that is the place the Storm King came from, without a doubt.]

Leon listened very attentively to Xaphan. This was all new to him, and he was fascinated. [So, then, you've been to this Nexus before, demon?]

[No. The Nexus is the realm of humanity, while demons inhabit the Void, the space between and outside of the planes.]

[And what's that place like? You called yourself a 'Lord of Fire', so there must be some kind of civilization, right?]

Xaphan grew silent. Leon waited expectantly but grew rather awkward and embarrassed as the silence continued. After about fifteen seconds, Xaphan finally spoke again.

[The Storm King was not native to this plane. There's no way he should have ever come here, but he did. And he summoned me. Or rather, he had his little butt boy Constans summon me for him, as well as four other demons.]

[Wait, four? I thought it was just you and two others?]

[I'd forgotten about them, as they were summoned before me. Two demons accepted the Storm King's offer, but I and the two summoned after me refused. Many years after the Storm King's warriors abandoned the prison, those two others managed to escape, but I have no idea what happened to the first two... I have no idea what happened that made those warriors abandon the prison either, come to think of it...]

[I found a note from the prison lord saying that the Storm King was killed, and his Princes recalled the warriors to exact vengeance.]

[Ha! Serves him right for trying to enslave *me*! It seems his dickhead sons are dead, too, given that their warriors never returned to the prison. Hehehehe... I wonder who got him. Probably the Realm Lord, or some other force that invaded this plane. I doubt anything else would've killed him, as I said, he was far too powerful to be here.]

[Realm Lord? Explain.]

[Maybe you could ask a little more politely and I'll consider it.]

[Explain, please.]

[Hmmmmmm... No. If you want me to explain something, don't be an ass about it.]

Leon sighed in anger again, but he had made it to the exit by now, so he couldn't help but get excited.

[Well, look at that, demon, you were right.] In front of him, he could see the brightly shining runic circle on the door, just waiting for him to open it.

[Of course I was right. No enchantment here can escape my discerning gaze.] Xaphan said proudly.

[...Except those enchantments trapping you, apparently, otherwise why would you have remained here for so long?] Leon shot back with a smile.

[Eh... Well, I did see through those damned wards, but how would I have removed them?! Did you see my restraints?!]

[Yeah, yeah, you're a real genius, a demon of unparalleled strength and wisdom, a being that even a mighty king would consider lucky to have met. And also, someone who has spent the last who knows how long trapped like a dog in a kennel.]

[Watch it, boy.]

Leon chuckled, but both thought to themselves, '*This damn guy...*' about the other. Leon didn't let it get to him, though, as he confidently strode up to the runic circle, and activated it.

He was, admittedly, a little surprised when the door flashed and vanished. Not so much that he waited for it to close, though. He quickly crossed the prison's threshold and walked out into the caves beyond.

Chapter 44: Reaching Civilization

The southern side of the prison was pretty much identical to the northern side. The door closed a few seconds after Leon had stepped through, leaving the caves pitch-black, but for the door's glowing red runic circle. Leon immediately went back to channeling magic into his eyes in order to see, and quickly put some distance between himself and the prison.

As he walked through the cave tunnels, the air grew much colder. The extremely warm prison had been cooling down ever since Xaphan had moved to Leon's soul realm, but only now did it get to the point that Leon needed to put his coat back on.

Less than a mile down the immense tunnel, Leon felt the ground angle upwards, and he began ascending towards the surface. As he continued, he grew nervous about what he might find. The tunnel that bypassed the prison had collapsed, showcasing the instability of the caves, and Leon hoped that the cave-in didn't stretch all the way to the southern exit.

He was in luck in that regard, as he soon found himself at the fork shown on his map, where the bypass met the tunnel back to the prison. Leon smiled in relief, checked the map, and kept going.

Xaphan didn't disturb Leon, but the young man could feel a subdued sense of excitement from his connection with the flame demon, in anticipation of finally seeing the outside again. Leon hadn't been down there for very long, but the feeling he got from Xaphan was infectious, and he started to feel the same overpowering need to leave this place that Xaphan did.

But, Leon's pace was steady and unwavering. He kept calm and just walked forward until he felt a slight breeze from ahead. He could no longer contain himself, and sped up, walking faster and faster until he broke out into a full-on sprint. He was a third-tier mage, so his sprint was quite fast, and he reached the exit in no time.

He did slow down at the end, though. He remembered from when Artorias had taken him through these caves that this tunnel exited onto another small platform, similar to what was on the north side, and Leon wasn't too keen on running straight off the cliff.

The sun was still out when Leon burst out from the cave mouth. He stopped just before plummeting over the cliff edge, and stood there, basking in the sun. He was like that for several minutes, enjoying the feeling of the sun on his skin and the wind in his hair. Xaphan kept his silence, but Leon could tell that the flame demon was beyond ecstatic to be experiencing fresh air again, even if it was through their magical connection. In fact, the demon's influence was why Leon was so happy to be out of the caves.

But, when Leon came to, he noticed that the sun had only just begun to fall. It was hardly past noon, so he had plenty of time to continue on his journey and put this prison far behind him.

He glanced down the cliff. It was just as tall and sheer as the north side, but Leon was undaunted. He was a third-tier mage, after all, and while he wouldn't willingly jump off this cliff onto the unstable-looking rocks below, climbing down posed no problem for him.

Once on the ground, he put his map with the cave system into his pack and retrieved the map of the Great Plateau. Clear Ice Fortress actually wasn't too far away, only a few dozen miles to the west, but that wasn't his destination. There wasn't much to the south of Clear Ice, a few scattered farming villages and mining towns, but close to the western edge of the Plateau was a huge dot. Leon knew that that was Teira, the capital of the three duchies of the Great Plateau, the seat of the old Archdukes that ruled them, and his current destination.

He went due south for several miles, keeping to the cold and rocky slopes of the Frozen Mountains. Perhaps Xaphan was curious about his new partner, perhaps he was in a talkative mood after leaving the prison, or maybe he was just bored, but he broke the silence with a question after only an hour.

[So... What are your plans, young mage?] The demon chose a bad time to finally speak up, as Leon was climbing over a large frozen boulder that blocked his way. Hearing the demon's voice in his head startled the young man, and he lost his grip, sliding down the icy boulder and back to the ground. Leon sighed in frustration and at Xaphan's lack of apology before answering.

[I am going south, to Teira.] Leon steadied himself on the loose stones beneath his feet, then jumped clean over the boulder. The boulder wasn't something that really needed the jump, but Leon was now self-conscious about having fallen off after being startled by Xaphan.

[... And then?]

[I'll be checking out my family's old home, then seeing what is in their vault in the city's central bank.]

[Your family was rich, then? You don't plan on living on inherited wealth to do nothing but sit in a room and cultivate your magic day-in and day-out, do you? That would get boring quite fast...]

[No, I'm just curious as to what was in the vault. My family has been the ruler of this Great Plateau for millennia, so there must be something. After that, I'll probably head south. I want to enroll in the Knight Academy.]

[Not a magic guild? There should be plenty of schools and organizations willing to take you in, probably in exchange for less work than being a knight.]

[And what would you know about it, having seen nothing but the inside of that cell for longer than this kingdom has existed?]

[I have lived for a very long time, boy, and have seen a great many things. I doubt this Knight Academy is anything new. The only thing you should worry about is your own power, your own journey. Don't waste your time serving some lord or king who will never acknowledge you.]

[My own power is why I want to become a knight. A decade or two spent fighting against the enemies of the kingdom sounds like a far better path to power than signing up for some mage guild. Besides, most mage guilds don't teach combat magic, which is what I'm interested in.]

[Well, your choice.]

Xaphan returned to silence, and Leon pushed on. There was a sparse forest on the edge of the mountains, which Leon quickly entered after leaving the rocky slopes. He traveled directly south-west, towards the road connecting Teira and Clear Ice Fortress, and Leon intended to follow that road straight to the city.

The sky grew dark before he arrived, though. For a moment, Leon's heart began to race, and he had to force himself to calm down after seeing the sunset, as he was in no danger of ice wraiths here. He decided to make camp, and continue in the morning.

When leaving Vale Town, Torfinn had given him one of the best steaks the market had. Leon intended to cook it up for dinner, and gathered some firewood. As he was gathering up the twigs and leaves to start the fire, Xaphan spoke up.

[Are you not going to use magic to light this fire?]

[Wasn't intending on it. I could make a fire rune, but it would probably take half an hour and several tries. Quicker just to make a fire by hand.] Leon felt some slight disapproval coming from Xaphan, but he ignored it and reached for a flint and steel.

Xaphan tried to ignore Leon's actions, but in the end, he couldn't. Leon had gotten the twigs and leaves to begin burning from a few sparks and was now blowing on the tiny flame to get it to grow. Xaphan watched in disgust, eventually interrupting the young man.

[I can't watch this. Stop this immediately.]

[Can't. Just got the fire started.] Leon started stacking a few small branches and logs around the tiny fire.

[STOP THIS AT ONCE!] Xaphan let his fury out in an immense shout, startling Leon and making him freeze in place. But, it was only for a moment.

[What is your problem?!]

[YOU! DOING THIS RIGHT IN FRONT OF ME! CEASE THIS FOOLISHNESS AT ONCE!]

[Well then how the hell do you expect me to get this fire going?!]

Xaphan was quiet for a moment. [You might be able to call upon some of my power. Not much, but certainly enough to stop this idiotic act.]

[What? I thought you said you had no power to give me?]

[I assumed you meant for battle. Using my power for battle would be quite impossible... or at least, absurdly inefficient.]

[*Sigh*. All right, what do I do?]

[Hold out your hand towards the firewood. Usually, you would call upon your own magic from within your blood and your soul realm, but you won't do that this time. Instead, try to sense our connection. You can use that to call forth some of my power.]

Leon felt like asking for more specifics, but he found that he didn't need to. If he had to put it into words, it was like pulling on a thread, one that connected him to Xaphan. It was actually startlingly effortless! He felt an intense, but comforting, heat erupt in his chest, then flow through his outstretched arm. A tiny flame appeared in his palm, no bigger than that of a candle.

"Well, would you look at that..." Leon muttered to himself.

[Don't talk to yourself. It's a bad look.]

Leon ignored Xaphan. He was far more concerned with examining the flame in his hand. He tried to call up more of Xaphan's power, but no matter how hard he pulled that thread, he couldn't feel anything more.

[Don't waste your time, there is no more to call upon.] Xaphan said bitterly.

'Although, that was far quicker than it should have been...' the demon thought to himself. Xaphan went quiet, resolving to investigate a suspicion he had.

Leon happily used this fire to set the gathered wood alight and took a package out from his pack. This was the steak Torfinn had given him, about twice the size of his palm, lightly salted and wrapped in leaves enchanted by the Greenhand farmers of the vale. The leaves would help keep the meat fresh for a few weeks.

Leon also grabbed a small iron spike, just large enough to stab the steak and roast it over the fire. He smiled as he remembered his father's insistence on always keeping a few cooking utensils whenever they went out into the Forest of Black and White to hunt. 'Essential to life', he'd called them. Along with the iron spike, Leon also had a spare knife and a small set of tongs.

When he felt that the meat was thoroughly cooked, he held it between the spike and the tongs, and happily ate it like corn. When he was done, he fell asleep, feeling rather content.

Leon got moving early in the morning. He had a quick breakfast of bread and fruit and got moving less than an hour after the sun came up. He made good time, finding the road to Teira in less than three hours. He didn't leave the forest but stayed close enough to the road to follow it straight south.

Occasionally, he would see a few people going about their business, walking along the smooth stone road, usually heading south just as he was, and he never let these people see him. He would occasionally leave the trees and walk along the road, but only when he encountered a farming town, and the wide-open fields were too big for him to justify going around.

Not too long after midday, Leon finally saw the first few buildings on the outskirts of Teira. They were only small houses, made of wood and stone and lacking any enchantments, but he could finally say that he had arrived in Teira.

Chapter 45: Charles

Most of the people who lived on the north side of Teira were commoners of lesser means. All the nobility and wealthier folk lived to the south, as Teira was a very large city, and living on the south side meant almost an entire day could be shaved off when they journeyed to the capital or one of the southern trade cities.

But, despite the north side being commonly considered the 'slums' of Teira, it wasn't without its charms and creature comforts. The roads were paved, if somewhat more run-down and cracked than further into the city. The houses weren't falling apart, the people looked well-fed, and there wasn't any sign of gang activity. All-in-all, a fine, if somewhat impoverished, place to live.

But, no matter where the city is, or how safe it might be, there are always assholes. Leon had barely walked five hundred feet into the city before he heard the sounds of fighting, or rather, the sounds of someone getting beaten several streets over.

Following the sounds, Leon found himself staring down an alleyway between a house and a butcher shop where he saw three large men, roughly early-to-mid-twenties, kicking a younger man in the stomach. The young man, who looked about Leon's age, was already curled up on the ground, shielding his head from their strikes.

"Hahaha, this little weakling thought he was so tough!"

"Yeah, maybe if he weren't so stupid, knew his own limits, and just coughed up the money, this wouldn't be happening!"

"Gah! Stop, please!"

"What's that, little baby? You want us to stop? Maybe you should empty those pockets, first!"

The young man looked up and saw Leon looking curiously back, at the far end of the alley.

"Help me, please!"

His cry for aid caused the three older men to notice Leon.

"Hey! Fuck off, kid!" shouted the biggest one.

"Yeah, you want to join this little bastard?" asked the thinnest one.

The third man didn't say a word. He was far more observant, though that isn't saying much, and noticed the sword Leon was carrying. He also saw Leon not batting an eye at the threat his friend made. He was a second-tier mage, a veteran soldier who had fought against Valeman raids before while he was serving in the Northern Legions, and he could tell just by looking at him that Leon was trouble.

Leon, for his part, didn't say a word. He simply looked back at each of the four men, then turned and walked away.

The veteran thug smiled and turned back to the young man on the ground.

"Look at that, no one's going to save you! No one cares about you, so just give us your money, and maybe we'll only break one leg."

The victim just curled back into a ball, shivering and trying his best to ignore the kicks.

Leon heard every hit as he walked away. Every little cry and whimper from the young man, every snort of glee from the thugs.

'Not my problem.' he told himself.

There weren't many citizens around. Even for a mostly residential area, the street was oddly devoid of people given how loud these thugs were being. Even the few people who were around seemed to be staring at the ground as they went about their business, or else looking anywhere but towards the alley.

'Well, not my problem.' he told himself again, but he had stopped walking. *'Keep walking. Just ignore it, like everyone else.'*

He heard one of the thugs laugh as another kick fell upon the young man. He clenched his teeth, his hands balled up into fists, and he sighed. Then, he turned back around.

The thugs didn't even hear him approach before he was upon them. Leon's potent killing intent froze them in place through sheer terror, and before they could process what was happening, Leon's fist had already slammed into the side of the thin thug's face. The thin man's body whipped around from the force, hit the wall of the butcher shop, and slid to the ground. He was barely a first-tier mage, and Leon's punch had knocked him out almost instantly.

The large thug fared a little better, as he had almost entered the second-tier, but only one punch to the gut from Leon was needed to incapacitate him. He fell, clutching his stomach and retching uncontrollably.

Despite his own battle experiences, and what he thought was a powerfully honed killing intent, the veteran thug was about as much a match for Leon as his buddies were. He had barely regained control over himself when Leon pressed his hand against his face, swept his leg out from under him, and slammed the back of his head into the ground. This would've been a fatal injury to a mortal, but fortunately for him, the thug was a second-tier mage, and so merely fell unconscious.

'He'll probably live...' thought Leon.

The young man on the ground was stunned. The thugs tormenting him had been taken down in seconds, and couldn't even fight back! He looked up at Leon with a look of both terror and thanks. Leon hardly spared him another glance before turning around and walking back towards the main street.

The young man scrambled to his feet, and ignoring his injuries, ran to catch up with Leon.

"Wait! Please don't go, let me have the opportunity to thank you properly!"

Leon ignored him, wishing he would just go away and leave him alone. The young man wasn't deterred, however.

"My name is Charles, you really saved me, there. Those thugs tried to rob me, and when I tried to fight back, they dragged me into that alley. I don't even want to think about what they might have done if you hadn't shown up!"

Leon still didn't say a word. Charles was very loud, and Leon wasn't good with people, so he had no idea how to handle him.

“But, if there’s anything I can do for you, just say it! You don’t look like you’re from these parts, if you need a guide, please allow me the honor of showing you around!”

This finally got Leon’s attention. He had a map of the city, but it was decades out of date. The city had grown immensely since Archduke Kyros had been assassinated, what with many competing nobles moving themselves and their households to the capital of the Great Plateau to try and seize any power they could. Large swathes of the south side’s residential sectors had been demolished to make room for the noble estates, with many of those citizens moving to the apartments of the inner city, the townhouses of the east side, or into the northern slums. In fact, according to Leon’s map, he wasn’t even in the city yet, since the slums had expanded so much in recent years.

With all that being said, he could still find the major landmarks. The palace ruins were in the very center of the city, the main street from Clear Ice lead straight to it. Or, rather, it cut straight through the city, continuing on all the way to the capital, only diverting to go around the palace, but Leon could still take the street to reach it.

There were also four immense streets forming an elongated diamond around the palace ruins, with Konstantine’s Dome at the easternmost point, and the Heaven’s Eye Tower at the westernmost point. The land in the center of the diamond used to be the palace estate, but the King had decreed that it would be turned into a forest, in memory of his closest friend.

Leon was fine with finding his destinations, but he could still use some help finding an inn and a place to eat. In fact, as soon as he thought of finding some food, his belly grumbled. He turned over to Charles, and reluctantly said, “I could use a guide.”

“Wonderful!” Charles’ bruised face brightened up into a smile. Leon also finally gave the young man a good look. Charles was fairly short, more than half a foot shorter than Leon, and had brown hair, brown eyes, and a very thin and lean build. He was fairly good-looking, but no one would call him handsome. His clothes were dirty, and not just from the fight, though they seemed to be of fine make. They weren’t anything fancy, but certainly enough for those thugs to think he had money.

“So, my friend, where do you want to go?” Charles stared expectantly at Leon, not noticing, or maybe not caring, about Leon’s slightly hostile look. He leaned in, waiting for Leon’s response. Leon took a few steps away from the overly familiar Charles before answering.

“I need some food. Somewhere cheap will do.”

“Oh! I know the perfect place, not too far from here!” Charles clapped Leon on the shoulder, oblivious to the other man’s discomfort, and led him down the street.

Leon was a little put off by Charles’ enthusiasm and thought it prudent to mention something. “I’m not going to buy you anything, I don’t have the money for that...” Leon did have the three hundred silver coins buried under the obelisk, but he wasn’t too sure how much that actually was just yet, so he had no intention of wasting this money until he went to the bank.

Charles was unperturbed by Leon’s statement. “Oh, don’t worry, you really helped me out, I wouldn’t dream of asking you for a meal as well!”

There was a forum less than half a mile away, with dozens of small shops and had several food stalls in the center. The smell wafted over the entire forum, and Leon caught a whiff of it several streets over. His eyes lit up, and his irritation at Charles' presence nearly vanished.

"The stalls here are great, especially for the price, but my favorite is the noodle stand, over there." Charles gestured toward one of the stalls, a place with only a single wall and roof, with curtains drawn between the ends of the wall and the two columns at the other end holding up the ceiling, and Leon eagerly approached. There weren't many people by the food stalls, as it was past lunchtime but before dinner, so the middle-aged stall owner was just sitting behind the counter waiting for a customer. When Leon and Charles approached, he put on a smile and stood to greet the young men.

"Welcome! What can I get for you two gentlemen?"

Leon looked to Charles, as he knew this place.

"A bowl of noodles is a single silver. Toppings are an extra silver, you can see over there." Charles pointed to a sign on the wall behind the counter. Leon gave it a quick once-over, and immediately saw something that piqued his interest.

"One bowl for me, with steak."

"Coming right up!" The owner smiled at Leon, and after Charles shook his head to indicate he didn't want anything, he began his prep work. He had a metal plate behind the counter, carved into which were several fire runes. He put the noodles and steak into a pan with butter and seasonings and cooked them over the fire runes.

While they waited, Charles tried asking Leon a few questions but had to get his attention first, as Leon had been watching the stall owner cook with extreme interest.

"So... It occurs to me that I never asked for your name. Do you mind if I ask you for it now?"

"Leon."

"Ah. Where do you come from? Your clothes don't seem to be like anyone else's that I've seen before."

Leon thought for a moment, before responding. "I'm from Vale Town, in the north."

Charles was taken aback, Leon didn't seem at all like the stories he had heard of the northern barbarians. No beard, no giant ax, no wild and criminal look in his eye. In fact, Charles had thought Leon to be a young noble from some distant house who had gone adventuring. But, he recovered quickly. Barbarian or not, Leon had saved him, and he intended to at least make friends with him.

"Oh... Well, what brings you so far south, then?"

Leon took another moment to think, covering it by staring longingly at the cooking food.

"Your kingdom's alliance with the Brown Bears was effectively renewed. Thus, I came south to see the sights, and join the Knight Academy."

"Wow. Lofty ambitions, though I'd say you must have the power for it if you could beat those thugs from earlier. You know, I was toying with the idea of joining the legion myself, though not as a knight,

obviously. I could use the silver. Anyway, you said you came here to see the sights? Any in particular you want to visit? I could show you around."

"I... was thinking about seeing the palace ruins."

Charles frowned. "Oh... Well, I'm sorry to say that you can't. Everything in the old palace estate is off-limits, by order of the king. Anyone caught trying to loot the old palace, or even anyone caught trying to trespass, is killed on the spot as a traitor to the crown."

Leon joined Charles in frowning at that news. He wasn't too deterred, though, as he still had the map of Teira, and thus knew a few secret entrances that he intended to check out, once he got away from Charles, of course.

"Hmm, other than that, just the Heaven's Eye Bank, and an inn to sleep in for a few days. After that, I'll be heading for the capital."

"Ah, well I can help you there. I am, myself, staying at an inn a few streets over, I'd highly recommend it. It's clean, the owners are very nice, and no one makes too much trouble."

"Sounds good. Bank, then inn. But first..." Leon got a huge smile as the stall owner finally put a steaming hot bowl of noodles and steak chunks in front of him. He picked up the provided fork, and immediately tore into it.

Chapter 46: The Bank

The owner of the noodle stall knew his stuff. Leon smiled, savoring the last few bites of steak in the bowl. The stall owner was pleased with Leon's obvious satisfaction and enjoyment of the meal, but he was even more pleased when Leon tossed him a pair of silver coins.

It hadn't even been five minutes, but Leon had almost inhaled the entire bowl in that time! Charles was quietly impressed.

"You must have been hungry indeed, to eat so fast!" he said to Leon.

Leon nodded in response. "There aren't many spices up north. Most things are eaten without anything more than a little bit of salt, and some butter if you have the coin for it, so this was... well, I've never tasted anything quite like it." Leon's face was almost split in half from his unabashed smile, a far cry away from the stoic and serious young man from just a few minutes before.

But, a few moments later, he remembered what he had come to Teira for, and the smile disappeared.

"Well, with that done, let's make for the bank."

Charles was a little taken aback at how quickly Leon switched back into seriousness, but he smiled and nodded.

"Right! Just this way!"

The bank was several miles away, a good distance to walk in the city. Along the way, Charles kept talking, but Leon remained quiet. He was busy looking at all the shops he was seeing around. They

weren't much to look at since they were still in the slums, but he saw blacksmiths, tailors, cobblers, enchanters, and so much more that he would never have seen even in Vale Town.

But the real surprises for him were still to come.

Teira had no city walls, but there were some 'gates' that one needed to pass to enter the inner city. The one in the north was an immense triumphal gate, made entirely of gleaming white marble, glittering silver, and expertly carved ivory. There were statues and sculpted reliefs that depicted a great victory by a past Thunder King, a victory that was long forgotten these days, but for this arch that spanned the entire road.

Passing through the arch, Leon frowned at something he noticed. "Hey, Charles."

"What's up?"

"There any reason I haven't seen any guards since arriving in the city? Would've thought they'd be guarding that gate."

"Oh yeah, all the guards in the city have been combing through the city in the past week or so. They don't have enough people to search the entire city, so most of the guards in the slums were called into Teira proper to aid in the search."

"What could be so important for them to do that?"

"We had a Paladin come through here recently, and one of his men-at-arms went missing. I heard he almost tore apart the south side looking for his guy. The Paladin had to leave a few days ago, but most of the guards that can be spared are still involved in the search."

"Hmm." Leon knew exactly what happened to that man-at-arms, though he'd never say. At least it looked like Roland wasn't to blame for the attack, but he still wasn't going to take any chances.

The main boulevard through the city was quite wide, enough to fit four large carriages side-by-side going in both directions. The street itself was far better than in the slums, with no cracks or pits. The median in the boulevard was filled with bushes, trees, and colorful flowers, and the buildings were all made of beautiful polished enchanted stone. It was quite the contrast compared to the other side of the triumphal arch.

The boulevard was straight as an arrow, and Leon could catch a few glimpses of the palace ruins in the distance in between the carriages, wagons, and pedestrians. It was quite easy to reach the bank from here, Leon and Charles simply walked to the edge of the palace ruins, then turn south-west towards the giant tower at the western point of the diamond-shaped estate.

Along the way, Charles asked what the Northern Vales were like, but Leon didn't say much in response, so Charles began talking about where he grew up, which Leon found a little irritating, but given how little he knew of the city, he still considered Charles too useful to abandon.

From his chattering, Leon learned that Charles' family was from the Serpentine Isles, a tributary state to the west of the Bull Kingdom, hundreds of miles out into the Endless Ocean. They had immigrated to the Bull Kingdom looking for work and ended up running a small mine to the east of Teira. Charles had left the tiny mining town for the big city when he was eighteen, but in the months that followed, he

hadn't made much of himself despite working in several places all over the city. Now, he was still living in an inn and could barely scrape together the money to eat and have a roof over his head.

Leon frowned a bit when Charles brought up his financial situation, prompting Charles to insist that he wasn't looking for charity or sympathy and that if his situation were so poor that he'd have to beg for handouts to stay in the city, he could always go back home and work in the mine for a decent amount of silver.

It wasn't long before they arrived at the Heaven's Eye Tower. It was twenty stories tall, though from Charles had heard, it only had nine floors. It appeared to be made entirely of the same polished white stone that Leon had seen everywhere in the wealthier parts of the city and topped with a shallow dome of blue tiles.

The immense dark wood doors opened of their own accord at Leon and Charles' approach, behind which was a lavishly decorated atrium and enormous lounge. Leon took it all in, the painted marble statues, spotless furniture, rows of elaborate support columns, an enormous crystal chandelier, and enough plush sofas and private booths to seat hundreds of people.

And then there were the people. About half of them were tremendously well-dressed, sporting almost more gold, silver, and jewelry than Leon had ever thought existed in the world. A few were even dressed in flowing robes or tunics and pants that Leon recognized were made of silkgrass.

The rest of the people in the lounge were clad in similar-looking black formal wear that had been tailored to show off their more attractive assets, something which these people had in great supply. The men wore tight-fitting tunics that greatly emphasized their waspy-thin waists and broad shoulders. The women wore long gowns that covered nearly everything, save for a modest cut to show off some of their chests. Both of these black uniforms were extremely form-fitting, leaving little to the imagination despite how much skin the clothes covered. These seemed to be the tower's employees.

"Hey, so since you've got business here, I think I'll just wait outside for you to be done, then I can show you the inn." Charles was clearly uncomfortable and very out of place in such an opulent setting, and after Leon nodded in acknowledgment, he turned around and left as fast as he could without looking foolish.

Leon understood Charles' reaction, but he was a still little upset over since he didn't quite know where to begin, as there didn't seem to be any receptionist waiting to help those who walk in. He awkwardly stood by the door, scanning the entire lounge area desperately looking for someone who might be able to help him with his business.

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To say that Elise was bored would've been to gravely understate her mood. She *hated* Teira and everything about it. Without House Raime to keep the peace and operate its ancient training grounds, Teira was nothing but a den of scheming nobles vying to succeed the old Archduke.

She'd been in the city for two years and found every noble who walked in through the Tower's doors to be mediocre at best, not one managing to catch her attention for more than a few minutes. Hells, most of the time, the men that she met were too busy trying to get beneath her dress to care about stimulating conversation, which would only lead to their unceremonious dismissal from the Tower—she

wasn't around to cater to their pleasure—and given her status in Heaven's Eye, she hadn't even made any friends in the Tower, either.

But loneliness was familiar to her. Even in her mother's palace back in the capital, she only had a handful of friends.

Still, she needed *something* to break up the monotony of her day-to-day life, something other than acting as a supervisor for the attendants for the Heaven's Eye Tower in Teira. Standing in the back of the lounge directing attendants to new patrons was hardly stimulating work.

'Maybe it's time I went home...' she thought to herself as she twirled a few strands of her red hair around one of her fingers, a little dejected at the thought.

But then, she noticed someone walk into the Tower, someone dressed in a coat of snow lion fur and clothes woven from silkgrass beneath. Someone dirty and dusty from the road, with a plain-looking sword at his waist and an aura powerful enough that she wasn't able to identify what magical tier he was.

He was a young man, perhaps a few years younger than her, but not by much. He was tall, but not remarkably so, his face had strong and defined features, but he also had a boyish charm about him as he glanced around at the Tower, somewhat dumbstruck at his surroundings and clearly with no idea what he was doing.

"Who is *that*?" Elise heard a nearby male attendant wonder aloud, derision and disgust inundating his voice. She glanced over at the man—like all Heaven's Eye attendants, he was tall, muscular, handsome, and strong. Physically perfect, but Elise found his attitude to be beyond unattractive.

"Huh, he's cute, but he looks like someone tracked him in on the bottom of their shoe," a female attendant whispered back.

"Should we call the guards? He clearly has no place being here..." the first attendant said.

"No, I think I can have some fun with him, if you know what I mean," the second attendant replied.

"I wouldn't recommend it, he looks dirty enough to give you something if you even get within ten feet of him."

"No need to worry about that, I'll just tease him a bit and then when he reveals that has no business here, I'll have him removed."

"Be careful, he doesn't look like he's a stranger to violence, he might attack you if you get too close... Hang on, let me get some guards on standby, just in case."

Elise frowned. The female attendant was a mortal, a woman with no magical ability whatsoever, so she could somewhat forgive the woman's lack of respect for someone so disheveled. The man, however, was a first-tier mage, and he should've realized that the young man they were talking about was much stronger than him, and not someone they should be so quickly disregarding.

The female attendant began walking forward without waiting for Elise to give her the go-ahead, which irritated Elise to no end. Besides, this young man was at least intriguing for having so much power at such a young age, and she could use the distraction that taking care of his business would provide.

“Wait,” she ordered, that one word causing the attendant to freeze in place with a nervous look on her face. “I’ll deal with him.”

Without waiting for a response from the rest of the flabbergasted attendants, Elise began walking toward the hapless young man.

—

Leon stood in front of the doors for what felt like an eternity, unsure of what he should do. There didn’t seem to be anyone around who he could ask for help, and whenever he noticed someone looking at him, their expressions were usually filled with some kind of disgust or indifference. Even if he were of a mind to ask one of them, it seemed clear enough to Leon that he wasn’t going to get any help with this issue from the other patrons or their attendants.

Fortunately, after only a minute or two had passed since Charles left him at the door, Leon noticed someone walking in his direction. It was hard not to notice her, for she was turning heads of men and women alike with every sashaying step, and when he did see her, Leon’s heart just about skipped a beat.

She was, in a word, gorgeous, but that word alone wasn’t nearly strong enough to properly convey her beauty. If Leon had to guess, he’d say she was a few years older than him, but not by much. Her hair was as red as fire and seemed to emit as much light for how lustrous it was. Most of it had been pulled back into a loose ponytail, leaving just enough untied to frame her heart-shaped face. Her eyes were like glittering emeralds, her full lips were turned up in a shallow, but confident smile. She wasn’t particularly tall, but she held herself with such dignity and nobility that she seemed twice as tall as anyone else in the room.

She had a perfect hourglass figure that was shown off by a similar tight black dress that the other attendants wore, its fabric hugging her alluring curves in ways that made it seem designed to enflame lustful desire, yet also carried an air of dignity that Leon found somewhat intimidating. What was more, she radiated not only confidence and sex appeal, but also a robust second-tier aura that made it clear she was different from the rest of the attendants, who were all either first-tier or mortal.

“Hello, Good Sir, welcome to Heaven’s Eye,” the woman said as she approached Leon, not a hint of disrespect to be found in her charming, almost singsong voice. She then came a little bit closer, almost to the point of making Leon feel uncomfortable, and gave him one of the most sultry, seductive smiles he’d ever seen, and said, “My name is Elise, and I’ll be your attendant. What business brings you here today?”

As she waited for Leon’s response, she leaned forward just enough to emphasize her tremendous bust and the deep cut of her dress’ neckline.

It took a moment for Leon to find his tongue under this stimulation, but fortunately, it seemed Elise was more than patient.

“... I... uh, I’m looking... to check in on... whatever is attached to this card...” he murmured, quickly averting his gaze from where Elise seemed to be trying to draw his attention, while simultaneously reaching into the inner pockets of his coat and drawing out his gold card.

When Elise didn't speak for a moment and didn't take his card, Leon glanced back at her, only to see a look of abject shock and surprise written on her face. But only a moment later—quickly enough that Leon doubted he saw that expression—it was gone, replaced with one that was both consummately professional and terribly friendly at the same time.

"And what is your name, Good Sir?" Elise breathed as she took his card and closely examined it. Before Leon could reply, she hid the card in the palm of her hand and she gave him such a searching, intrigued look that Leon felt like he'd made a terrible mistake.

He figured that telling her his name would only compound that mistake, but he didn't know what else to say.

'I need whatever is in those vaults, not matter what, and they're not going to let me in if I say a false name...'

So, in the end, Leon mentally shrugged. He'd already unthinkingly told Charles his name earlier, and he trusted in the flawless reputation of the Heaven's Eye Merchant Guild not to let something like that leak.

"My name is Leon."

Elise smiled, then took a couple of steps forward and took Leon's arm, her soft touch sending shockwaves through Leon's body.

"Please come with me, Leon," she sensually whispered, pulling on his arm until he followed her toward the elevator.

"I... can walk just fine," Leon protested, trying to pull his arm from her grasp, but Elise only held on a little tighter.

"Please, Leon, I mean no harm," Elise playfully said, though she didn't release his arm, instead continuing to steer him to the back of the lounge.

Leon was about to protest, but a quick scan of the lounge indicated that his treatment was in no way special. There were a few exceptions, but for the most part, the attendants were acting *very* familiar with their patrons, leaning in, indulging in light touching, or being touched in turn. One pair Leon noticed was a somewhat older noblewoman—or so she appeared—who even let her hand fall down to stroke the inner thigh of her male attendant, which he seemed more than happy to let continue.

"This is... a strange place..." he couldn't help but murmur.

Beside him, Elise giggled, both at his statement and his stiff discomfort.

"We get that a lot," she said. "This is a place for those who can afford our most expensive services, whether that's blacksmithing, enchanting, or blood magic. We do our best to cater to our patrons' needs, and our attendants have been trained extensively in socializing with those of the upper echelons of society."

Leon frowned. He wasn't entirely opposed to the 'socialization' that seemed to be happening here, but it wasn't something he was eager to indulge in. Even Elise's light grasp on his arm was almost too much.

Finally, though, Elise steered Leon through one of several large sets of double doors in the back of the lounge, which were then revealed to be the doors to magical lifts.

“We’re going to the seventh floor, where we’ll have a more *private* place to talk,” she said, flashing him another of her radiant and more than a little suggestive smiles.

Leon could only take a deep breath and quietly nod. If he were honest, he didn’t entirely hate Elise’s presence or her touch, but he was still put off by how familiar she was. That they were now going somewhere private left his emotional state a profoundly confusing mess of relief, uncomfortable, anxious, and excited.

All of these conflicting feelings were more than Leon could deal with, preventing him from responding to Elise, who laughed again, squeezed his arm, and then touched a few of the runes on a large and complex runic circle hovering as a light projection over the middle of the lift, causing the lift to spring to life and begin rising.

Looking at Elise through the corner of his eye, Leon quietly took another deep breath and asked himself, *‘What in all the hells have I gotten myself into?’*

Chapter 47: Tower Lord

The private room that Elise took Leon to seemed more like a private lounge than a room in which to conduct business. Several luxurious sofas were arranged around a large glass table; the marble floor tiles were polished to a near mirror shine; there was a minibar in the corner filled with all kinds of multi-colored drinks that Leon had no doubt could get even a mage of prodigious power inebriated; tucked away behind a curtain of black silk was a sliding door to a large bathroom complete with shower and bath.

“Please, Leon, make yourself comfortable,” Elise whispered to him as she steered him into the room and toward the nearest sofa.

Leon wasn’t sure how to respond, so he remained quiet. He had no idea why this girl was treating him as she was, and nothing in his past had ever prepared him to deal with such a situation.

Once Leon sank into the sofa cushions, glanced back at Elise, who still held his gold card.

“Uh... what now?” he asked.

“I’m going to pass this card by our managers downstairs,” she swiftly answered, her alluring smile deepening as it became increasingly obvious the effect that she was having on him. “Once we confirm the information on it, we’ll have the vaults and accounts that are tied to it—however many there may be—brought up here and opened up to you...” Elise indicated an open section of the floor from which Leon could detect a few strands of magic power—a telltale sign of enchantment. “This is where they’ll appear from.”

“And... will you be coming back?” Leon hesitantly asked, inwardly cringing at how it sounded coming out of his uncharismatic mouth.

Elise held her hand up to her mouth and nobly giggled. “Of course I will, I wouldn’t leave you here alone! I’ll return to help you with *anything* you need once I get everything in order, OK?”

Leon apprehensively nodded. The only thing he wanted more than for Elise to hurry back was for her to not come back at all, though the latter was losing ground to the former every time he looked at her.

"I'll be right back, Leon, please don't go anywhere," she whispered seductively, then began sashaying over to the door. As she pulled it open and stepped through, she paused just for a moment before the door closed to send one last enchanting smile over her shoulder, which had Leon's heart beating in his chest like it wanted to break free from its fleshy prison and follow her wherever she wanted to go.

As the door closed, Leon let out a breath that he'd been unconsciously holding. He slapped his face a couple of times to make sure that he was, indeed, still conscious and not stuck in a dream, and he felt just how heated his cheeks had become. As he inspected himself further, he suddenly became very aware of just how *dirty* he was from the journey south, and he was immensely grateful that the private lounge had its own bathroom. He quickly got up and scurried over, taking every second he'd been given to clean himself up a bit and to prepare himself for Elise's return.

With every passing moment, his anxiety settled, and his desire to not see her died with it. Soon enough, there was nothing he was looking forward to more than her return.

—

Elise's smile didn't fade when she left the lounge she'd left Leon in. Instead, it transformed from one of seductive playfulness to one of pure amusement, happiness, and delight. Nearly all of the people she interacted with were local nobles, and their training in etiquette and diplomacy meant that just about all of them were suave, confident almost to a fault, and not shy about pursuing what they wanted. She had endured just about every attempt at flattery and flirting that could be seen under the sun of Aeterna, to say the least, and she was more than a little tired of being constantly pursued by young noblemen—and occasionally noblewomen—who each thought themselves a gift from the Ancestors for the targets of their pursuit.

However, she had never once seen anyone as... *innocent* and easy to see through as Leon was. He was completely overwhelmed by her, and his attraction was obvious. Adding onto that his power and his possession of a gold card, which under any other circumstance was an object only held by members of Royalty—nobility and other elites were typically awarded a silver card, while commoners would be given a card made of thin but durable enchanted wood—ensured that Leon made almost as strong a first impression on Elise as she had made upon him.

And this time, *she* was the one who was acting as the playful seductress instead of her usual more aloof and far more dignified demeanor. It was a nice change of pace, in her mind, even if it did start as simply a way to have some fun at the expense of the attendants who had been so quick to dismiss someone so young, yet possessed of third-tier power. Were it not for the dust from the road covering him and the simple clothes, she knew they would've immediately thought him the scion of a noble House and been all over him, eager to please and to bring him whatever he needed on the off chance that he might've taken them into his harem.

'Leon, huh? I don't think I'll be forgetting you anytime soon,' she thought, briefly wondering just what circumstances had led him to this point. Whatever they were, she found herself feeling some amount of gratitude for them.

She quickly composed herself as she entered the magic lift. Whatever she thought about Leon could wait.

The sixth floor of the Heaven's Eye Tower was entirely taken up by the offices of the account managers. Their job, for the most part, was to supervise the smaller Heaven's Eye banks throughout the city and the rest of the Great Plateau, but when a noble came here wanting to access their account, it was always one of these managers who facilitated it.

Elise strode off the magic lift as soon as it arrived, took a cursory glance at the desks, and immediately began making for the first account manager who didn't seem busy, all seduction and playfulness in her attitude gone so quickly it was like it had never been there. Right now, she was all business.

Her arrival didn't go unnoticed, and just about everyone briefly stopped what they were doing to stare and wonder just what brought someone of her rank and stature down here, where usually only attendants came. If she had some business with them, then under normal circumstances she would've just issued a summons and any one of them would've been more than happy to go to her instead.

"Lady Elise!" her chosen idle account manager exclaimed as she stopped at his desk. "To what do I owe the honor?"

"I need whatever vaults and accounts associated with this card prepared to be opened and brought to room three on the seventh floor," she said, her tone commanding but not overbearing. She wasn't impolite, but she wasn't wasting time with pointless pleasantries.

Elise held out the gold card that she'd taken from Leon, and the manager's eyes almost bulged out of their sockets when he laid his eyes upon it. The only thing he could think of was, *'Did one of the Princes come to the city?!'*

He gently took the card, knowing full well that the wealth associated with it was likely orders of magnitude greater than all the money he'd ever make in his lifetime.

Every account was given a sixteen-digit alphanumeric ID, but the card the ID was printed on was so heavily enchanted that it couldn't be read by anyone without a lens that only one of the account managers would possess. The manager pulled out his lens and examined the account ID.

All the blood in his face immediately drained away. He read the ID again just to be certain, then shuffled around in his desk and took out a piece of paper. He compared the ID on the card to what was on the paper, then looked back at Elise.

"Who gave you this card?" he asked somewhat timidly as if he were afraid of angering someone he could *not* afford to piss off—he was still new, after all, and it would only take one word from Elise to see him fired from Heaven's Eye.

"Is there a problem with it?" Elise asked, her tone turning sharp.

"My lady, this account was recently locked, as we detected the death of the last member of the family that held it."

"Oh?" Elise frowned.

“Whoever brought this card likely obtained it through dishonest means and is now attempting to steal those assets.”

Elise continued frowning. She didn’t get that kind of vibe from Leon. She was certain that he was no murderer, thief, or graverobber, but she also knew that appearances could be deceiving. Still, she was inclined to believe that Leon was on the up-and-up.

“What then do we do?” she asked, her even tone starting to take on a hint of annoyance at this unexpected hiccup.

“There is a protocol for this, and it isn’t like it’s guaranteed the card bearer did something shady or illegal. The last account holder may have simply given the card to a friend or passed it on to a child that isn’t in our records. Regardless, we’re going to need a drop of blood from the card bearer.” The manager took out a tiny steel needle and a glass orb, then stood up, making for the magic lift. Elise’s frown deepened, but she followed closely behind him.

The two were completely silent as they made their way back to the room that Elise had left Leon in. Elise intimidated the living hells out the manager, despite her not doing anything to warrant such fear, but he kept his mouth shut.

When they arrived at their destination, Elise took a moment to compose herself, regain her elegant bearing and a light, noble smile, then pushed the door open.

—

Leon cursed himself for his foolishness. He should’ve gotten a room at an inn somewhere and cleaned himself up *before* going to Heaven’s Eye!

‘*No use crying about it now...*’ he forlornly thought as he hurriedly washed his face. He had contemplated making use of the shower that was in the bathroom, but he wasn’t sure how much time he had, so he settled on a quick wipe down of his face and getting a change of clothes. He was halfway through the latter when he heard the lounge door open.

“Leon?” he heard the soft, melodic voice of Elise call out.

“Uh... in here!” he responded, his voice shaking in nervousness and embarrassment.

“Ah, is there anything you need assistance with? I’d be more than willing,” he heard her say, her voice teasing and playful.

“No! No, I’m good, doing just fine!” he replied as he threw a dark green silkgrass shirt over his head. He didn’t bother to put his snow lion coat back on, and instead just stuffed it and the rest of his dirty clothes into his pack.

When he left the bathroom, he found Elise and the manager standing there, Elise looking gorgeous and confident, the thin and balding manager looking like he’d rather fade into nothingness rather than continue to be there, a reaction that Leon could understand since he was so close to Elise yet seemingly so ignored.

As if to spite that impression, Elise said, “I’m terribly sorry, Leon, but we’re going to have to run a quick blood test to get you access to the vaults and accounts associated with this card...”

Leon hesitantly nodded. Blood magic was one of the most reliable methods for determining someone's identity, but that didn't mean that he was excited about it. The only reason he nodded at all was because of the Heaven's Eye Merchant Guild's sterling reputation.

Elise flashed him a radiant smile, then turned towards the manager and nodded. She had Leon hold out his hand while the manager drew the steel needle and pricked Leon's finger. Leon hardly felt it, and it didn't seem to leave a wound, but the needle still came away with a single drop of blood. The manager brushed the needle against the glass orb in his other hand, which Leon noted must be heavily enchanted, as the drop of blood passed through the glass like it wasn't even there and hovered in the exact center of the orb.

The manager nodded respectfully to Leon, then made for the door. Elise smiled again at Leon, squeezed his hand, then made to follow.

"We'll be right back, I'm sorry again for this inconvenience," she breathed.

"Do-Don't worry about it!" Leon replied, perhaps a little too enthusiastically, for Elise giggled again and departed, leaving Leon alone to feel like a complete fool all by himself.

—

With Leon's blood in the orb, Elise and the manager made their way down to the fourth floor of the Heaven's Eye Tower, quite possibly the most unused floor in the entire Tower, since it wasn't a place that patrons of Heaven's Eye were allowed.

The fourth floor of the tower was taken up by the Heaven's Eye blood mages. Blood magic had a terrible stigma associated with it, with most magicless mortals thinking that it was only about sacrificing to demons or killing people to use their mana to power magic rituals. In fact, vampirism could only be contracted through overindulgence in the more repulsive sides of blood magic.

But blood magic had far more benign uses that can't be ignored, such as identification and oath swearing. Swearing blood oaths was an uncommon practice, though, with most people only ever swearing them with the people they most trusted in the world. Even innocent people accused of crimes they didn't commit were often more willing to face the judgment of the Arbiters than to try to risk swearing a blood oath, for the words they swore to could always hurt them more than an Arbiter's verdict.

When Elise and the account manager arrived on the fourth floor, there was only a single blood mage behind the desk. Not many accounts were so tightly secured as to require this level of identification, so the few blood mages who work in the tower generally divide themselves into shifts, so there is rarely more than one blood mage behind the desk at a time.

Elise didn't say a word to the on-duty blood mage, instead letting the manager take the lead, for he knew these parts of the protocol better than she did. The manager gingerly put the gold card and the glass orb on the desk, spoke a few words, then waited as the blood mage left the room.

Fortunately, this process wasn't very complicated. The blood mage returned after a few minutes holding a bird claw carved from solid gold. Gripped within the talons was another glass orb, about the

size of an orange. The blood mage very carefully placed the claw in the center of a magical formation carved into the desk, then placed Leon's orb right next to it.

When the blood mage activated the formation, the two orbs slammed together before any of them could blink. It was a good thing these orbs were so heavily enchanted because they would have shattered into dust had they been normal glass. Elise and the account manager had seen this ritual done before, but they had never seen such a strong reaction. The blood mage himself panicked a little, before activating a few runes carved into the edges of the formation. The two orbs unstuck themselves, but the two drops of blood could be plainly seen pressed up against the glass, clearly attracted to each other.

"What was *that*?" the account manager asked quietly.

"Hmmm..." The blood mage thought for a moment before answering. "There are three possibilities for such an intense reaction. The first is that the blood you brought me is from the same person as our sample. The second is that these samples are from identical twins. We can rule those out, as the orbs were no longer stuck after I activated these runes. The last possibility, and thus the only possibility, is that they share an Inherited Bloodline of an Ascended Beast. Regardless, these two samples are from close relatives, separated by no more than two generations."

The blood mage quickly filled out a short document, and gave it to the very relieved account manager, while Elise was lost in thought.

'A gold card, stronger than second-tier at a young age, and an Inherited Bloodline?' Her face scrunched up in confusion and mounting worry. *'Who are you, Leon?'* she wondered. Equally mysterious was that gold bird claw, which she'd never seen before. She couldn't imagine who could've been so important to warrant it, for not even the Bull Kings were given such ostentatious holders for their blood orbs.

When they returned to the magic lift, the account manager set it for the top floor. Elise was so lost in thought that she didn't even notice until the lift doors opened.

She turned to give the account manager a confused and exasperated look, assuming this to be just a stupid mistake, but he just walked past her and made for the huge doors at the end of the hall. She quenched her annoyance and followed, knowing that whatever the manager was doing, he wouldn't be troubling the Tower Lord unless this situation was more important than she realized.

The doors opened on their own, and with odd silence given their size. The room beyond was an enormous dimly lit circular chamber, largely empty save for a few pieces of furniture, a gargantuan firepit in the center of the floor, and a desk at the other end of the chamber, shaped into a half-circle around a plain-looking chair that was facing the doors. The man sitting in the chair seemed middle-aged, though he had run this branch of Heaven's Eye for at least two centuries now. He was so strong that even the account manager, who wasn't even of the first-tier, could feel the hair on his body stand up from this man's passive magical aura alone.

He looked up from the papers on his desk, with a face as expressive as stone—at least, until his eyes momentarily landed on Elise, which softened his expression for just a moment. But it was only a moment, and when his professional demeanor returned, he asked in a gravelly voice that seemed to echo in the account manager's mind and made him a little weak in the knees, "What do you want?"

It took a moment for the manager to compose himself in the Tower Lord's presence. "My Lord, that vault you ordered locked last week, a young man has arrived with the card associated with it."

The only sign that the Tower Lord was surprised was a slight momentary narrowing of his eyes before he extended his hand. The manager understood exactly what he wanted, and with as much respect and deference as he could, handed over the gold card. The Tower Lord glanced at it, his eyes easily seeing through the myriad enchantments placed upon it.

"Anything else?" he growled. The manager wasted no time relaying the results of the blood test, handing the Tower Lord the document from the blood mage. The Tower Lord examined the document with far more care than he did the card, then casually leaned back in his chair.

"Have this account's vault brought to the waiting room. I'll go meet this young man myself."

The manager's eyes widened in shock, as did Elise's. The young fire-haired woman couldn't help herself and muttered, "Uncle...?"

"This is the account of a very special family of clients, it would only be proper for me to greet the new account holder in person." He rose with almost unnatural grace and seemed to glide across the shiny marble floor towards the doors. Elise hurried after him, with the manager not far behind.

Elise and the Tower Lord got off the lift on the seventh floor, while the manager took the lift further down, to make the arrangements for Leon's vault to be sent to his waiting room.

Elise and her Uncle, the Tower Lord, swiftly crossed the distance between the lift doors and the entrance to Leon's waiting room. But upon reaching it, the Tower Lord paused and glanced at Elise, letting his face break out into a fatherly smile.

"Tell me, little Butterfly, what is your impression of this young man who brought in this card?"

Chapter 48: The Vault

"Tell me, little Butterfly, what is your impression of this young man who brought in this card?"

The Tower Lord could easily see with his magic senses what was happening in the other room, how the young man was nervously pacing back and forth in the lounge as he waited for Elise to return. His aura was strong and potent, the obvious result of years of effort and knowledge of what he was doing, rather than muddling his way through the magical tiers as most citizens of the Bull Kingdom were forced to do, let alone the northern barbarians that this young man so resembled in dress and style.

Elise paused as she contemplated her uncle's question, her thoughts turning to the young man in the room just beyond the door in front of them. The more she thought about him, the more intrigued her expression became, and a smile began to spread across her face. "He seems to be the sort of man who hasn't had to deal with many people, especially not those in the upper strata of society. He's quiet, unexpressive even when embarrassed, uncomfortable around other people, but innocent most of all."

"Innocent? Really? He appears to be a third-tier mage to me, and even second-tier mages are rarely so innocent..."

"Third-tier, hmm? Well, innocent when it comes to women. I did sense a slight undercurrent of killing intent, so he's most definitely killed before, and I'd say he'd be more than willing to do so again."

"Sounds to me like you're interested in him," the Tower Lord replied, cocking an eyebrow at his niece. "Don't tell me it was love at first sight?"

"No, I don't think that's the case," Elise replied, her cheeks reddening slightly. "But I will concede that he's far from the noble chaff that usually finds its way into our Tower. Certainly not a pampered rich boy who hasn't seen a single day of struggle—quite the opposite, I would guess."

"If he is who I think he is, then there's no way his father would've raised him somewhere peaceful."

"Oh? And who do you think he is?" Elise stared at the Tower Lord, her uncle, her brilliant emerald eyes gleaming with curiosity and expectation. The Tower Lord loved his family and was weak to such assaults, especially where Elise was concerned, but he couldn't just say it without a promise from her, first.

"... You will not repeat a word of this to anyone. We at Heaven's Eye take as little part in political struggles as possible, and this is a very weighty situation we now have on our hands..."

Elise nodded eagerly. She didn't mind not speaking of this matter, and she couldn't stand not knowing, especially where this intriguing young man was concerned—after all, he had the looks of a barbarian, but the power of a high noble and the gold card of Royalty.

"... Good. The card he came in with was for House Raime. That blood test you just ran confirmed him as the grandson of Kyros Raime."

"*House Raime?*" Elise incredulously responded, almost shouting the question in shock. It took a moment for her to process her uncle's revelation, but when she did, she understood the need for secrecy. "I thought they were all dead!"

"Which is what most people thought. In fact, I'd say myself and a few of our senior blood mages at this branch were the only ones who knew differently. Fifteen years ago, when Artorias Raime's villa was destroyed, he managed to escape. I heard that he had a son, but he never registered the boy with the Guild."

"But how did you know he was still alive? Did he visit this place?"

"He didn't have to, we have his blood. We could've even found him if we wanted, but that isn't our way."

Something occurred to Elise as they were talking, the reason this account had been locked in the first place. "But if he survived, why was the account locked?"

The Tower Lord was silent for a moment, before answering in a quiet voice. "He died last week."

"... Oh."

"Well, the Guild's rules must be followed, so I gave the order to lock the account for one hundred years. If no one showed up to unlock it, the assets would have been seized by the bank. I didn't expect someone to arrive so quickly, though. Now, then, I would like to meet this young man."

Elise nodded, her demeanor swiftly shifting back into that of the role she'd been playing since Leon had entered the Tower—that of a confident businesswoman and a helpful and mildly suggestive

attendant. She then opened the door and strode in with the confidence of a woman who knew she practically owned the place.

The Tower Lord followed Elise inside, and when he saw Leon with his own eyes rather than the more esoteric perception of magic senses, any doubts as to his identity immediately vanished. It was like he was looking two centuries back in time, and it so profoundly struck him that the Tower Lord could only stand and stare at the young man before him. The same brown hair so dark it appeared almost black, the same prominent nose, the same strong features. The only thing that was remarkably different was Leon's eye color—bright gold rather than House Raimé's more traditional hues of dark brown. If someone told the Tower Lord that Kyros had come back to life as a younger man and was now standing in front of him, he'd probably believe them.

Elise, meanwhile, took the opportunity to approach the young man and inform him of what was happening, but the Tower Lord was so overcome with sudden emotion that he failed to track the conversation. He saw Elise smiling at the young man, nodding at what he was saying, lightly touching his arm. The young man seemed nervous and embarrassed, but he was responding positively to Elise's presence and attitude, speaking to her readily enough in a shaky, stuttering way.

"Incredible... You really are Kyros' grandson..." the Tower Lord muttered, unable to help himself despite his centuries of mastering himself.

He was a powerful man, and his voice carried even when spoken so softly; Leon heard him and froze for a split second. Then, he threw himself back from Elise, his right hand dropping down to the hilt of the sword at his waist. He was about to draw before the Tower Lord realized his mistake and waved his hand, freezing Leon in place with the weight of his magical aura alone.

"I'm terribly sorry, I shouldn't have said something so careless. Elise, are you all right?" She nodded back to him while nervously smiling at the sudden turn in events.

"We... mean you no harm, Leon," she whispered, any trace of seductiveness gone from her voice, replaced with nothing but an earnest entreatment to calm down.

Leon stood there, staring at the two of them, unmoving even as the Tower Lord withdrew his aura and released him.

"We're not going to hurt you, young man, or spread word about your identity, so please calm yourself." The Tower Lord spoke with a quiet and measured voice, showing Leon nothing but trust and serenity. And slowly, Leon released the hold he had on his blade, but he kept a good few steps away from both Elise and the Tower Lord.

The Tower Lord smiled, and gestured toward the chairs, taking one for himself.

After a few moments, Leon began to relax, but he kept his eye on both the Tower Lord and Elise. The latter was still standing, her breathing not quite steady and her hands shaking. She'd never seen someone switch so quickly from cordial conversation into a violent stance before—hells, she'd never even been *in* a violent situation before, so she'd been taken completely by surprise.

"I... uh, sorry about that..." Leon said a little bashfully, finding it difficult to look her in the eye.

After a few more seconds, Elise's breathing started to slow, and she said, "It's fine. It's fine."

“Elise?” The Tower Lord didn’t want to elaborate on his concern, not in front of a stranger, no matter who he appeared to be, but he needed to know that she was all right.

“I’m fine,” she replied, turning to him and smiling. “Just a little more excitement than I’m used to is all.”

With that, she practically skipped forward and took Leon’s arm again.

“Please, Leon, we’re here to help. We can be discreet.”

Under normal circumstances, Elise might have some seductive emphasis on the second part of her statement, but in this situation, she refrained. Being straight-up with Leon was probably the best option to avoid more misunderstandings.

“Right. Sorry,” Leon repeated.

“Don’t worry about it. Let’s get back down to business, shall we?” she brightly said, steering Leon back toward the sofas where the Tower Lord was waiting.

Leon allowed her to do so. He’d already decided to trust Heaven’s Eye, but hearing the Tower Lord suddenly say what he did had caught him off-guard and he acted purely on instinct. He didn’t wish harm upon Elise or the old man she’d returned with. He wasn’t even sure if he could hurt the Tower Lord if he tried, given how incomprehensible his aura was and how easily he’d immobilized Leon.

But Leon kept an eye on the man all the same. He took a seat opposite the glass table, with Elise sitting next to him. The intimacy she previously showed was gone, which made Leon even more regretful over his hasty actions, but replacing it was a sense of seriousness that had Leon not dwelling too long on her previous demeanor.

The Tower Lord spoke first, leaning back in his chair and smiling at Leon, trying to make it as clear as possible that they weren’t enemies. “I’m glad to see you, ‘Leon’, was it? My name is Ajax, and I’m the Lord of this branch of Heaven’s Eye. As Elise told you, I’m sure, I’ve arranged for your vault to be transported directly to this room.”

“Thanks,” Leon replied. “Was it... was it just that one vault?”

“Yes, everything else tied to that card you brought us was the property of the Archduchy of the Great Plateau rather than of House Raime, specifically, meaning that after the death of Archduke Kyros Raime and his heirs being either dead or missing, ownership all of those assets were transferred to the Bull King.

“I see...” Leon murmured.

“Now, just to get some things straight and to ensure that everything is on the up-and-up, you are the son of Artorias Raime?” Leon didn’t answer him verbally this time, but the momentary tensing up of his body and spike in his aura told Ajax all he needed to know. “I thought so. Your grandfather, His Honored Grace, Kyros Raime, was a friend of mine. You actually look so much like him when he was younger that I lost myself when I saw you, I apologize if you found that startling.”

Leon frowned and said nothing more than, “Ah, OK,” leaving Ajax feeling a little awkward. He was used to dealing with long-winded nobles and merchants, so he had a habit of leaving the other party plenty of room to speak, but Leon wasn’t giving him much to work with.

“This is your first visit to a Heaven’s Eye Bank, correct?” Again, Leon didn’t respond verbally, but he at least nodded to Ajax. Ajax was thankful for that, as it gave him an excuse to talk about many of the procedures the Guild had implemented for its banks. He told Leon all about their account system, how they verify IDs, the tightness of their security, how to lock an account in the case of a lost ID card, as well as how to get a new card in that event, throughout which Leon remained silent as stone.

It took a moment, but Ajax thought he knew why the young man was being so taciturn—Leon was quiet, to begin with, but Elise had been slowly sliding closer as he and Leon had been talking. She didn’t quite come close enough to press her body against Leon, but she’d certainly slid close enough to rub her arm against his. It seemed to Ajax that for however surprising it was to see Leon’s violent side, Elise wasn’t too bothered by it.

“Elise, do you think you can wait outside, please? I would like to speak with Leon alone.” Elise responded with a cute pouting face, but the Tower Lord insisted, so she reluctantly rose and moved to the door, but she didn’t forget to give Leon a few mournful looks as she did.

Leon watched her go with a look almost as regretful, and Ajax couldn’t help but notice the young man’s gaze wandering over Elise’s body.

The Tower Lord put on a teasing smile, and asked, “So, Leon. How are you enjoying your time at Heaven’s Eye so far? Has Elise been accommodating? You seem to be a bit on edge, has there been any problems?”

Leon hurriedly shook his head. “No, no problems yet. Just... Elise is very nice, and I’m... not really used to that...”

“Well, if she makes you uncomfortable, don’t hesitate to say so, and we’ll find you a new attendant as soon as we can.”

Leon nodded in gratitude, but he refrained from taking the Tower Lord up on that offer. As uncomfortable as Elise’s attentions could be, Leon couldn’t honestly say that he didn’t enjoy them. “Are all your attendants so... friendly? I noticed quite a few downstairs who were... very close... to the other people here...”

“Yes... At this branch of Heaven’s Eye, our attendants get the opportunity to meet with many wealthy merchants and nobles, and they do tend to take advantage of that. We don’t require such behavior out of our attendants, but it does keep our clients coming back, so we don’t discourage it. Oftentimes, our clients will grow quite attached to their attendants, and will even take them as concubines or spouses.”

If they take an attendant into their household, then Heaven’s Eye will always see them. Ajax left that part unsaid, but Leon was smart enough to infer that much, even if he was terrible at talking to people.

But the Tower Lord had never seen Elise act that way with a client before. Usually, they would be fawning over her to the point she’d lose patience, rather than the other way around. Elise was a woman who knew her status and didn’t have the time for those who thought too much of themselves and only spoke to her out of want for her body.

Ajax fully supported his niece when she kicked those kinds of people out of the Tower, and there'd been plenty who'd been given temporary bans when they refused to stop trying to court her. So, Ajax was more than a little surprised and even a little gratified to finally see Elise taking an interest in someone.

But he pushed those thoughts out of his mind as the floor began to vibrate and he heard the clunking of something unspeakably heavy moving around beneath their feet.

"Ah, it sounds like they finally got your vault here." He rose from his seat and walked to the center of the waiting room, where the floor had begun to rise. Leon eagerly followed and stood next to the Tower Lord, watching an enormous vault at least as large as Leon's entire hut back in the Northern Vales made of dark blue enchanted steel rise from the floor.

"Your grandfather had this vault set up about one hundred and fifty years ago, as backup resources in case your family was ever in trouble. As far as I'm aware, there are no other accounts in your family's name still with Heaven's Eye, so I'm afraid if you don't find what you're looking for in that vault, then there's not much I can do to help you further without charging you for it. Of course, just because this is all we have left doesn't mean there isn't more out there, but..."

"I understand," Leon whispered.

Ajax was a little disappointed in Leon for not asking more about his family, but he could understand on some level. Leon still didn't quite trust him. Besides, the vault rising from the floor was far more immediately compelling. But Ajax still wanted to speak with the grandson of Kyros, the last Archduke and Ajax's late friend, and hoped that Leon would be a bit more curious after he retrieved whatever he needed from the vault.

The vault was remarkable in its simplicity, as it appeared to only be a perfectly smooth metal box. The edges were slightly rounded, and it had no seams, but other than that, there were no decorations or even visible methods to open it. But this was a vault from Heaven's Eye, there didn't need to be any visible means of opening it. A magical formation illuminated itself for less than a second, before disappearing again. After that, an open doorway with a curtain of smoky black darkness appeared in front of Leon. He was a little surprised, as the doorway had appeared just as he blinked, but a smile began to spread across his face. Leon didn't waste any more time and hurried into the vault, easily passing through the privacy curtain of darkness magic while Ajax waited outside.

Chapter 49: His Name

When Leon walked through the door of the vault and laid his eyes on its contents, he was left stunned. Stacks of shiny gold bars and crates of silver coins were in the majority, but there were also smaller boxes on a table in the center filled with precious stones. Sapphires, rubies, emeralds, amethysts, and several diamonds the size of his fist were all glittering in the light of the magic lanterns illuminating the vault.

Leon was frozen in place; he couldn't decide what to go and examine first. His heart raced with excitement and wonder as he stared at the obscene wealth before him, far more than he'd ever imagined would be within. He'd have considered himself lucky beyond belief to have even a few thousand silver coins, let alone all of this.

After a few moments of staring, he settled on the silver coins. The gold bars couldn't be spent directly, and the gems—while extremely valuable—had practical uses that he wouldn't give up just for a little coin.

He counted sixty large wooden crates, each stamped with the image of a bird of prey with its wings spread and talons outstretched, the sigil of House Raime. The crates were stacked three high, almost touching the ceiling, except for the four closest to the doorway, which were open to reveal hundreds of metal tubes, identical to what Leon had found beneath the obelisk. He estimated after some digging around that these crates, which were so numerous as to fill an entire third of the vault, had about half a million silver coins each, totaling about thirty million silvers.

Next were the gold bars. The economy of the Bull Kingdom had been overhauled several hundred years ago, phasing out both gold coins for being prohibitively valuable, and copper coins for being too worthless. Consequently, there wasn't much Leon could do with these bars. Only royalty or the obscenely wealthy still stockpiled gold, only using the bars to pay for their largest of expenses.

Leon counted himself lucky for being in a Heaven's Eye Bank, as this was one of the few places he could exchange one of these gold bars for silver coins. There were one hundred gold bars here, though Leon had little idea how much that was worth in silver, so he moved on to the gems in the center of the vault.

A quick count came to fifty sapphires, seventy rubies, one hundred emeralds, two hundred amethysts, and five diamonds. All the stones, with the exception of the enormous diamonds, were roughly half the size of his thumb. These he did not intend to sell. While gemstones are often used for decoration, especially in jewelry, Leon knew that they are far more valuable to enchanters than jewelers, as magical energy could be stored within them, which could then be used in place of a mage to power enchantments. How much they could hold was dependent on both the kind of gemstone and its size.

Sapphires were the most valuable in that regard, being far and away the gem that could hold the most magic. After that came rubies, emeralds, amethysts, topazes, pearls, and opals, all of which could store less magic than the one before. Just about any other gemstone was simply decorative and had little uses apart from ornamentation, with the sole exception of diamonds. While diamonds couldn't store as much magical energy as sapphires or rubies, they still had the miraculous quality of amplifying magic that passes through them, greatly strengthening enchantments they were incorporated into, making them much more valuable than other gems.

Leon didn't quite know how valuable these gemstones were, given that he only knew what little Artorias had been able to teach him about enchanting, but he knew that these stones would make for great enchantment material if he ever got the opportunity to study that art. It was just a shame that they were not currently storing magic power, so Leon would have to charge them himself if the time ever came—an expensive process, he'd been led to believe.

As he thought about all this, he was reminded of the enormous crystal powering the enchantments in the prison where he found Xaphan. He had no idea what that crystal was, but it certainly was no gem he had ever heard of.

'Oh well, no use guessing now. Something to look into, should I get the chance...'

Leon stepped away from the gems and took another look around the vault, taking it all in, trying to wrap his head around just how much wealth this was. Artorias had once told him that the Great Plateau was one of the richest regions in the entire kingdom, thanks to its abundant mineral resources. Seeing all this gold and silver and knowing that it was just a small amount of emergency funds that Archduke Kyros had set aside really drove home for Leon just how enormously rich House Raime was before it collapsed.

After some thought, he grabbed a single gold bar and about five thousand silver pieces. The silver would be enough to live off of for a couple of months, while he intended to use the bar to open an account with Heaven's Eye that was more immediately available, so he wouldn't have to come back to open this vault every time he needed more coin.

Leon took one last look back at the vault as he left, letting a small smile appear on his face.

The Tower Lord was still waiting when Leon emerged from the vault, about half an hour after he had entered.

"Everything was to your satisfaction, I trust?" he asked, and Leon nodded in response. "Wonderful!"

"... There is something else I would like to speak with you about, Tower Lord."

The Tower Lord smiled jovially, and said, "Please, call me Ajax. Your grandfather and I were friends, after all, and I hope we can be friends as well."

"Right..." Leon felt more than a little awkward at that statement, but he continued regardless. "I would like to open a more traditional banking account with Heaven's Eye. This will be my deposit." With that, he placed his gold bar on a nearby table. "And, I would prefer that everything we do be done with the highest level of discretion. I hope you can understand."

"Of course. The loss of your family was a tragedy, and I understand the need for... subtlety. No need to fear, Leon, I will personally ensure that as few people know about you as possible!"

The two men sat back down, while the Tower Lord waved his hand, causing a small stack of papers to appear on the table in front of them.

"First things first, we'll need your ID papers." Leon frowned at this, which Ajax noticed. "I take it, then, that you don't have your papers?"

"I d—" Leon was about to answer that he did have his papers, but he had an instinctive aversion towards using them, but the Tower Lord interrupted him before he finished.

"—Because if you don't, we at Heaven's Eye have the power to issue you a new ID. It won't be the same as what the nobles here use, but they are perfectly acceptable in this Kingdom." Ajax then waved his hand again, causing a few more papers to appear on the table. "Just write down the name you wish to go by, and I'll have a new ID made for you."

Leon cracked a small smile, understanding what Ajax was saying. He pulled the papers closer and took a look at them. From what he could tell, he only needed to write down his name, and the rest would be done by Heaven's Eye. He quickly wrote down his first name, unwilling to abandon it despite his name being known in the Kingdom. It was his last name that gave him pause. He hadn't given it much

thought as to what he should call himself in front of other people, so he sat and thought for several moments before Ajax spoke up.

"It seems fairly obvious that you have come here from one of the Northern Vales..." he looked meaningfully at Leon's silkgrass shirt, relatively long hair, and Snow Lion coat. "... and whenever one of the Valemén comes down south, they are always given a name that indicates where they have come from. For instance, the Brown Bear Tribesmen, who control the only vale connected to the Great Plateau, would be named 'Urs', 'Ursus', or 'Ursine', when issued their IDs. You might find that going by that name to be unpleasant, but it could also help you to avoid further scrutiny if people assume you to be nothing more than a barbarian."

Leon nodded. He had told Charles that he was from the Northern Vales, so it would be far easier to continue with that story given that it was true, even if he did omit a few key details. He wrote Ursus down for his last name and handed that form back to the Tower Lord, who accepted it with a smile. He glanced at the form, then rose and made for the door. He sent Elise to get the ID made, and she was back within ten minutes, by which time Leon was already done filling out the rest of the forms, so Ajax sent her off again, much to her relative frustration.

"So, with all that done, you'll be using this gold talent as your deposit?" The Tower Lord gestured at the gold bar, and Leon nodded in response. "Ok, this will put your account at about six million silver coins."

Leon's eyes widened when Ajax said that.

'Six million for a single damned bar?!' he silently shouted. His eyes flickered back to the large vault, still sitting in the room, knowing that a hundred more bars were waiting for him in there, utterly dwarfing the silver that shared the space.

After giving Leon a few minutes to process this, the Tower Lord spoke up. "Do you plan on staying here in Teira, Leon?"

Leon didn't immediately answer. Ajax didn't mind, though, he was just making small talk, and was starting to get used to Leon's usual silence.

But it was still a compelling question for Leon. He'd been intending on joining the Knight Academy down in the capital, but he had to admit that knowing someone like Elise was here in Teira, he was tempted to stay.

But it was only a temptation. He had answers and revenge to seek, and he wouldn't find either in this city.

"I think I'll be heading for the capital," Leon reluctantly said. "My intent is to join the Knight Academy."

"Ah, an honorable goal," Ajax said. "We also have a Tower in the capital, and if you do find yourself in need of our service, feel free to stop by. My sister is the Tower Lord there, she runs a tight ship and will have you sorted out in no time. Should you ever require exotic materials, weapons, armor, and enchantments, then look no further. We also have branch offices in most major cities across not only the Kingdom, but the entire continent, so you'll never be too far from assistance should you require it."

As Ajax said this, Elise returned with Leon's new ID in hand. It wasn't anything special at first glance, but it had many of the same enchantments placed upon it as the account cards, verifying the holder's

identity. All Leon would have to do to show that he was the proper holder of the ID was to activate a simple light enchantment, and the borders of the ID would flash green. As the enchantment was tied to the blood sample he gave Heaven's Eye earlier, no one else would be able to activate this enchantment.

More than a few kingdoms were extraordinarily jealous of how skilled the Heaven's Eye Guild was at enchanting, as creating these kinds of IDs was beyond them. There was even some speculation that such techniques were unknown even to the four Central Empires, though it was hard to say for sure, as the empires were in no hurry to clarify something like this.

After handing Leon his new ID, Elise hovered for a moment, hoping to have something a bit more to do now instead of being relegated to courier. However, before she could say anything, Leon rose to his feet, his business with Heaven's Eye effectively concluded.

"Well, Leon, should you ever need our services again, don't hesitate to come back," Ajax said as he and Elise escorted Leon across the room. As they passed the vault, he made a subtle hand gesture, and it began sinking back into the floor. It would only take five minutes or so for the vault to sink through the entire tower and back underground, where all the other vaults were kept.

"Yes, we'll do *everything* we can to ensure that your needs are met!" Elise enthusiastically said as she lightly took Leon by the arm. Leon's cheeks reddened, but he made no attempts to get her off of him.

Before reaching the door, however, something seemed to occur to Leon, because he stopped and looked at the Tower Lord, his embarrassment quickly vanishing from his face, replaced by a stern seriousness.

"There is... something *else* you could help me with..."

"Please, say it, and I'll do my best to make it so!"

"Not long ago, a Paladin came through here, I think 'Roland' was his name? He lost a man-at-arms..."

"Ah, yes. Sir Roland is a good man, and I hope his missing man is found. Even now, the city guard is still tearing the city apart looking for him."

"What was the name of this missing man-at-arms?"

Ajax was curious about why Leon would want to know this, though he knew that asking would probably be pointless, judging by the look in Leon's eyes and the mild thread of killing intent that wound its way through his aura. He was a bit worried about the young grandson of his late friend, but he eventually decided that he needn't pry into Leon's business.

"His name was Adrianos Isynos."

"Adrianos Isynos..." Leon muttered. He didn't say anything else and walked the last few steps to the door.

'Adrianos Isynos...'

Elise glanced back at the Tower Lord with a questioning look, but he almost imperceptibly shook his head, discouraging any inquiries. She scowled, then hurried after Leon, taking his arm again as he left

the room. However, unlike the other times she'd gotten so close to him, Leon barely seemed to notice, lost as he was in his thoughts.

'Adrianos Isynos...'

This name echoed in his mind, and his thoughts turned back to the team that had assaulted his home and left his father mortally wounded. It was all he could do to restrain his killing intent and keep quiet.

'Adrianos Isynos...'

He had his first real thread to follow, something to go on more concrete than just 'one of Roland's men-at-arms'.

The lift doors opened, and Leon immediately stepped out into the entrance lounge. He made a cursory inspection of all his things, making sure that he hadn't left anything behind. He had his gold card and his new ID, so he made to leave. He didn't notice any of the stares from the other patrons, the glares of disgust at his clothing style, or the occasional envious gaze from having such a beautiful attendant on his arm.

Elise finally released him at the door, giving him a glowing smile which he returned as best as he was able. Without anything more to say, he said his goodbyes, and left, hoping he'd get the opportunity to see her again. But soon, pleasant thoughts about Elise were driven from his mind as that name resounded in his mind once again.

'Adrianos Isynos...'

No matter what was to come next, he knew that it was a name he'd never forget.

Chapter 50: On to the Inn

"Leon!" Charles, who was still waiting outside of the bank, noticed Leon walk out, and approached once Leon and Elise said their goodbyes.

Leon saw Charles run up to him and collected himself. He had gone a little out of sorts after learning Adrianos' name, so he clamped down on his emotions as best as he could.

"Charles," he said, his tone giving nothing away.

"So, did you get everything done that you needed to?" Charles was bursting with questions for Leon, especially about what business a Valeman could have with such a large bank, but he kept his mouth shut when he saw Leon again.

"Yes."

"Ok... um, on to the inn?"

Leon still had his five thousand silvers in his pack, and for a brief moment was tempted to find an inn somewhere other than in the slums, but he thought better of it. *'Best not to make a scene, keep things low-key...'* he thought. So he nodded to Charles, and they set off back to the slums.

Elise and the Tower Lord watched Leon walk down the street from a window in the Tower Lord's office. The window hadn't been there earlier, but the office had hundreds, perhaps even a few thousand convenience enchantments woven into it. Ajax could turn a wall in his office into a transparent window almost at will.

"You seem to have taken a liking for that one. Finally find someone who caught your eye?" the Tower Lord asked teasingly.

"Oh? What gave it away?" Elise asked, genuinely confused as to how he knew. Any trace of playful seduction in her demeanor was gone, replaced only with a mildly relaxed business-like attitude.

"What *didn't* give it away? You're usually far more aloof to our guests, I don't think I've *ever* seen you approach one of your own will! But you were practically all over young Leon!"

"Well, it's rare to see someone so young yet so strong. Even rarer to see someone with that kind of power not trying to flaunt it or to show off."

"Not for you. How many balls and parties did my sister throw for you back in the capital, trying to find you a match? I'm sure you've met at least half the nobles in the capital. Undoubtedly there were more than a few who were possessed of comparable strength with a pleasant attitude." Ajax glanced over at Elise.

"You'd be wrong, and besides, there were none who also held a gold card and had a name like 'Leon Raime'," she said with a mischievous smile. "Besides, all those boys my mother introduced me to were strong, impeccably dressed, well-mannered, and mind-numbingly *boring*. But Leon... he was quiet and unassuming, not drawing much attention to himself, but all that vanished when you said his name. I was intrigued before, but he gave no prior impressions that indicated he could be so *decisive*. Truth be told, I was starting to think him just as boring as everyone else until that happened. He was ready to fight despite your obvious power, of that I have no doubt. And yet, he's still so *innocent*! It makes me want to tease him even more, have some more fun with him..."

"Be careful, Butterfly. He's still a Raime, so he'll have his fair share of enemies. I'd hate to see you get hurt or worse by whoever attacked his family."

"I'm willing to take the chance," she replied. "I'd rather take the chance that Leon will prove himself a better man than most other nobles I know than settle for someone who thinks of no one but himself."

Ajax nodded, understanding that she was still young, barely even twenty years old, and hadn't even had a single boyfriend before. She felt like she needed someone different and unique, and compared to most of the nobles she'd been introduced to, Leon fit that mold perfectly. Fortunately, Ajax had been left with a good impression of the young man, and he didn't think it necessary to further warn Elise away from him. She was old enough to make her own choices and to take her own risks.

"Uncle, I'm going to return to the capital."

Ajax looked back at his niece, his eyebrow rising in intrigue. "Gotten bored of this place already, eh? Finally ready to go home? About damn time I say, my sister has been sending me messages almost weekly demanding that I give her news about you."

Elise sighed. She loved her mother, but she could be a little stifling and overenthusiastic in her support of Elise. Case in point, the dozens of parties she threw for her daughter to meet the eligible men in the capital. It was too much, and by the time Elise was eighteen—two years after coming of age—she needed to get the hells out of the capital.

It had been two years since then, but until now, she hadn't been quite ready to go home. She glanced out the window again, but the reason she was going home had vanished from sight. As a sixteen-year-old third-tier mage with an illustrious name and a gold card, Leon was the first man she had met that she felt even came close to meeting her very high standards, so she wanted to keep an eye on him. Even better, he was cute, adorable in his innocence, and he had great potential. She wanted to be as close to him as possible, to watch him grow and see if her interest could lead anywhere, and the only way to do that was to follow him back to the capital.

"Oh, by the way, you'll be coming home to another step-father, my sister has taken another husband," Ajax said with some slight embarrassment.

Elise resisted the urge to facepalm. As a Tower Lord, it was legal for her mother to have a harem, but she was always so flippant and casual about it. By Elise's relatively outdated count, this would make her thirty-fifth step-father, not to mention her mother always takes three additional concubines for every new husband.

"Whatever. Let my mother do as she will. I may have to look into getting a private place, though, a place where she can't bother me about starting a harem of my own."

—

The inn Charles brought Leon to was about as Leon expected from seeing the rest of the slums. Made primarily of wood, but with a foundation of stone, and no enchantments powerful enough that he could sense their presence. That didn't mean they didn't exist, for the kitchen would have to have an ice room, though such things were so simple and cost so little magic power that they weren't easily perceivable in a place as abundant with magic power as the great city of Teira. Ice rooms were basically the same as the ice shack Leon and Artorias had in the Forest of Black and White, just a large room with a few carved ice runes that kept the place below freezing.

The innkeeper behind the counter by the entrance was an older man, perhaps in his fifties, and barely a first-tier mage. Even without advanced breathing techniques, any commoner's lungs would adapt to the magic in the environment given time. Most would never see the second-tier without proper instruction and training, though.

"Hey there, Pops, I found you a customer!" Charles' unabashed sociability kicked in, talking loudly and waving to the surly innkeeper. The innkeeper himself just glared at Charles, but otherwise ignored him.

"What do you got?" Leon asked, his tone subdued even by his standards.

"A bed in a group room for twenty silvers, or a room all to yourself for fifty," the innkeeper replied, appreciating Leon's quiet and businesslike demeanor, in extreme contrast to Charles.

"And food?" The first floor was taken up by a number of tables, chairs, and a bar, so Leon knew that this place would have something to eat.

“Dinner in an hour, breakfast around an hour after sunrise.”

“Got it.” Leon counted out fifty silvers, and the innkeeper gave him a key.

“Third floor, end of the hall.” Leon stoically nodded to the innkeeper, who stoically nodded back.

Leon made for the stairs, with Charles just behind.

“Nice, a single room! I have to make do with a bed in a group room, sharing with five other people!”

“Hey, Charles, how secure would you call this inn? Are there problems with theft and break-ins?”

“Oh, no, not at all! This place has some good beer for a very cheap price, so many of the younger guardsmen come here to drink and relax. No one messes with a bar favored by the Guard.”

Leon nodded in acknowledgment. The two soon climbed the stairs to the third floor, and Leon saw that there were only about ten rooms here, compared to the twenty he saw on the second floor.

When the two arrived at the door at the end of the hall, Leon turned to Charles and said, “It’s been a very long day. I’m going to rest for a bit here, but I’ll be down for dinner.”

“Alright! I’ll meet you there!” And with that, Charles bounded back down the stairs so enthusiastically that he kind of reminded Leon of a puppy.

Leon unlocked the door and pushed it open. There wasn’t much to say about the room—a bed, a table, three chairs, a couch, and a fireplace. There was a door leading to a bathroom, and Leon found a toilet and shower with functioning water runes, and though they weren’t all that powerful, he was still very pleasantly surprised. He immediately dropped his pack on the bed, closed and locked the door, then took a shower.

Ice shacks and utilities powered with water and ice runes were required by the royal government, so even the most run-down inns and houses would have running water and a place to store and preserve food. But, of course, places like this inn wouldn’t have nearly the same level of care put into their construction as in the wealthier districts, so the shower Leon took was cold and the water pressure was lacking, but he got clean. Since he was a third-tier mage and had little reason to sweat, he didn’t stink, but he still felt dirty, and even a cold shower left him feeling refreshed.

As he cleaned himself, he kept replaying the day’s events in his mind. Most prominent in his thoughts was the name Adrianos Isynos and what it might lead him to, but the more he stood beneath the water, the more his thoughts began to drift. Elise kept popping up in his mind, with her fire-red hair, her flirtatious demeanor, her confidence, her almost unbelievable beauty. If there was going to be any single reason for Leon to stay in Teira, it would’ve been her, but Leon hadn’t the temperament to stay in the city for a girl, even one as gorgeous as her.

After a few more minutes, Leon found himself thinking about Ajax. The Tower Lord was an old man, old enough to have apparently been friends with Leon’s grandfather. Leon already regretted leaving the Tower so soon, since now that he had some time to think about everything, he wished he’d asked Ajax more questions about his family. He knew next to nothing about House Raime save for what Artorias had deemed worthy to relay, which was quite possibly the only thing that Leon resented his father for.

Leon could understand and sympathize, but now that he realized he'd passed on a perfect opportunity to learn more about his family, he couldn't help but kick himself.

It wasn't a big enough reason to go back to the Tower before he left, at least unless something more important came up, but Leon had a strange feeling that he was going to come back to Teira one day. As his thoughts drifted back in Elise's direction, he couldn't help but smile and hoped he could find an excuse that wouldn't embarrass himself soon.

'Maybe I'll find one after searching that palace...' Leon thought to himself, practically salivating at the thought of looking around his family's old palace. He'd have to find a way to break in, but he was not about to leave the city without at least *trying* to get inside those ruins. *'After dinner...'* he thought as his stomach began rumbling.

Eventually, he left the shower, dressed, secured his blade around his waist, and left the room. He kept all of his papers, bank cards, and IDs in his pockets, but left everything else locked away in his room. The door and lock were sturdy, so he wasn't too concerned.

Charles was waiting for him down in the dining area. As usual, Charles talked Leon's ear off with stories from the mining town he grew up in, and Leon just listened and watched the other two dozen or so people in the inn.

Something that interested Leon was a group of off-duty guards loudly complaining at the bar.

"Why d' we have ta help in 'is search?! I's the Paladin's guy, let the damned Paladin find 'im!" one man drunkenly shouted.

Another, slightly more sober guardsman responded. "It's precisely because he's the Paladin's man that everyone's gotta help. 'Sides, the paladin himself has other duties, so he can't search with us."

"Oh, horse shit! The fucker was last seen in the Exarch's place, so he either went AWOL or he got snatched by some dickhead noble. No use haltin' half the patrols in the city to find this guy, 'specially when we got hundreds of other missin' people to keep an eye out for."

"Well, boss says jump, we gotta jump..."

"Damned assholes. All of 'em, assholes..."

Leon soon stopped listening to them, as they just turned the focus of their complaints from the search for Adrianos to their boss. Leon didn't really overhear much, anyways, but he was at least willing to bet on Roland not being involved in his father's death.

After paying a few silvers each for dinner, Charles intended to talk to some of the ladies at the bar, but Leon stopped him first.

"Listen, think you could show me around a bit tomorrow?"

Charles looked a little hesitant. He guided Leon around today because he was grateful to him for saving his hide from the thugs, but he couldn't just stop his job hunt for him. Fortunately, Leon noticed his hesitation.

"I can pay one hundred silvers for your time. I just need to find a good tailor and a barber." Leon had been in the city for a while now, and he was well aware that he stuck out like a sore thumb thanks to his clothes and long hair, so he intended to change that.

Charles' eyes lit up when Leon mentioned payment, but he restrained himself from immediately accepting. "A hundred coins for just *that*? Of course, but are you sure? You could buy a much better guide for that money."

Leon frowned. Talking to Charles was difficult enough, he wasn't willing to meet *another* new person. "Well, if you feel that I'm not asking enough, I suppose you could show me a bookstore or two, preferably those stocked with enchantment textbooks."

Charles' eyes practically gleamed with the promise of a job, even one that was temporary.

"Of course!" he said enthusiastically, staring at Leon like the younger man was his savior.

The two made plans to head out again after breakfast, and Leon made for his room while Charles swaggered over to the bar, the promise of coin putting some confidence into his step.

When he returned to his room, Leon's eyes found the window, through which he could catch a few tiny glimpses the distant ruins of Teira's palace from between the block apartments of the slums. He quickly locked the door behind him and barred it by jamming a chair under the doorknob. He then rummaged around in his pack for a minute or two and retrieved a pair of maps. One was the map of the city and the other was his map of the old palace. The main entrances to the old Raime palace may be locked down now, but he still had methods to access the estate.

The map of the palace grounds had no less than five secret tunnels leading to various places around the city, with several access points per tunnel. Leon cross-referenced with the city map to find the closest access point and hoped that the tunnels hadn't been discovered in the years since the fall of his House.

Leon glanced out of his window again. The sun had fallen, so the sky was dark, but the main streets were still bright from the numerous magic lanterns that filled the city. There weren't so many here in the slums, but he could see the luminous glow from the southern districts with ease. The city was still so bright, in fact, that Leon could only make out the brightest of the stars that he had been able to see up north.

Leon leaned back on the couch, intending to relax for several more hours, giving everyone still on the streets the chance to get tired and go home, when he heard a voice in his head.

[Leon.]

[Xaphan! You've been pretty quiet, what's up?]

[It looks like you've got some time, so let's talk. There are some important things we should discuss...]