

Storm King 451

Chapter 451: Blinding Fury

Duronius lunged forward, his lance rocketing towards Leon. Leon dodged with a swift side-step, then sprang toward the Duke. His lightning magic allowed him to close the distance, but his blade slid off the Duke's armor. That wasn't enough to make Leon give up, though, and instead of pulling back to make another strike, he kept moving forward and threw his shoulder into the older man.

Duronius was elderly, closing in on three centuries old. But he was a sixth-tier mage, and for all the accumulated aches and pains of his life, he wasn't yet crippled by age-related infirmities and had the combined experience of all those years to back him up. He stood strong against Leon's shoulder check, but with Leon now too close for him to use his lance properly, he recalled the weapon into his soul realm and began grappling with the younger man.

Their fight became a messy tangle of limbs for the next few seconds, in which Duronius had the advantage. Lightning magic gave Leon unparalleled speed and explosive magical power, but in terms of sheer physical might, nothing could hold a candle to earth magic, of which Duronius was a practitioner. Leon's attempts to lock down his limbs ended in failure as Duronius simply overpowered him at every turn.

To Leon, it felt a lot like Duronius wasn't taking their fight seriously, and that was infuriating. With another blast of lightning, Leon threw Duronius back and regained a bit of distance, which he then used to re-engage with his blade. He'd learned in these few exchanges that he wasn't going to beat the man in a hand-to-hand duel, so he'd have to rely upon his skills with the blade and the magical arts.

His lightning strike did little damage to the Duke, but his follow-up stab bit into the Duke's forearm where his gauntlet met his pauldron, slicing through the mail and cloth padding beneath. Leon withdrew the blade before Duronius could counter, and he was gratified to see blood wetting the end of his blade, but only a moment later a rock spike burst from the ground behind him and slammed into his back. His armor held, but all the wind was knocked from him again, and he was thrown almost into Duronius' arms.

"Idiot boy!" Duronius bellowed as he grabbed Leon by the shoulders and lifted him into the air. Leon fired off a burst of lightning, succeeding in getting the Duke to let him go, but he landed hard enough that Duronius was able to kick him in the chest, hurling him back a dozen feet.

A moment later, Duronius conjured a mace from his soul realm, a weapon that Leon's armor would have a hard time defending against. What was worse, it pulsed with earth runes, causing the metal to subtly warp and twist and create vicious flanges along the mace head, making it just that much more deadly.

Duronius roared, "Something so rude and uncouth as *you* ought to be lanced, but since you've festered long enough to develop a hard shell, I suppose I'm just going to pop you like a blister!" With that, Duronius launched himself at Leon using the stone beneath his feet, almost like a rock from a catapult.

Leon was still too stunned from the repeated blows to the chest, and so he couldn't react with quite as much alacrity as he would've otherwise. He was still able to raise his blade and block, but the force carried by Duronius' mace was tremendous, causing him to almost drop his sword. Duronius' follow-up swing forced him back again.

For the next few seconds, Leon focused on dodging. He'd learned that he wasn't stronger than Duronius and that trying to fight him in a straight fight would only end with his loss.

"You know," Duronius began between swings as Leon danced around him, not quite finding a good window to attack that he judged would be worth it, "I can't help but be disappointed! I expected a barbarian to be tougher! I especially expected someone I've heard so much about to be more than *this*!"

Leon ignored him. Duronius' rantings about him meant nothing. At first.

"But I suppose I should hardly be surprised! You were one of Trajan's little soldiers, weren't you?!"

Duronius' mace finally clipped Leon, sending him sprawling across the ground, only to slam into a stone wall that Duronius conjured that immediately bent and locked Leon in place.

"I hated that sanctimonious ass from the first moment I met him," Duronius mumbled. "Always trying to pass judgment as if he were better than us. He may have been a Prince, but that means nothing! He ruled nothing, his title was empty as his ideals! Who was he to judge *me*?!" The Duke suddenly stopped himself and took a breath as Leon fought against the stone that restrained him. Leon didn't care what Duronius said about him, but his comments about Trajan were starting to make his blood boil—a sentiment that began to seem more and more literal with every second that passed.

He felt a heat start to spread from his chest, a terrible, scorching heat that had his heart beating like it wanted to break free from its bony prison. Leon's wrath grew in proportion to this heat, though whether it was causing it or was caused by it, he couldn't say—this was no time for the kind of self-reflection that getting to the bottom of it required.

After clearing his throat, Duronius, looking almost embarrassed from his outburst, continued with the kind of light and breezy tone that was at complete odds with the battle raging all around them, "I'll just send you to him, then. A worthless savage and the Prince that preferred his company to civilized men. You two were made for each other."

Duronius stepped forward and raised his mace, clearly intending to bring it down upon Leon's helmeted head.

But then, Leon practically exploded in fire, causing the Duke to reel back in surprise and primal terror. Fire poured from Leon's body as if he were trying to emulate Xaphan, incinerating most of his armor's Skyflax padding and overwhelming the complex fire enchantments in his armor.

But Leon wasn't entirely aware of this happening. He was simply furious, and his magic power resonated within, and power began to erupt out of his soul realm like ash from a volcano. All of this power buried his senses until he was operating on an almost detached level, still in control but not quite seeing reality, not emotionally aware of what was happening to him.

His fury never left, though. In fact, it was stronger than ever. The only coherent thoughts in his head were that Duronius had to pay in blood for his comments about Trajan and that Leon couldn't die mere hours after Lapis and the rest of the giants had sacrificed themselves for him.

He wouldn't fall here. He *couldn't*. Not before he found Naiad; not before he saw Elise again; not before he finally dealt with Valeria, her family, and 'Lord Kamran'.

With a titanic roar, Leon shattered the stone holding him down and stood back up, sword in hand, fire streaming from the gaps in his armor. Around the core of his flaming blade was a hint of black, a candle-shaped shadow within the bright orange flame that was almost unnoticeable.

Duronius had never seen anything like this before, but he barely had the time to take a single step back before Leon swung his blade and launched a wave of fire surging toward the Duke. It was too wide to dodge, so Duronius summoned a wall of stone to protect himself. He just barely managed to get it formed in time, but Leon's fire spilled over the edges and licked at his armor. The heat of the attack was scorching, even to the sixth-tier Duke, and he could feel his skin being seared and some of his silver hair burning, though neither were debilitating injuries.

A moment later, Leon appeared on Duronius' left and extended his left arm, letting loose with a blast of fire that Duronius managed to block once more with a stone wall. This time, Duronius made the wall a little bigger and a little thicker to help block the flames, leaving him relatively unscathed.

He then turned to his left, expecting Leon to appear again to launch another blast of fire, but instead, a moment later something hit his wall of stone with enough force to send cracks spiderwebbing all over its surface. For a brief moment, Duronius felt a satisfied glee and he called upon his magic to repair and reinforce the wall, but then a reddish glow appeared in the cracks and the wall exploded into fiery bits. Duronius was showered with searing-hot and even melted stone.

The Duke screamed in pain as Leon's fire enveloped him and completely obscured his vision. He circulated his magic, desperately fighting off Leon's magic power that sought to break through his defenses and ravage his body, while at the same time he threw himself back, trying to get clear of the fire.

After taking a few steps, he spared just enough power to cause half a dozen rock spikes to appear from the ground within the flames. A second later, the fire cleared, revealing the stone spikes impaling nothing but empty air. There wasn't even a hint of blood to be found.

Then, with a clap of thunder, Leon appeared behind the Duke, his body no longer covered in flames, but instead with blindingly bright silver-blue lightning dancing across his battered armor. With a flash of light, Leon's blade bit into the gap in Duronius' armor behind his knee, easily drawing blood and sending this peculiar lightning surging into the Duke's body.

Duronius felt his body seize up as pain became his entire existence. He felt nothing but the excruciating sensation of Leon's lightning tearing his leg apart from the hip down, but after a few seconds, his earth magic managed to suppress it.

By then, however, Leon had already grabbed Duronius' dominant arm and squeezed, bending many of the overlapping metal plates that formed the gauntlet and letting his lightning magic flow into the Duke's arm. Much of it was blocked by the armor's defensive enchantments, but enough got through that Duronius' arm locked and he shrieked again in pain.

At this point, any trace of the cocky and arrogant noble was gone, replaced only with pain and desperation. It was such a sudden reversal that Duronius couldn't comprehend it. It was utterly lost on him as his fight-or-flight instincts kicked in.

But before he could do anything, Leon pulled back and conjured a silver-blue bolt of lightning in his left hand, then slammed it into the Duke like he was thrusting with a spear.

The lightning exploded across the Duke's armor, charring it black, destroying many of its enchantments, burning his torso, and throwing him back like he was something fished out one of the surrounding swamps. Duronius hit the ground hard enough to bounce back up, then roll for another few dozen feet.

By now, their fight had attracted a great deal of attention, and seeing their Lord in such a state, four high-ranking knights and a noble that Leon couldn't identify ran forward to stand between Leon and the Duke; all were sixth-tier.

That meant nothing to Leon in his current state, and before any of these newcomers could blink, he was upon them.

His first target was the one with the weakest aura, relatively speaking. He seemed like a light mage, but Leon wasn't able to verify that before his blade slid beneath the rim of the knight's helmet and sliced clean through his throat.

"NO!" shouted the knight standing next to them, and with a wave, he conjured a wall of ice spikes that rocketed forth to impale Leon.

With a clap of thunder and a flash of silver-blue light, Leon vanished, reappearing next to the knight. He slammed his gauntleted fist into the knight's faceplate, creating an explosion of silver-blue lightning powerful enough to break the knight's neck with the impact. It was an instant kill, despite the knight's towering aura and magic power flowing through his body. None of it, not even his lightly enchanted armor, was able to stand against Leon's potent lightning.

"GET HIS GRACE!" screamed the noble as he lunged forward, his spear perfectly placed to penetrate the small gap in Leon's armor at his armpit.

But, as before, Leon dodged with an accompanying thunderclap that left the noble deafened, then practically vanished and reappeared in front of him, his Adamant metal blade stabbing into the noble's midsection. The force of Leon's strike had his sword piercing clean through the noble's plate armor, underlying mail, and gambeson padding.

The noble dropped, his body unable to deal with the amount of silver-blue lightning that Leon poured into him. His body convulsed, his eyes turned red as his veins ruptured, and his muscles seized up, causing him to curl up into the fetal position.

The remaining two knights, having just watched three of their comrades be taken out in a matter of seconds despite their power, realized that if they continued to stand against Leon—whose terrifying aura barely seemed weakened at all by his exertions—they'd be dispatched just as quickly.

So they didn't. Instead, they turned and used every available drop of mana they had in their bodies to reach the collapsed Duronius as quickly as they could, picked him up between them, and began carrying him away from Leon.

Leon almost gave chase. It would've been so easy, especially with the sheer amount of power flowing through him. But something distracted him—a shout, one made by a feminine voice and full of distress.

That one cry managed to pierce Leon's furious haze, and he suddenly became aware of his surroundings again. His tunnel vision that had been so focused on Duronius and the other knights that had challenged him widened, and he took in the state of the battle that had been raging all around them.

Duronius may have been terribly injured and been carried away, but the cavalry charge he'd led had been extraordinarily successful, at least against the group that Leon had been leading. Most of the knights and men-at-arms that had fallen in with Leon earlier in the battle had been struck down, and few had managed to inflict serious casualties upon the Duke's heavily armored knights.

Leon's core group—Anzu, Valeria, Alix, Marcus, and Alcander—weren't doing much better. Alcander was injured, his left arm covered in blood that seeped out of his armor. Marcus' helmet had been knocked off his head, and he had a large gash along his cheek. Valeria and Anzu seemed to be doing relatively fine, but both were obviously tired, and their auras were flagging. Alix had been the one shouting at Leon, and as he took everything in, she kept calling out to him, shouting for help.

Leon grimaced, unable to abandon any of them, not even Valeria. Perhaps especially Valeria. There was no way he was going to leave them behind, not on the same day that he'd lost Lapis.

With one last regretful look at the retreating Duke Duronius and with the knowledge that he could catch the Duke right now if he were to choose to do so, Leon screamed in frustration, then launched himself into the air, landing like a bolt of lightning in front of his people and hurling back many of their assailants with silver-blue lightning. In doing so, he was letting the Duke get away, but he was more aware now than ever after the events of the day where his priorities ought to be.

With a few swings of his blade, Leon sent blasts of the Thunderbird's lightning careening into the ranks of Duronius' cavalry, killing horses and mutilating their riders. One errant blast even fried the corpse of Duronius' bull, which had been rather unceremoniously killed by Anzu.

Leon's show of power forced back Duronius' knights, but only for a moment. They surged back out again after a few seconds to steel their nerves.

But again, with a few blasts of lightning expelled from his blade, Leon inflicted serious casualties and forced the survivors back.

For a moment, it seemed like the knights would make another push. They certainly had the numbers to do so. Their charge had even broken through Leon's line in several other places, so it would've been easy to surround him and bring him down that way—theoretically, at least, but few of the knights were willing to test that theory out by being the first to charge again.

But then, any thoughts of doing so were dashed as horns sounded from the north. Through the camp came barreling dozens of Augustine horsemen, not as heavily armored as Duronius' knights, but more than armed and numerous enough to instill panic. Almost without pause, Duronius' knights began to fall back, and without Duronius there to stop them, that retreat quickly turned into a full rout as the Augustine forces hit them in the back.

Leon didn't join in. Instead, he stood there, in front of his people and between them and the retreating knights, appearing calm and collected and completely in control, but behind the face of his helmet, he was desperately gasping for breath as the strain of using so much power finally got the better of him.

“Leon!” Alix called out, sensing that something was wrong since Leon wasn’t pursuing their fleeing enemies, as was his wont. Anzu and Valeria, too, realized that fact and rushed forward. Anzu got there first and enveloped Leon in his wings.

Calling his helmet back into his soul realm revealed Leon’s terrible condition to the others. His face was pale and ashen gray—rather, those parts of his face that weren’t horribly burned were ashen gray. His eyes were bloodshot and unfocused, and after a moment of staring off after the retreating knights, he turned to look at Valeria as she ran forward, then collapsed without another word.

Anzu tried to catch him with his wings, but all he succeeded in doing was slowing Leon’s fall enough that Valeria was able to catch him. She pulled him in close, her new fifth-tier strength allowing her to hold the relatively tall, well-built, and armored Leon with ease. However, she still slowly sank to the ground under the weight of Anzu’s accusing stare, the albino griffin’s blood-red eyes glaring at her as she held Leon close.

She could feel the griffin’s killing intent and his silent demand to remove her hands from Leon’s body. She’d already tasted his wrath before, and she wasn’t eager to repeat the experience, despite now wearing her armor.

But then Alix, Marcus, and Alcander ran up, dissipating that tension as Alix got under one of Leon’s arms.

“Come on!” she shouted. “Let’s get him out of here!”

Valeria silently nodded, but after a moment of looking around, she looked back to Anzu.

“Get him on his griffin! Our horses are dead, but Anzu can get him out of here quicker than we can!”

“Right!” Alix agreed, and for just a moment, Valeria felt something that felt like approval coming from Anzu before the terrible naturally predatory expression returned to his avian face.

“What about... us...?” Marcus gasped, the day’s exertions finally catching up with him.

The eyes of the others turned to Valeria. She was still Leon’s second-in-command, after all, even if Marcus out-ranked, her socially.

She stared at Marcus for a moment wondering why he was leaving the decision to her, and after some thought, she said, “Let the others chase Duronius down. For us, the battle was over as soon as Leon collapsed.”

Marcus and Alcander glanced at the Augustine cavalry galloping past them with something that resembled regret, but in the end, they agreed with Valeria.

At the very least, even if they weren’t there to assist in striking the final blow, the battle had still been won. August’s main forces had been freed from the siege, and Duronius had been put to flight after taking devastating losses.

Chapter 452: Mind ‘Palace’

Leon dreamed of fire. He’d known several kinds in his short life, from the normal fires that he used to make back in the Northern Vales to cook with when he and Artorias spent the night away from their

compound, to magical fires made with runes or spells, and even the demonfire that he'd gained access to from his contract with Xaphan.

But he dreamt of none of these. Instead, his mind was filled with visions of black flame, a dark, shadowy fire so omnipresent that it was only by the heat and the light given off by the occasional dull red spark that he knew it was there.

That wasn't all, though. Within that flame he could sense... *something* watching him, *something* out there that was more powerful than anything he could fathom. Stronger even than the remnant of the Thunderbird that resided in his soul realm.

Within that thing's attention, Leon felt smaller than he'd ever felt. He'd been nearly killed on multiple occasions, but this powerlessness was something that even those experiences couldn't hold a candle to. Compared to whatever was out there, he was nothing.

He searched for whatever was out there. He felt as if he could only see it with his eyes, then some of its presence might be diminished, some of the terror that filled him now would disappear.

And then, within the flames, a light appeared. It was a strangely familiar red-orange light, shaped somewhat like an eye that had been turned ninety degrees, and exuded so much power that Leon was completely unable to focus on it. Behind that light lay something massive, something *moving*, but Leon could only see it in the corner of his eye, for the red-orange light obscured it almost completely.

Leon did his best to see past the light, to focus on the thing behind it, but it was difficult. He squinted, stared as hard as he could, tried channeling magic into his eyes, and for the briefest of moments, it worked. He saw scales as black as night that sparkled as if they contained all the stars in the sky, he saw four gigantic wings, the first pair slightly smaller than the second, and he saw three pairs of ivory horns curling back over a long scaled neck like a ribcage.

Then the light pulsed, and Leon saw no more. The flames disappeared, the light went out, and he fell.

—

Leon awoke, gasping, in his soul realm. His magic body was sprawled out across the marble tiles at the foot of his throne. His thoughts were still consumed by his vision of black fire, and it took a moment for him to realize where he was, and when he did, he simply lay his exhausted body back down on the cool marble. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply, ignoring everything else around him.

"You're finally awake," Xaphan observed, his deep, resonant voice grating on Leon's ears.

"No I'm not," Leon irritably replied.

"My mistake, I guess," Xaphan drily replied, "You're clearly talking in your sleep. Yes, that's what you're doing. Certainly not turning away from me as I speak, not a chance! That's just a coincidence! And holding your hands over your ears, that's exactly what sleeping people do!"

"All right, shut up! I'm awake Ancestors damn it!" Leon shouted.

"Of course you are," Xaphan smugly said.

Leon took a deep breath and sat up. He was momentarily surprised to see that the palace he'd worked so hard on for almost two years was nowhere to be seen, until he remembered that he'd torn it down completely with the intent to start over.

"Terrible time to have done that..." he muttered to himself, wishing that he'd at least saved a bed, for he was hardly in any mood to create one now, and he felt like it would do him some good to lay down in something comfortable. His magic body in his soul realm felt exactly like his physical form did in the outside world, and he could use some creature comforts.

"To have done what?" Xaphan inquired.

"Doesn't matter. Why'd you bother me? How long have I been out?"

"I'd say about three or four days. Time kind of blurs in this place, so it's hard to say for certain."

Leon sat back up, his physical and mental fatigue momentarily forgotten.

"Three or four *days*?!" he asked in shock. It had felt like barely even an hour since he'd been fighting Duke Duronius, and as he started to recall more of what he'd been doing before the vision, he started to panic and struggle to his feet, intending to collapse into his throne and return to the waking world.

"Don't overdo it, young human," Xaphan cautioned. "Your body is fine, it's currently resting in a room set aside for your use. That Paladin and little Princeling had your injuries seen to, but the healing hasn't been completed, yet. Probably better to stay here for a while and let your body rest. Shouldn't take too much longer, anyway."

Leon collapsed onto the stairs in front of his throne and stared back almost incredulously at his demonic partner. He didn't recall taking so many injuries... but then he remembered the strange fires that he summoned that scorched his body from within and without.

"Dear me, is that *concern* I hear in your voice, demon?" he asked, cocking an eyebrow in surprise and trying to refocus his attention on something else.

"It is," Xaphan readily replied, not a trace of playfulness or sarcasm to be found in his voice. "You called upon some strange powers before you lost consciousness, you know. I'm fairly sure you did it before following the death of that giant friend of yours, but I'd barely gotten a chance to notice before it stopped, so I'd thought it a figment of my imagination at the time. But now it's undeniable. You called upon something within you, something that even I've never seen before, let alone understand."

"I don't suppose you could be a little more specific?" Leon asked.

"No... something was blocking me from getting a more detailed look at... *whatever* you were doing..." Xaphan muttered.

"And you have no idea what it could be..." Leon asked.

"None."

"How about the Thunderbird? Any idea of her location?"

"Out in the Mists."

Leon stifled a groan as he pushed himself to his feet.

“What was it like on your end?” Xaphan asked. Leon was mildly surprised to hear genuine curiosity in his question.

“Remember not long after we first met and you said there was the possibility that I might have inherited some kind of power from my mother?”

“I do,” Xaphan admitted. “However, I’d since put it out of my mind. Didn’t seem like there was anything else here, especially after the Thunderbird made her presence known. Couldn’t ever imagine *that one* sharing this space. I figured you just inherited some kind of affinity for fire magic and nothing more. Nothing too special compared to what some ambitious families with penchants for experimentation can do to their families in the Nexus. Why? Have you discovered something to the contrary?”

“... Maybe... I was hoping to question the Thunderbird first, because... I’m not sure what I saw...”

Xaphan went silent as he contemplated the issue. Leon felt the demon’s power probe his soul realm a few times, concentrating mostly on the empty outskirts closer to the Mists of Chaos rather than the bare island that Leon had reverted his proto-Mind Palace to.

The silence was long enough for Leon to properly compose himself.

“So, you said that my body was injured?” he asked.

“It’s your own body, why don’t you tell me?” the demon replied.

Leon gave him a bitter smile and turned his attention to himself. Overall, he felt fine, but he figured that was because he was currently primarily inhabiting his magic body rather than his physical body. Still, they were connected, and it didn’t take too much concentration for Leon to get a good idea of how his physical body was doing.

For the most part, he felt dull pain and the itching that came with rapid healing. As a sixth-tier mage, his natural healing abilities were already quite robust, but if he were still healing even after several days, then his wounds must’ve been grave indeed.

“Well, it seems that I might be stuck here for a little while longer. Might as well use this time for something.”

With that, Leon took off, rising into the air above his island and rather unceremoniously leaving Xaphan sitting in his pavilion alone.

“Leaving just like that, huh?” Xaphan mumbled to himself. “That’s fine, I’ll just sit here by myself. No problem, really.”

Leon, however, heard none of that. Instead, he reached out into the Mists of Chaos with his will and grabbed a ‘handful’ of it. When he erased his previous Mind Palace, he’d come to the realization that he couldn’t plan out what his Mind Palace needed to be. Instead, he had to let it come to him in the moment, or rather, to let his instinct guide him.

And he'd just realized what he had to do first. He gathered up the enormous amount of requisite mist and let it fall upon the island. In but a moment, the plain of dirt and bare stone was transformed into a relatively more lush field of bright green grass.

But that wasn't enough, not by a long stretch.

Leon smiled and let his unconscious mind take over, letting his natural instincts do the work of painting the image that was forming in his mind.

The island was quite large, and huge swathes of grass began to change color. Some of it turned blue, some turned dull red, and some turned a vibrant shade of darker purple. It was one of these purple swatches that Leon surrounded the center of the island with.

Not stopping there, Leon continued with more vegetation. First were smaller bushes and flowers, all with brighter and more varied colors than would be seen just about anywhere in nature.

Then came the trees. Half of them had bark almost as black as obsidian, while the other half's bark was pale white. The darker trees had leaves brighter and greener than anything seen in the Bull Kingdom, while the lighter trees were even more alien, with leaves the same shade of dark blue as the sky in the last few moments before the sun set.

Once that was finished, Leon forced the island to expand. The stone and dirt at the edges burst outward, rapidly moving to the very edges of his soul realm. By this point, Leon had lost himself in the act of creation. He didn't even realize that as the island's edges approached the Mists of Chaos, the mists were being pushed back, causing his soul realm as a whole to rapidly expand, rather than just the island that would serve as his Mind Palace's foundation.

After a few minutes, the island began to feel right, so Leon ceased its expansion, but his eyes were closed, so he had no real idea of how big it had become. He simply 'grabbed' the edges of it with his will and began curling them up. These folds in the land then bent and wavered, splintered and broke apart, forming a ring of tall mountains around the thick forest that Leon had created.

With little more than another thought, he cut through this vale and created several long, deep rivers, one of which ended in a deep, dark, terribly foreboding lake.

Without opening his eyes, Leon turned his attention now to the area immediately around what remained of his old Mind Palace, that of his throne, the vault, the red and white tiles, the giants' tomb, and Xaphan's pavilion. First, he took the tomb and lifted it like it were nothing more than a paperweight. The massive tomb holding the remains of Lapis and ninety-nine other giants flew through the air like a piece of paper, covering miles in minutes. It came to rest in the shadow of the mountains far behind Leon's throne, which he had arbitrarily designated 'east'.

Next, Leon caused four great wooden walls to spring out of the ground around his throne and the rest. In the center of the walled off area was his throne, behind which sprang a huge four-sided granite obelisk capped with a pyramid and covered in runes. On the northern side, Leon put his vault, which quickly dissolved and immediately reformed into a wooden storage shed of considerable size. To the east went Xaphan's pavilion. In the south sprung forth an underground tunnel leading outside into the purple grass field, the entrance of which was surrounded by the red and white tiles.

Finally, in the west Leon willed into existence a small three room wooden cabin, whose layout was a perfect replica of the shack he'd grown up in. Behind the cabin was a small bath built in the manner of a hot spring.

His final touch were a few decorative plants and trees spread throughout the compound, giving himself a semblance of privacy which he then made more tangible with a series of stone rings buried in the ground that blocked magic senses surrounding both the compound as a whole and his cabin. He wasn't sure if the rings would work in his soul realm, but he figured it was better to try and it would make him feel better to have, which was far more important in these matters than actual *practical* concerns.

Still, he was not complete. He had one final touch to make before he could say that he was.

Over the tunnel entrance leading out of the compound, a pair of stone pillars shot straight up, then bent about thirty feet off the ground until they met in the middle, forming the perfect arched perch for the Thunderbird.

Only once that was complete did Leon open his eyes and survey his works. The compound, at least superficially, greatly resembled his childhood home. The forest outside, despite lacking the incredibly dangerous fauna, was a near-perfect replica of the ironically named Forest of Black and White.

With a smile on his face, Leon slowly descended down to the ground, and he stood on the edge of his throne's platform, using his magic senses to look out upon his creation.

And he felt... complete. He felt safe and comfortable. He felt like he'd returned home, even though he knew that the home he'd based it on was long gone.

His soul realm shuddered. The entire island shook as if some titanic being had taken it into its hand and thrown it through the air.

But Leon didn't panic. Not only was this *his* realm, where his word was law, he could feel that this wasn't a bad thing at all. In fact, it was quite possibly the best thing that could happen, full stop.

The edges of the Mists of Chaos had already been pushed back by his creation, but now they were receding like they were being repelled by something far more powerful. The light-emitting clouds that perpetually surrounded his Mind Palace fell away, leaving what appeared to be empty space, but in reality, was just more space that Leon's soul realm took up.

In just over a minute, Leon's soul realm had expanded to a mind-boggling ten miles in diameter. What was more, Leon could feel his physical body strengthening, his ability to hold magic power in his blood rapidly growing, and the connection his physical body shared with his soul realm being reinforced.

He could now store far more magic power in his soul realm than ever before. He could call upon more magic through his strengthened connection to his soul realm. He could use more powerful and more mana-intensive magic for longer periods of time with his greater ability to store that magic power in his blood.

He had just finished his Mind Palace and stepped into the realm of seventh-tier mages.

Chapter 453: Ancestry

Leon felt incredible. The expansion of his soul realm didn't directly immediately lead to new power—he'd still have to generate enough to fill that space from his bone marrow—but the reinforced connection his soul realm now possessed with his physical body meant that he could call upon more of his stored power than before. Even with his consciousness in his magic body, Leon could feel the magic power running through him.

It was euphoric.

Of course, a good amount of that euphoria was the simple knowledge that he'd finally ascended to the seventh-tier of magical power, coming within striking distance of the peak of power within the Bull Kingdom.

Coming within striking distance of enough power to challenge Justin Isynos. He wasn't there yet, but he was close. At the very least, he figured that he could now call upon Xaphan's power without risking serious injury, which in and of itself greatly increased his fighting potential.

Leon floated above the compound of his Mind Palace for a long time, simply basking in the glow of his achievement. He was now the same tier as his father, and he'd achieved it at the age of twenty, though there was still quite a sizable gulf between himself and where Artorias was when he was killed.

His revelry was short-lived, however, for soon he heard the sound of approaching thunder, and sure enough, the Thunderbird came flying out over his island, gleefully surveying all that she saw.

That sight alone put quite the damper on Leon's ecstatic mood and the knowledge that it did so only depressed him further. This should've been a time for celebration, but instead, he was only reminded of the Thunderbird's deceit. It fed on itself as he slowly dropped back down to the ground until, by the time his feet touched the marble tiles around his throne, he was truly in a foul mood. It was time to get some answers from his Ancestor.

"Wonderful! Wonderful!" the Thunderbird joyfully cawed as she circled his Mind Palace. "Stunning!"

She continued on like that for a little while longer, and when she was finished, she alighted onto the perch that Leon had created for her.

"Not going to lie, boy, that other Mind Palace certainly had its charm, but I like this one quite a bit more," she said appreciatively, staring down at Leon with pride, which only served to instill more terrible feelings in him. "More open, less stuffy, plenty of space to unfurl my wings..."

Xaphan's gaze flitted between the Thunderbird and Leon, the two at obvious extremes of emotion—the Thunderbird, joy, while Leon, anger and frustration. "Not that it's my place, but maybe you ought to quiet down for a second? Your descendent doesn't seem to be in quite the same mood as you..."

The Thunderbird glared at the demon and began to spread her wings, her aura growing in an obvious prelude to attacking the demon.

"He's not wrong," Leon quietly said, instantly redrawing the Thunderbird's attention as her avian head whipped back around and her aura faded.

"What...?" she asked in confusion.

Leon stood at the foot of his throne, calmly and seriously staring back at the Thunderbird. "... You lied to me, didn't you?" he said accusingly.

Leon went silent for a long moment after his question as the Thunderbird cocked her head back and forth.

"... I'm afraid that unless you provide more details, I won't know what you're talking about..." she replied.

"My mother," Leon said, willfully ignoring the implication that the Thunderbird had lied to him more than once. "You told me I inherited nothing from her."

"What of it?" the Thunderbird arrogantly countered.

"I've been told otherwise."

"By whom?"

"Valeria Isynos."

"And you trust her word over mine? Is it not her family that has been hounding yours?"

"Her word aligns with my own suspicions. So, yes, I trust it over yours."

The Thunderbird glared down at Leon, her eyes blazing with fury and lightning dancing across her rich, brown feathers. Leon had just gravely insulted her, and she was incensed by it.

But he wasn't wrong.

The Thunderbird suddenly transformed into her human form and leaped down to the ground right in front of Leon, close enough to invade his personal space and stare at him in the eye.

"*Anyone* else who impugned my honor as you have just done would be ash on the wind by now," she furiously growled.

Leon, undaunted, stood his ground, returning every ounce of antipathy he received with a glare of his own.

"*Anyone* else who lied to me as you did would likewise be ash," he calmly declared. "Now, *the truth*, if you please. Else, I'll start doubting everything you say, putting the restoration of your Clan at risk..."

"Threats will get you nowhere, boy, not when by your very existence you further my Clan..."

"Maybe I'll choose not to have kids?" Leon shot back. "I'm descended from you, and your power makes having children difficult under the best of conditions. I can't even fathom how difficult it'll be now that I know that there's something else in my blood. Maybe I just won't do anything to counteract that infertility. Your line will end with me, and all because you were too damn proud to admit that you *lied*!"

The Thunderbird almost called Leon on his bluff. But something stopped her. She averted her glare for the first time and blatantly stared out into the Mists, staring back at the eyes that she knew were upon her. She hated that the owner of those eyes had put her in this position through its arrogance and sense of superiority.

And yet, she also knew that she could've at any time told Leon the truth. And she never did, even going so far as to lie to his face when he asked about this issue.

Leon followed her gaze, but he neither saw nor sensed anything out there. Whatever she was looking at, she was the only one who could see it.

With a deep sigh that brought Leon's attention back to her, the Thunderbird took a couple of steps back.

"I'm dead, what need for pride do I have?" she murmured. She then turned to Leon and admitted, "Yes, I lied to you. You asked me to divulge a secret that wasn't mine, and I refused. If asked again, my answer would be the same."

"Even if asked now?" Leon sharply asked.

"Yes," she replied. "You know that something else is there, you'll find it on your own. But I'll not assist you in its uncovering."

Leon glared at her in anger and frustration. She *knew*, and she wasn't going to tell him.

"You've got to be fucking kidding," he mumbled, kicking a nearby stone into dust. "Tell me. It's my own damned power! What is it?!"

The Thunderbird stared at him for a long moment, silently thinking to herself. She wanted to stick with her original declaration, and she almost did just that, but the look in Leon's eye stopped her. She suddenly had the sinking feeling that the relationship she and Leon shared had probably undergone a radical change now that he'd picked up a few crumbs of the truth. If she continued to refuse, it might never recover.

Again, she glanced out into the Mists.

And shrugged.

"... I suppose..." she hesitantly began, "if he wants his secret kept, if he wants to continue to deny your existence... it's not my problem, is it?"

Leon said nothing, simply exuding pressure with his presence, silently demanding answers from her.

"It'll destroy whatever relationship I have with him... but I don't strictly need it..." the Thunderbird murmured to herself. After a long, thoughtful pause, she said without the slightest hint of ceremony or drama, "Very well, boy, I shall tell you. Your mother is a part of the Great Dragon Clan. Or was. Depends on if she's still alive."

Leon's eyebrows shot up into his hair, while Xaphan's fire sputtered and faded enough for his obsidian form to almost be visible within them.

"The... Great Dragons...?" the demon incredulously asked.

"Quiet, demon," the Thunderbird growled, glaring at Xaphan yet not retaliating in any other way.

Leon reeled for a moment, but he quickly recovered. It gelled well with his vision of black flame and the reptilian features he'd gotten a glimpse of.

“Dragon...” he murmured.

“Yes, and the Great Black Dragon in particular,” the Thunderbird further revealed. She then paused, giving Leon some time to process.

Leon stumbled back, almost falling into his throne. But he remained standing, and instead summoned a small ball of fire in his palm.

“I knew *something* was missing...” he whispered, staring into the depths of the flame yet seeing nothing out of the ordinary. “But this...? You said that the Great Black Dragon was the most powerful of all Divine Beasts, right?”

“I recall saying something to that effect,” the Thunderbird replied. “I also said that his power was about on par with mine, so don’t suddenly start thinking you’re invincible! Besides, given what he did to you, you probably can’t even consciously call upon his power...”

“What do you mean?” Leon demanded.

“The Great Dragon Clan was the first to figure out how to pass on their power in their human children, and as a result, they know the most about such things. I have no idea how he did it, but somehow, that pompous lizard prevented his power from fully awakening in you when you performed the ritual. But it is still there, which combined with your emotional state and rapidly increasing power has allowed you to call upon it recently in moments of great emotional distress.”

Leon glanced back at the fireball in his hand. It was true that no matter how hard he pushed, he couldn’t summon the same power that he felt in the fight with Duronius, and he was really trying to.

“Then how can I change that and what will I be able to do when I manage to?” he asked, not once for a moment laboring under the delusion that the power would remain forever out of his grasp.

“I don’t know if that’s entirely possible, but the Great Black Dragon was known for several things,” the Thunderbird explained. “The first was his most commonly used power, that being black fire. It is a terribly powerful weapon, one that can destroy just about anything, even some of the hardest and toughest and most magically powerful materials in existence, such as Titanstone or Celestial Crystals.”

Leon didn’t know what that meant, so he directly asked, “How did it stack up against your lightning?”

The Thunderbird paused and glared at Leon in annoyance, but she admitted, “In this one instance, my lightning at its peak didn’t compare favorably, but it didn’t *have* to. My lightning had—*has*—properties other than pure destruction, properties that can’t be defended against.”

“Like its ability to counter the mind-altering effects of darkness magic?” Leon asked.

“Exactly,” the Thunderbird said with pride. “The Great Black Dragon was known for his extremely destructive powers, and that was why he was revered as the most powerful of all his brothers. However, he was also a one-trick pony, so to speak. The rest of the progenitors of the Great Dragon Clan had skills and talents other than destruction, and so the clan was built upon them and their descendants. Great Black was only able to destroy, and so his descendants have usually been rather isolated within their Clan and only called upon in times of war.”

Leon grimaced, but he was more than excited at what was revealed anyway. He could think of quite a few uses for such destructive power... but there was more that he wanted to hear, first...

"You said that his fire was only his 'most commonly used power', indicating that there were more?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied. Her tone by now had gone from reluctant to almost reveling in the secrets she was revealing. Now that she'd gotten going, she was all-in and delighting in revealing secrets that she wasn't 'supposed' to be revealing. "Great Black was also known as the Dragon of Calamity, for he could destroy with more than just fire. He had a unique power, one that I'm afraid doesn't easily fit into any of the magical categories..."

"What does that mean?"

"Meaning it's certainly not fire, but I'm not sure what element to ascribe to it if an element can even *be* ascribed to it. As a being that was created by the birth of the universe itself, that power might be something *more* than elemental magic, something more akin to the reality-warping effects of more powerful Universe Fragments. I was never able to study it, nor was anyone else. Great Black was stingy with its use for perhaps that very reason. Anyway..."

As the Thunderbird paused, she began projecting an image of light nearby of a reptilian beast covered in shiny black scales, possessing two pairs of wings; vicious claws; a barbed tail; huge ivory spikes running down its spine; three pairs of horns that curled back protectively over its relatively thin neck; long, beak-like jaws; and on its head, three ominously glowing red eyes, two on the side of its head where Leon would expect them to be, and one massive eye more than twice the size of the others in the center of its huge ridged forehead. The central red-orange eye glowed so brightly that Leon suddenly realized that it was the light that had obscured the dragon's body from his sight in his previous visions of black flame.

The scale of the monster was off, with the projection only being about four feet long or so and maybe another two to three tall, but the detail in it gave the impression that it was supposed to be *much* larger than that.

His expression momentarily darkened as he was confronted with the unmistakable fact that his ancestor knew about him, they'd made *eye contact*, and the beast still never revealed itself to him... unless those visions *were* it revealing himself? Leon couldn't say for certain, but the emotion he eventually settled on was that of mild fury and more intense indignation.

"... this power had something to do with his central eye. In the rare times that it would open, it would pulse with light—maybe indicating what its element was? —and everything that its light touched would turn to dust."

"... Turn to dust?" Leon asked, unable to quite believe what the Thunderbird was saying.

"Yes," she replied, then began manipulating her light projection. "Like *this*..."

The dragon projection reared up onto its hind legs, curled in its wings to protect its exposed underbelly, and lowered its head until its central eye was aimed at the ground. Then, the red-orange light emitted by the eye magnified in intensity, then magnified again. A high-pitched whine filled the air, which grew strong enough for even Leon and his newly-ascended seventh-tier senses to feel uncomfortable.

At the same time, the Thunderbird projected a few boulders around, each about the size of the dragon's head, all of which just fell apart in the Great Black Dragon's light, disintegrating and scattering upon the wind in but a moment.

"Well..." Leon said in awe. "So... I could—"

"I doubt you'd be able to use such power," the Thunderbird said, cutting off the obvious question. "As far as I'm aware, none of Great Black's descendants ever inherited that power. It was his and his alone."

Leon frowned in disappointment. But black fire that could apparently destroy anything was exciting enough. There was just one problem.

"Do you have any ideas on how I might be able to awaken that power?" Leon asked.

"I'll think on it," the Thunderbird honestly replied. "The Great Black Dragon does have a presence here, no matter how much he wants to pretend you don't exist. I've consulted with him on several occasions, and while he doesn't always answer my questions, I have gotten some useful insight out of him regarding your desire to shapeshift."

Leon's eyes widened in excitement and he couldn't help but ask, "So, does that mean...?"

"I'm not even close to figuring that out, though progress has been made," she immediately replied. "Rest assured, boy, I'm not going to stop working on that. The problem is just incredibly complex."

"I don't suppose you've figured a way for me to... oh, I don't know... grow wings or something?" Leon asked, his tone hopeful.

"No," the Thunderbird unceremoniously replied.

"Damn. I suppose that's fine, I've waited this long, I can wait longer," Leon said, his tone not quite as hopeful as a moment ago but still quite upbeat. "I don't suppose you know more about my mother...?"

"No, and after having revealed all of this to you, I wouldn't count on Great Black humoring any further questions from me. And as I am now, I can't force any questions out of him. You'll have to ask someone like that silver-haired wench for that information if you want it."

Leon grimaced a bit from the Thunderbird's phrasing and the reminder that he and Valeria still had business to discuss, but he was also looking forward to getting more information on the subject.

"Is there anything else you're not telling me?" Leon asked her.

"Nothing immediately springs to mind," the Thunderbird said.

Leon stared at her for a long moment, his golden eyes searching for any sign of deceit. When he found none, he sighed and decided to let this one go. He wouldn't be forgetting the Thunderbird's lie anytime soon, but he did, in the end, get the information he was looking for.

"All right, then. I suppose that's something I'm going to have to keep in mind as I go forward..." Leon said mostly to himself. "Look for something that can awaken my blood further..."

"I shall redouble my efforts into researching ways to stimulate your blood to shapeshift," the Thunderbird responded. "As for your training..."

“I think I’m going to take a break from that for a while,” Leon replied. “Lots to process, and all that...”

The way Leon looked at the Thunderbird made it clear that this was more a consequence of the lie, but she was willing to accept it. This was her last living descendant, she could set aside her pride for just a little while when it came to him.

“Just call when you need me and I’ll be here,” she said, quickly transforming back into her avian form, taking off, and vanishing into the Mists ten miles distant, leaving Leon and Xaphan alone in his compound.

Neither human nor demon spoke for a long time. Leon just sat on the steps in front of his throne to think about what the Thunderbird had told him, and to get used to the idea of the Great Black Dragon that she’d talked up so much before was his ancestor. Hells, it was probably *why* she talked him up so much. Whatever the case, he was going to have to get Valeria to tell him everything she knew about his mother’s Clan—not that he wasn’t intending on doing so before, but now that desire for information had drastically increased.

He just wasn’t going to be asking the Thunderbird’s opinion on it anytime soon. Whatever he decided to do would be as free of her influence as he could make it. He was no longer angry with the Thunderbird, but that feeling of betrayal and the resulting lack of trust wasn’t just going to go away anytime soon.

As Leon sat thinking, Xaphan simply stared at him in something that resembled awe. Dragons were masters of fire, legendary even to demons. He’d never seen one—they were rare enough in these times that most reputable sources claimed true dragons to be extinct—but still, the very thought that he was now contracted to a descendant of one of the strongest dragons to have ever lived changed much, and gave him a lot to think about, too.

After about twenty minutes, Leon got back to his feet, said his goodbyes to Xaphan—who seemed almost numb and unresponsive after the revelation of Leon’s ancestry—and sat down upon his throne.

It was time to get back out to the physical world and see what had transpired while he’d been out. Xaphan had told him it had been several days, and he wanted to know what had happened in that time.

But most of all, he wanted to finish his conversation with Valeria.

Chapter 454: Valeria’s Offer

Leon’s return to consciousness was slow. His senses came back a little bit at a time, with the relatively soft feeling of bed sheets as his first sensations. Next came a burning perfumed candle that had the familiar scent of pine assaulting his nose. Then was his hearing, with the muffled sounds of conversation just outside of whatever room he was resting in finding its way to his ears.

Last was his vision. He deliberately kept his eyes shut as he relished the comfortable feeling of a proper bed for the first time in more than a month. But that couldn’t last long as he heard the soft sounds of someone sleeping close by. He didn’t want to wake them with a random pulse of magic senses, so he slowly cracked his golden eyes open.

The first things he saw were timber support beams above him. They weren’t bare and dusty as he would expect from, say, a farmhouse near the battlefield, and, in fact, were quite ornate, with bulls, lions, stags, and other animals carved into them.

So, he was somewhere fancy enough to decorate its roof support beams, and as he pushed himself up into a sitting position, he found that the rest of his environment was similarly well-furnished, with hardwood floors, elegant furniture made of southern wood, and rich velvet curtains over a nearby window.

By the standards of nobility, it wasn't much, but it was still rich and comfortable.

Leon was in for a much more chilling realization, though, as he found not only was he not wearing any clothes beneath his bedsheets, but Valeria was also slumped over fast asleep in a nearby armchair. She was almost fully armored, with only her helmet missing. Her silver hair was tied back into a tight bun, though, ready for her to summon her helmet from her soul realm at a moment's notice.

Forcing himself to remain calm and to remind himself that he was now a seventh-tier mage and had little to fear in the Bull Kingdom, Leon immediately summoned some clothes from his soul realm. He remembered that when he'd passed out, he'd been wearing his armor and holding his blade, meaning that he hadn't had the opportunity to call them back into his soul realm before losing consciousness for several days. A cold feeling of dread settled into his stomach until his eyes landed upon his black armor in a heap on a nearby dresser. Even from across the room, though, he could tell that his armor was horribly damaged.

That left his sword missing, but as he adjusted his position in the bed, his hand brushed against something hard and metallic, and when he glanced down, he found his family's blade there right next to him in the bed.

He breathed a sigh of relief, though he was more than a little curious as to why it was there, of all places. Without delay, he quickly pulled it back into his soul realm, then reached out with his magic power and did the same with his armor, taking some small pleasure in how easily he was able to do so despite almost twenty feet between him and the armor.

Leon then turned his attention back to the slumbering Valeria. From the way she was leaning back, he guessed she must have been keeping an eye on him for any changes, only to fall asleep while on guard.

He briefly considered waking her up with a sarcastic comment about how attentive she was being, but he held his tongue. They didn't have the kind of relationship that would be needed to make a comment like that appropriate.

So, instead, he just leaned back in his bed and took further stock of his surroundings. He gently released a pulse of his magic senses to get a better idea of what was outside, but he kept it low-power enough not to overly disturb anyone who would be able to feel it.

He found that he was within a relatively large mansion in the countryside, with a dozen buildings as part of its estate all behind a low decorative stone wall. The land outside of the walls was mostly given over to agriculture and a farming village, but Leon didn't think it was grain or potatoes being grown in the swampy fields. Regardless, he was still undoubtedly in the Southern Territories.

The rest of the buildings in the compound were filled with injured troops, their healers, and a number of guards. All-in-all, Leon guessed there were several thousand people packed into this compound and the nearby village.

Nowhere did he see Prince August, Roland, Marquis Aeneas, or anyone else in the leadership. Neither did he see Marcus or Alcander, but Alix he saw in the stables brushing Anzu's brilliant white coat. He smiled when he detected that she'd ascended to the fourth-tier in the time he'd been unconscious.

Finally, he cleared his throat loudly enough for Valeria to jerk awake and conjure a glaive from her soul realm. Leon almost armed himself in response, but he kept himself in check and just waited for her to make another move.

She didn't, choosing instead to set her glaive aside once she saw that he was awake—as only a fifth-tier mage, she couldn't just will her weapon back into her soul realm without a good deal of time spent concentrating.

"You're awake!" she excitedly observed.

"As are you," Leon drily replied, unable to help himself.

"Your sword!" Valeria quickly realized it wasn't where it had been left.

"Already back in my soul realm," Leon explained.

Valeria nodded, giving Leon a small, embarrassed smile. After a long awkward pause, she said as if she couldn't think of anything else to talk about right now, "... Ah. We weren't able to get it out of your hand when you were unconscious... Everyone who tried was painfully dissuaded, so we just had to leave it with you as you slept..."

Leon cocked an eyebrow at her. "Define 'painfully dissuaded'..."

"They'd be shocked by the Thunderbird's lightning," Valeria replied, startling Leon with how open she was about speaking of the Thunderbird, which he wasn't used to at all.

But as her words registered in his head, Leon grimaced. He guessed that his power must've still been flowing through the blade, but that didn't explain why they'd been unable to pry it from his fingers and had to have him sleep next to it.

'Just something to ask the Thunderbird later, I suppose...' Leon thought to himself, putting it out of his mind for the moment.

"So, I suppose that happened... What's been going on in the time I've been out?"

Valeria jumped into her explanation with a strange enthusiasm, giving Leon the impression that she was desperate to talk about anything other than the elephant in the room. "We defeated Duke Duronius and his army. The Duke himself managed to escape to the south, and Prince August and the rest chased after him. For the first time since we entered the Southern Territories, we have a numerical advantage over Duronius and his survivors, so Marquis Aeneas has been using that to apply pressure on our enemy. I don't know much else about their activities, I'm afraid. We were left behind to watch over you as you recovered here in the camp made for the wounded."

"When you say 'we', I assume you mean you and Dame Alix?"

"Oh! Uh, yeah..."

"All right," Leon said as he sat back up, leaning against the bed's headboard. "Marcus? Alcander?"

"They elected to continue with the army," Valeria replied.

"Thought so," Leon said. He never expected them to wait for him, but it did sting just a little bit. "Will we be interrupted here?"

Valeria's cheeks flushed a few shades darker, but she shook her head in the negative. Before Leon could continue, though, she said, "You should know, you weren't that subtle in your last moments before you lost consciousness... There have been a lot of rumors going around that I've managed to overhear about... you and House Raime..."

Leon silently cursed, but he otherwise took it in stride. "Had to happen eventually," he bitterly said. "Though, I can't deny that I would've preferred no one noticed anything... Hmm... I'd rather you don't confirm who I am with anyone who asks."

"Done," she instantly agreed.

"Should I be worried about this getting back to your family?"

The color in Valeria's face drained as fast as it had appeared as Leon began to broach that most important of questions. "I... I don't know..." she honestly answered. "I haven't been in contact with my father since before his arrest warrant was issued by Octavius... I don't know where he is or what he's doing right now..."

Leon sighed. "Then I must assume that it will get back to him and prepare accordingly. So I suppose we ought to hash some of this out between us beforehand. I'd rather we both know where we stand before we make any mistakes. How do you feel right now? Do you trust me? Should I trust you? I'd ask more questions like that, but I don't think I know enough about your situation to be making any suggestions..."

Again, Valeria fell silent, and Leon gave her all the time she needed. His confrontational attitude died during their last conversation and hadn't returned, nor did he want it to. She started to speak several times, but she was understandably hesitant. After almost a minute of them sitting and staring at each other in silence, though, she managed to find at least a few words to respond with.

"I... don't know..." she muttered. "I'd rather not lose either of you, but..."

"... that doesn't seem quite possible," Leon finished.

"... You blame my father for your father's death?" Valeria asked, though it was more a statement than a question.

"Do I blame him? I suppose I do, how can I not? It was his order that resulted in my father's death."

"He was forced to give it, the order itself didn't originate with him."

"So you say, but what proof of that is there?"

Leon kept his voice calm and measured. It wasn't so difficult after having some time to work through some of his emotions on top of ascending to the seventh-tier and finally learning something about his mother, but that didn't necessarily mean he was willing to forgive Justin Isynos.

"I have no proof to give you," Valeria admitted. "If it means anything, though, I can swear to the truth of it."

"You'd swear upon your Mana Glyph?" Leon asked incredulously. That was a serious oath and one that came with a correspondingly serious penalty. If such oaths were broken, they could injure a person's connection with their soul realm, weakening them immeasurably.

"I would," Valeria unhesitatingly replied, and from what Leon was able to tell of her stony expression, she meant it.

Leon sighed, his respect for her only growing in light of her determination and conviction. But that alone wasn't necessarily enough. "... I can't let go, though. My father is dead because of yours. I don't hold that against you, but neither can I forget it. I... don't know how to proceed, though..."

"I understand that you're angry, Leon," Valeria said softly, tenderly, her expression softening for a moment, "but making peace is always an option."

"Peace," Leon growled, the concept rather alien to him. He'd never known true peace. Even in the Forest of Black and White, his life depended on the taking of lives and the evasion of ice wraiths and their pet banshees. "I've never tried that before... But I hesitate to try it with someone I don't know, who I don't trust..."

"But it might secure your future," Valeria countered. "I don't pretend that I knew anything about him, but from what I know about you and knowing that he raised you, I can't help but think that your father wanted you to live above all else... That he wouldn't want you to waste your life on revenge, or to get yourself killed seeking to avenge him."

Leon gave her a sharp look, his golden eyes seeming to pierce through her every defense, but he said nothing. What she said was true, Artorias wasn't a man who valued vengeance as much as Leon did. If he had been, he wouldn't have run away from the Kingdom to keep Leon and himself safe. Vengeance always came after ensuring the safety of what was left of his family. Still, Leon didn't know what Artorias would've done if he hadn't had to take care of him for sixteen years. His father might've gone on an avenging crusade for his missing wife and murdered father and brother.

But Leon couldn't speak to that. He only knew Artorias as a father, and Artorias wanted Leon to remain safe more than anything, more even than seeking revenge.

As he thought about his father, Leon found his thoughts eventually turning toward Trajan. The Prince had taken Leon under his wing after learning that he was the last scion of House Raime, and he tried to instill in the younger man certain values that Leon felt aligned well with Artorias' lessons. Artorias had always taught Leon to be merciful and not to think with his blade, that murder wasn't always the best solution to his problems. Leon thought back to the last lesson that Artorias had ever taught him in that regard—it had been a small thing, consisting of paying a troll two silver coins to let them use its bridge rather than simply killing the creature as Leon was more willing to do.

'Maybe I've lost sight of all that a bit...' he wondered. 'Would either of them approve of my decisions? Probably not... I'm sure they'd pressure me to make peace if they could talk to me right now, assuming that's an option... If it isn't, they'd advise me to kill my enemies, that I know for sure. Maybe... Maybe I've been wrong about this... Maybe there's room for compassion, mercy, and forgiveness...'

Leon scowled and glanced back at Valeria. Her sapphire-blue eyes were locked on him, radiating a warmth that Leon had never seen there before. She was usually so cold and aloof, but here, she actually seemed... friendly? Maybe a little vulnerable?

"So... how do you think we'd move forward if I were to agree with your plea for peace?" Leon asked. "Do you even think any offer you make would be honored? Won't your father just ignore it and try to kill me? This is your mission, isn't it? And doesn't the life of your mother depend on its successful completion?"

"I suppose that is our mission, technically speaking," she replied. "Under any other circumstance, my father would be more inclined to protect you from Lord Kamran, I think. In practice, this mission is more of an exile. I don't think my father truly believes he'll see my mother again..."

"We're not under other circumstances," Leon observed. "That means he's still my enemy, and from where I stand, it would seem we're irreconcilable. Peace may not be in the cards, here."

"As I said, peace is always an option, you just have to have the will to agree to it," Valeria replied with an uncharacteristic amount of sudden passion. "What I propose is an alliance!"

"An alliance?" Leon asked with both incredulousness and bemusement.

"Yes!" she said. "My father and I want to rescue my mother from Lord Kamran! You want to find and kill those who ordered your death! Kamran is ultimately responsible! My father is only the weapon he's using! When someone is beheaded, do you blame the ax or the man wielding it? Or the Arbiter or Lord who ordered it?"

"I think I might just blame all three," Leon sarcastically replied, eliciting a glare from Valeria that drew a wry grin from him.

"Sir Leon," Valeria said with the utmost seriousness, "ally with us. I can persuade my father that doing so is in our interest. Your goal is the Nexus, correct? You want to rebuild the Thunderbird Clan?"

"I suppose that's one way to put it..."

Valeria shrugged, accepting his statement even though he made it clear she was wrong on some level.

"My family knows the Nexus, we're from there! We can help you establish yourself! And when you're ready, we can help you wage war against Kamran!"

"What would you want in return? I doubt that this aid would come for free..."

"I want my mother back," Valeria simply replied. "Kamran is our enemy, too, and with your help, we might stand a chance in a few thousand years."

"That's a long time to wait."

"For us, maybe. Not for the most powerful in the Nexus. Not for those that have achieved Apotheosis."

Leon cocked an eyebrow at her use of that term, but he figured that since she was from the Nexus, then there was no reason to have assumed that she didn't know of it before he did. In fact, she seemed to be staring at him as if she were expecting him to ask what it meant...

... or she was just waiting for him to respond. Could be that, too, he couldn't say.

"Ally with you, kill Kamran with your help, free your mother?" Leon asked for confirmation.

"Essentially, yes," Valeria said.

Leon took a long moment to think about it, and he made a big show of leaning back and looking around the room, deliberately not turning his eyes toward Valeria.

When he turned his attention back to her, she was practically sweating as she awaited his answer to her offer.

"I've always been taught about the virtues of forgiveness," Leon slowly said as if he were working through these ideas out loud, "but I've rarely supported its merits. Many people close to me, in fact, have actively encouraged me not to indulge in such ideals..." Leon thought of the Thunderbird and Xaphan when he made that statement.

Leon continued, "I'll say this, Valeria, I don't hate you. I'd actually like to think of you as a friend if it weren't for my own... shortcomings in that regard, and I trust you more than I trust just about anyone else in the world. I think you're being absolutely genuine in your offer. You make me want to give forgiveness a shot. But I will never believe in forgiving someone who shows no remorse for their actions. Any alliance between me and your family is impossible without your father's agreement and sincere attempt to apologize and make up for my father's murder. Your father would have to show me that he wants forgiveness and that he's willing to betray his Lord.

"If that doesn't happen, then no alliance between us can work."

"That's... reasonable," Valeria replied, though she still looked quite discouraged and pained, turning her eyes down and shrinking down into her seat.

"I'll promise you this," Leon said, not wanting to see someone who'd been so helpful otherwise, someone who'd never once held any kind of genuine hostility toward him, be so obviously hurt, "I won't go hunting for your father. I won't make myself vulnerable, either, and if he attacks me, then I will defend myself with all available means. But beyond that, I'm willing to give this alliance a shot. I will trust in your belief that it's possible, I will trust your word when you say that your father is a good man worthy of making this alliance with, I will trust in your word that this is possible at all."

Valeria looked up at him in surprise, which quickly turned into gratitude and happiness, and then back into stoic seriousness to give this moment its proper weight.

"Thank you, Sir Leon. You won't regret this!"

"I'm not so sure about that," Leon replied. "But, I'm willing to give peace its fair shake."

Valeria gratefully nodded.

"Now, let's work this out a little bit more," Leon said. "Obviously, I don't want you telling everyone about who I am, so I want to know how you'd get in contact with your father and what you're going to tell him. No one else gets told who I am."

"I understand, Leon," Valeria replied. "I wasn't planning on spreading it around, anyway. And as for my father, I wasn't intending on telling him everything, anyway, at least, not at first. Enough to bring him to the negotiating table without running off to find and attack you."

It was Leon's turn to nod. The two continued to talk about this for a while longer, and Leon slowly got used to the idea of actually giving this a shot, even if in the back of his mind, he didn't truly believe that this would work out as well as Valeria seemed to hope.

Chapter 455: Her Power's Resonance

Leon and Valeria had reached something that resembled an agreement. She'd continue to follow him, and if they managed to find her father, she'd do her best to convince him to make peace with Leon. In return, Leon wouldn't immediately try to kill Justin and would give peace a chance.

Leon wasn't sure what Valeria would do if her attempts to make peace failed, but he began preparing himself for the worst and hoping for the best.

But all that was a problem for later—at least, Leon *hoped* it would be a problem for later, he wasn't quite ready for that particular confrontation, yet. For now, though, they had to turn their attention back to the immediate situation.

"So, what should we do now?" Valeria asked.

"I suppose I should get out of this damn bed," Leon replied.

"Should we do anything about the rumors people are spreading about you?"

Leon frowned. She'd already told him that there was rampant speculation that he was a member of House Raime given he'd used their signature lightning in the last battle, and all they'd decided to do was not confirm any of it.

"We're not going to stop the speculation, even trying to do so would be a mistake," Leon said. "A denial would be as much of a confirmation as a straight-up confirmation would be."

"I'm not so sure about that..."

"I am. Regardless, just don't say anything. If someone directly asks you, you can deny it, but we'll make no official statement on the matter."

Valeria nodded.

Leon then pulled himself out of bed and back onto his feet. His limbs were a little stiff and sore from having been in bed for several days, and he was now realizing that he was ravenously hungry.

"Ugh... I feel dead," he muttered. "Where can we go to get some food?"

"I can show you to the dining facility," Valeria replied.

"Good. First, though, we should probably check in with Alix and Anzu."

"I would agree with that. Anzu, at least, was an absolute nightmare for us to try and calm down after you lost consciousness. Alix was the only person he allowed to approach you after you fell..."

Leon smiled in amusement, gratitude, and embarrassment. He loved that griffin.

Exiting the room, Leon and Valeria found themselves in a long hallway with a pair of guards outside the door. The hallway was decorated much like Leon's room had been, with more wood paneling, hardwood floors, and thick carpeting as opposed to stone tiles and painted stone walls that most rich people in the Bull Kingdom preferred.

The guards almost jumped out of their skin as Leon walked out, but he paid them no mind after telling them he was fine and would see the camp commander on his own time. Instead of doing that right away, though, he made his way to the main door of the house. He could still see Alix tending to Anzu in the stables, so that was his destination.

"Where are we, exactly?" Leon asked Valeria as they walked.

"Prince August had us occupy the closest village to use as our recovery camp," Valeria explained again. "I believe this is an estate owned by a local Baron who surrendered after our victory. He and his small retinue have been absorbed into the army while his family remained behind to see to their property."

Leon nodded. "And that was three days ago?"

"Yes. Prince August and the rest set out in pursuit of Duke Duronius, who fled south."

"Any reason you know of that he would go south?"

"No, and I'm not important enough for people to have told me before they left," Valeria answered.

"Then I suppose once we get some food into us, we ought to head on out and see if we can catch up," Leon said. "With Anzu and my flight suit, we should be able to make good time."

In the swampy terrain of the south, Leon knew that the armies could probably make about twenty-five or thirty miles per day. This would be an excruciatingly slow pace for the stronger mages, but they were held back by the weakest members of the army. However, he could easily envision more elite units ranging ahead to harass Duronius' rear detachments as he retreated, so the marching column was probably longer than he realized.

Still, he didn't envision it taking longer than a few hours to catch up to Prince August's main army by air.

The outside of the villa was more in line with the aesthetics of the Bull Kingdom, but neither Leon nor Valeria paid it any mind as they made their way over to the stables. After walking out through the front door into the busy unpaved yard, Leon could feel quite a few people staring at him. It wasn't the most comfortable feeling, but when Leon glanced around, he could see that there wasn't anyone staring at him maliciously. In fact, it seemed that it was mostly awe and curiosity that drew their eyes.

That didn't make it that much better, but fortunately, Leon's attention was soon grabbed by something else. Or rather, *someone* else, for he could feel the power that Naiad left in his soul realm start to quiver and shake, and he knew that she was near.

Stopping in his tracks, Leon immediately projected his magic senses. Valeria, walking just behind and slightly to his right, was taken by surprise and almost ran into him.

“Ah! Sir Leon...?” she asked, hoping to get an explanation for his strange behavior. They were still in the yard out in front of the main villa and were in the way of several healers fetching supplies, administrators organizing August’s logistics, and others going about their business. It was entirely due to Leon’s current status as a sixth-tier mage—as far as the public at large was concerned, at least—and as someone probably connected to House Raime that they weren’t getting yelled at by frustrated people whose path they’d interrupted.

“Change of plans,” Leon suddenly said. “Go let Alix know what’s happened and get her ready to go. I have something to do instead...”

“Wha—” Valeria began, but her protest was cut short as Leon practically vanished with a flash of golden lightning and a tremendous clap of thunder that had the dozens of people passing through the small yard covering their ears and swearing in anger and pain.

But Leon didn’t hear those curses, he was already long gone. He’d leaped from the yard into the air, his lightning magic and seventh-tier strength allowing him to pass over the walls of the compound from the yard—a distance of almost two hundred feet—and land in the marshy field outside, startling a pair of nearby farmers who were walking to the cultivated areas. Leon spared no thought for the wet ground and the mud that now covered him and his boots and began sprinting for the tree line as if his life depended on it. He could sense Naiad ahead of him, and he was determined to find her before she disappeared again.

In a matter of seconds, he left the field behind and entered the omnipresent forests of the Southern Territories. He kept his magic senses projected the entire time and pointed in the direction in which he could sense Naiad, which slowed him down a little. Unfortunately, he wasn’t able to see anything, and could even sense Naiad’s power within his soul realm begin calming down, which he took to mean that she was moving away from him.

Without hesitation, Leon stopped projecting his magic senses and put all of his power into moving as fast as he could. Naiad was still stronger than him in terms of raw power, but he was confident that he could catch up.

Lightning began arcing all over his body, burning holes in his clothing, but he didn’t care. Compared to finding Naiad, his clothes were worthless.

He bolted through the forest, his natural skill in traversing such terrain combined with his power making him nigh-invisible by mortal standards, but it was unsustainable. In fact, after about thirty seconds of such a pace, the only way Leon was able to force himself to keep going was because he felt Naiad’s power start resonating again and doing so stronger with every step he took. He still couldn’t see her or sense her at all, but he knew she was out there.

And then, he caught up to her. Or at least, he *felt* like he had, but he could neither see nor hear anything. As far as his eyes and ears were concerned, he’d come to a stop in a small clearing where he stood all by his lonesome. When he projected his magic senses, he could only locate a single other person in the area, and that was a hunter more than half a mile away chasing a rabbit.

Still, Leon could feel that Naiad was close, that she was almost within reach. He was so close that he couldn’t even determine her direction, just that she was close and she wasn’t moving.

Leon stood there for a long moment, simply waiting. He hoped that she'd show herself of her own accord, since he doubted he'd be able to find her otherwise. But his hopes were dashed as second after second passed without Naiad making an appearance.

Finally, he couldn't take it anymore and declared, "I can feel you. I know you're here."

His words were met with deafening silence.

Leon leaned against a nearby tree and waited. He was patient, and all he wanted was to talk to her.

"I'm sorry," he said after a minute that felt like an eternity. "I put you on the spot and tried to force you to make a decision. I won't do that again... I just... I just want you back. Both Elise and I want you back."

He knew she could hear him, and he didn't make any excuses. He didn't want to rationalize, he only wanted to express his sincerity.

"I can wait as long as you need. If you don't want to come back... I understand that, too..."

Leon was starting to feel like he was just rambling to empty air, and he began to doubt himself. Was Naiad really here? Or was he just misinterpreting the way her power was resonating?

"We love you, Naiad. I love you."

He said nothing more. He'd said the hardest thing to say, and that left nothing else for him to express. Either she'd reveal herself, or she wouldn't. The ball was in her court, and Leon was more than willing to wait. No matter what she decided, he'd accept it. But that she was here—or *if* she was here—then it was a good sign that she was willing to forgive his rash and idiotic mistake.

So, he waited.

And waited.

And waited.

It seemed like an eternity passed before he finally noticed something. It was a small thing, nearly imperceptible amongst the small puddles and wet ground that was ubiquitous in the Southern Territories: the water in a puddle rose and then fell for no apparent reason. Leon's eyes darted to it, and he stared at it so hard it felt like his eyes were about to fall out. But the puddle did nothing for long enough that Leon just about thought he was going crazy and starting to see things that he wanted to see.

And then the puddle rippled again, then rose, expanding far more than it ever should've given its size. It rose into a tall pillar, which then swiftly resolved into the powerful, voluptuous, athletic form of the river nymph Queen that Leon had been missing so badly.

Naiad had appeared before him, her tanned face pulled back into a smile that seemed half proud and half embarrassed, as if she were reveling in her appearance while also feeling nervous about seeing him again. She was characteristically nude, save for the bright green emerald ring on her left index finger. Her light brown hair cascaded over her shoulders and down her back like a waterfall, while she stood in front of him without the slightest hint of shame at her state of undress.

Leon didn't see any of that, though. As soon as his eyes met hers, they were locked in place.

Ever since Trajan had died, Leon had done nothing but lose, as far as he was concerned. He lost his mentor in Trajan, he lost his lover in Naiad, he lost the home he'd built with Elise, and it had all culminated in that terrible day earlier in the week where he'd lost his unit, Lapis and the giants, and the friendlier, more relaxed relationship he had with Valeria.

To now see one of those things that he'd felt had been lost suddenly return was too much for him to handle. All the grief of losing Trajan and Lapis came roaring back and warred with his elation at finally seeing Naiad again. His heart felt like it had risen into his throat, his mouth and chin twitched under the emotional strain, and for the first time in his memory, tears began running down his face.

[Hey there, boy,] Naiad whispered into his mind, her tone flippant, but quivering just enough for Leon to know that it was just a front. [Been a while, hasn't it? Missed me?]

Just 'hearing' her voice again almost broke Leon. He couldn't say anything in response, his throat had completely shut down. So, he did the only thing he could do to communicate his joy and his love: he pushed himself off the tree, stumbled forward, and pulled her into his arms. He held her tightly against himself and pushed away all of the other thoughts that were fighting for his attention.

Naiad was back, and for the moment, that was all that mattered.

Chapter 456: Maia

It took Leon a few minutes to get control of himself again. He spent those minutes holding Naiad close and desperately trying to keep his crying to a minimum. But it was a bright spot in what had otherwise been a terrible half year, and the sheer joy of her return combined with the grief of losing his unit and the giants prevented Leon from staying as stoic as he would've preferred.

For her part, Naiad enjoyed every moment that Leon held her in his arms. She practically melted into his embrace, wrapping her own arms around his waist and savoring every second. She cared not a whit for Leon's minor breakdown and gave him all the time he needed to compose himself.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Leon softly asked, "What happened? Where did you go?"

Naiad slowly pulled back so that she could look Leon in the eye, though both kept their arms around the other.

[You asked me to commit. I wanted to... but... I had some business to attend to back in Saron...]

"Saron... Right, I think you mentioned that before...? A city of river nymphs?"

[In a manner of speaking,] Naiad replied. [It's the center of what passes for our civilization. It's not as... *complex* as that of humanity, but it's ours. My mother is the Empress of my people, and I had to say my goodbyes to her, to see her one last time and tell her face to face that I wasn't going to come back to Saron ever again...]

"So... that means...?"

[To finally give you my answer, Leon, I would like to be a part of your family, if you'll still have me.]

Leon smiled and tightened his hold on Naiad, pulling her back in and pressing his forehead into hers.

"There will always be room in my family for you," he whispered to her. "No matter what happens, you, me, and Elise are family."

As he finished, he tilted his head to the side and pressed his lips against hers. He went in light, giving her plenty of room to pull back if she wanted to. Instead, Naiad snaked her arms out from around his waist so that she could then wrap them around his neck and head. Then, she pulled him in closer and tighter, pressing her body against his as her mouth opened, and she began licking at his lips.

Leon reciprocated in kind, pushing Naiad up against a nearby tree as he began tangling his tongue with hers. As he began to be more assertive with his actions, Naiad let him take the lead even though she had more than enough power even after Leon's ascension to push him down if she wanted.

But she didn't want to push him down. She did that when they first met, and it led to their relationship getting off on entirely the wrong foot. Needless to say, she was more than happy that Leon was now so willing to take charge of their intimate moment. She enjoyed it even more when Leon's hands snaked down her back, his fingertips gently stroking her spine and causing goosebumps to sprout all over her tanned skin. Leon's hand eventually stopped when they reached the bottom of her butt, at which point he sank his fingers into her toned cheeks and lifted her off her feet.

The two were still locked together at the lips, and Naiad moaned in surprise and pleasure as her feet left the marshy ground. She spread her legs and wrapped them around Leon's midsection while she removed her arms from around his neck to begin grabbing at his shirt. She pulled the fabric off Leon's hard abs and over his broad chest. There, she paused, for she'd run into a terrible problem: if she wanted to remove Leon's shirt completely, they'd have to separate, and after so long away, that was the last thing Naiad wanted.

Suddenly, and to Naiad's shock and dismay, he quickly set her down and pulled away. He didn't leave arm's reach, but he did pull back far enough to make it clear that they weren't going to be going any further right now.

[Something wrong?] Naiad asked, now feeling more than a little worried.

"No, no, I just... I just want to talk a bit before catching up in *that* way," Leon said with a smile. If he were honest, the thought of Elise also had him hesitating to take things further with Naiad, but he also knew that Elise wouldn't care, not after everything the three had done before Naiad left. Still, it was going to take a few more minutes to work through that particular mental block, and in the meantime, he wanted to talk to his gorgeous river nymph Queen for a while.

[Whatever you want to know, I'll tell you,] Naiad said, smiling seductively at Leon as he lightly set her back down on the ground.

"First off, and I kind of hate myself for saying this, do you mind putting on some clothes? You're very... *distracting* right now..."

Naiad's smile grew wider as she felt Leon's stare wander over her body, and she pushed her generous chest out a bit to show off. She held that pose for just long enough to tease Leon before conjuring some

clothes over her body, though the long-sleeved shirt and pants that she chose did little to hide her figure even if her exposed skin had been mostly covered.

“So,” Leon began as he fully disentangled himself from Naiad, save for one of his hands which remained locked with one of hers, “you’ve never really told me about your mother. What’s she like?”

[I’ve never told you before because you’ve never really asked,] Naiad chidingly replied, but her smile remained radiant letting Leon know that she wasn’t too upset about that fact. [My mother is the strongest person I’ve ever met. Stronger than me, even.]

“Stronger than you? That’s hard to imagine,” Leon said, squeezing her hand.

Naiad chuckled and said, [I’ve never managed to pin down exactly how powerful she is. By human standards, I’m eighth-tier, as you know, but I’d estimate my mother is ninth-tier at the weakest.]

“*Ninth-tier?!?*”

[Yes. Her aura is immense, and I can barely even discern it. But her power is almost wasted, for she never leaves Saron.]

“Why not? I can’t imagine someone committed enough to reach those magical heights not having some ambition they want to fulfill, or being content to waste the fruits of their labor...”

[That actually happens more than you think, I’d guess. Many people just want to get stronger for themselves, they don’t crave political power. That’s not why she remains in Saron, though. She has a duty to fulfill, that of watching over the city and making sure that the graves located there remain undisturbed.]

“What graves?”

Naiad then told Leon all about the immense cavern filled with thousands of black pyramids, and she made sure to tell him about the Great Pyramid and its blue beam.

[... that thing has always given me a feeling of terrible doom, as if some unfathomable *thing* resides within... I can’t say for certain what, if anything, lies within, though, and the only thing I can say with confidence is that I’m glad that I will never return.]

As she’d told Leon about Saron, the two found a nearby boulder sticking out of the mud to sit on as they spoke. They weren’t quite as physically close to each other anymore, but their entwined fingers hadn’t separated for even the briefest of moments during their talk.

“That’s... I don’t even know what to say to all that...” Leon stated as Naiad finished her explanation.

[I don’t blame you, I don’t know what to say about it, either.]

Given her descriptions—especially notable to Leon were the massive skeletons of winged humanoids as well as the hallway of carved reliefs—he had an idea as to what all of those pyramids were...

“Do you know what this planar cluster is referred to by the people in the Nexus? I mean Aeterna and the closest eleven planes.”

[No,] Naiad replied, cocking an eyebrow at Leon for the strange question.

“They call this region of space the ‘Divine Graveyard’. It’s where the Primal Gods and their servants, as well as the Primal Devils and their followers, were interred following the ancient war that led to their deaths...”

[Now that you mention it, I do remember you saying something to that effect several times back at your home, but I have to admit that I never paid too much attention...]

Leon smiled in exasperation, then proceeded with great patience to tell Naiad everything that he’d been told by the Thunderbird regarding the history of the Universe—all of which he’d already told Elise long ago. By the time the two were done getting on the same page, almost an hour had passed since Leon found her.

[And you think that Saron is one of the graveyards that has given this planar cluster its name?] Naiad asked once Leon was finished.

“Seems obvious to me, though I can’t say for certain without going there.”

[Something to consider, I suppose. Not that it matters too much in the immediate future, nothing’s going to happen to that place with my mother around.]

“If she’s as strong as you say, then I don’t doubt that conviction,” Leon said. “I can’t help but be kind of fascinated, though. I wonder if there are more places like Saron around the plane? I mean, you say there were thousands of pyramids, but I can’t believe there were enough in that cavern to account for even just a twelfth of the population of Gods and Devils...”

[I can’t speak to that, I’m not that well-traveled,] Naiad admitted. [There could be more, there could not be. I’ve certainly never heard of another place like Saron...]

Leon nodded and smiled as he thought about the possibilities that Saron represented. He didn’t think there was much practical gain to be had by going there, especially since the Thunderbird had explicitly said that if there had been any loot to be had following the war that killed the Primal Gods and Devils, it would’ve all been taken before the Gods and Devils were laid to rest. Still, he wouldn’t mind seeing Saron someday if he ever had the chance.

“Naiad...” Leon began after a long pause, his tone turning more serious, “why did it take so long for you to come back? You told me that your mother imparted all of her knowledge of the river nymphs to you, whatever that means, but did it really take so long?”

Naiad grimaced, but she felt like she needed to give Leon an answer. She thought for several seconds about what to say, and eventually settled on the most honest answer she could give.

[No, it didn’t take that long. I’ve been here a while, watching you.]

“I thought so, I sensed your power before... when I lost Lapis, the giants, and the others who followed m...”

Leon wasn’t even able to finish before letting his voice just taper out. But Naiad could feel his anguish by the way that his grip on her hand tightened, even if his expression barely changed.

[I’m sorry,] she whispered in his mind. She would’ve leaned up against him so that he knew she was there for him, but she refrained, sensing that he wanted a bit of space instead. [I... I could’ve done

something, then. *Should've* done something... but I didn't just want to show up again and ask you to take me back. I wanted to save you, to arrive in such a manner that you wouldn't... turn me away...]

Leon glanced over at her, seeing her hunch up as if bracing herself for his anger. And he did feel a little angry. She was incredibly powerful, and if she'd acted sooner, then Lapis could still be alive. The rest of the giants could still be alive. Leon's unit and the Barons that led it could still be alive.

But instead, she stayed away, watching and never acting until Leon chased her down and practically forced her to reveal herself.

"I sensed your power, I could tell that you were gearing up for something big when it seemed like everything was over," Leon said.

[I was, it seemed like the perfect moment,] Naiad admitted, her gaze still lowered. She knew what she was saying and how it sounded, that the death of Lapis meant nothing to her beyond being a perfect moment for her to return.

"But you didn't take it," Leon said, his tone still serious, but also calm and even.

[No,] she murmured. [I saw those others starting to make their move, and I decided to wait for another chance, when you were actually in need. You weren't in need of my power anymore after all of those humans turned against their comrades...]

Leon sighed as he turned his eyes to the bright blue sky. Naiad stayed braced for his inevitable fury, but Leon remained almost frighteningly serene, and his hand never left hers, even when she unconsciously pulled back a few times.

"I didn't need your power," Leon quietly said. "I've never even really *wanted* your power. I wanted *you*. I just wanted *you* back. I wanted to apologize and to show you all the love that I should've shown you before. All that matters to me right now is that you're back."

He turned his face back to hers and gave her the warmest, most genuine smile that he'd ever given her, and in it, she could see nothing but love.

It was now Naiad's turn to start tearing up, and after a moment, she threw herself forward and began sobbing into Leon's shoulder. Leon didn't say anything more, he just held her close for the few minutes she needed to get it all out and compose herself.

When she pulled herself out of his embrace, her eyes were still wet and she could barely meet his gaze.

[If I'd moved sooner, you wouldn't have lost all of your people...] she stated with a heartbreaking amount of anguish.

"Maybe..." Leon lightly assented, his thoughts now turning to others. Several faces flashed by in his mind's eye, but the last one to do so was Valeria's. "But you're not all-powerful. Who knows what might've happened. Whatever, I don't for a moment blame you for Lapis and the rest. If I'd led them better, they wouldn't have died. If I'm going to play the blame game, then I have to start with myself. And after me would come Gaius Tullius and the Duchess of Vesontio. If *they'd* made their move sooner, then my people would never have died. If Sertor Arellius had been just half an hour faster, then my people wouldn't have died. I don't blame you Naiad, just as I don't blame them or myself. I did my best,

they were looking out for their people more than me—which I can fully understand—and Arellius marched as fast he could. The only people to blame for killing Lapis and my giants and my unit either died in that battle or fled south after we kicked their teeth in later that day.”

If he was willing to try and make peace with Justin Isynos, then there was no way he couldn’t find a way to forgive Naiad for this, not when she was so clearly remorseful.

Naiad finally began to look a little better as Leon’s assurances hit home. She bit her bottom lip in hesitation, but then, she seemed to come to an internal resolution and her expression became much more determined. Leon just sat there, gently watching her with a smile on his face, waiting for her to make the next move.

Naiad leaned forward, scooting over on the rock until she was pressed right up against him, and wrapped her arms around his neck again, letting go of his hand as she did. She held him tightly for several seconds before moving her lips close to his ear.

Her lips parted, and with a light, enchanting voice, a smooth, breathy, soft, and silvery voice that sent shivers down Leon’s spine and caused the power she’d left within him to vibrate like a bell that had just been struck, she said, “I love you, Leon Raime. My name isn’t Naiad. My real name is Maia.”

Chapter 457: Bond

“... My name isn’t Naiad. My real name is Maia.”

Naiad’s words had an immediate effect on Leon. Firstly, he’d never heard her voice before, and in fact, didn’t think she could even speak like humans could, since she never did so without using her mental communication technique.

Secondly, it caused the power she’d left within him when they had made their contract resonate in a way that it had never done before. It expanded into a lake of power, filling him with the gentle flowing power of water magic, but as quickly as it came, it then compressed into something that felt more akin to a river than a lake.

It was a euphoric feeling. It was one of absolute trust, love, and partnership. It felt not dissimilar to the contract that Leon had made with Xaphan, though far more intimate and romantic in nature.

This power that now flowed through Leon didn’t make him stronger. It gave him quite the rush, so it was difficult for him to tell, at first. But after a few seconds of him practically stunned at the changes happening within him, he managed to take stock. And no, he wasn’t more powerful. The power that Naiad had left within him had fundamentally transformed, leaving him to feel like there was a river of power flowing into him, bringing with it everything that Naiad wanted to share with him. That power would stay for a short time before leaving again, taking back his feelings about Naiad.

Glancing to the side, he could see Naiad in a similar state of stunned euphoria as he. Her power had linked them, like an aquatic ring connecting neighboring lakes of power.

What was more, Leon could now sense where Naiad was without concentrating. To say that they were connected now was to put it mildly.

“Ooooh,” Naiad sighed and shuddered in pleasure as she managed to relax, almost collapsing into Leon’s arms with the release. “That was... *incredible*... and from what you’ve done to me in the past, that’s saying a *lot*...”

Leon flushed with embarrassment before the reality of the situation sank in—Naiad was *speaking out loud*, and whatever she did had caused a tremendous change in both of them. It was one that Leon enjoyed—one that he welcomed, even—but he also wanted some answers.

“What just happened?” he asked breathlessly, pressing his forehead down into her silky brown hair.

Naiad looked up at him, trapping him in her lake-blue eyes. “I told you my true name, I shared with you my power and my voice. I am now yours, as you are mine. But no need to worry about that last part, I know that Elise has staked her claim to you, too, and I can share with her.”

Leon shook his head a bit at what she was saying before settling on what she said first. “Your ‘true name’?”

“Yes,” Naiad said with a radiant smile. “My true name is Maia, not Naiad. Naiad is a title among my people, not a name. So, allow me to introduce myself to you, Leon Raime. I am Maia, a Naiad of the river nymphs.”

“Maia...” Leon whispered, letting the name sink in. When he said it, though, his river nymph lover shuddered again.

“Say it again...” she moaned.

“Maia,” he repeated, with a similar reaction.

“Ooh,” she groaned. “My mother told me about this, but I didn’t think it would be so *intense*! To have my name on the lips of my love!”

Leon pulled her in tighter, his arms swathed around her waist. Her waist was normally tight and waspy, without a hint of body fat, but in Leon’s arms, Maia had become so relaxed that she almost melted into him. In fact, the tips of her toes had *literally* melted, turning into water as Maia lost control of her body with all the new and delightful sensations that now filled her.

Leon smiled and his hands began to stray from her waist.

“Maia,” he whispered lovingly into her ear, eliciting another moan from the river nymph.

He took a hand off of her and began pulling at his clothes. He knew Elise would understand. She’d be disappointed that she missed out, but she’d also be even more upset if he were to leave Maia in such a state without satisfying her.

Still, he went slow enough that if Maia wanted to, she could end things whenever she wanted.

Of course, she didn’t do such a thing, and as her eyes refocused and she found Leon pulling his shirt off with one hand while his other arm was wrapped so far around her back that his fingers were gently stroking the side of one of her breasts, she practically squealed in delight. She didn’t bother taking her clothes off the conventional way and simply recalled them into her soul realm.

Leon clicked his tongue in mild displeasure. "I wanted to do that," he complained, but as his eyes wandered over her nude form, any further complaints he had died in his throat. Without delay, he pulled his other arm off Maia so that he could finally get rid of his shirt. He heard Maia's breath catch in her throat as he slowly began revealing more of his body, bringing a smile to his face.

After his shirt, Leon didn't immediately move onto his pants. Instead, he pushed Maia down against the boulder and began attacking her lips with his while his hands gripped her waist. After a few seconds of tongue-wrestling, his left hand went high while his right hand went low, until the former started massaging her sizeable breasts and the latter reached her lower lips, which were already cascading with Maia's arousal.

"No," Maia suddenly breathily moaned, causing Leon's heart to nearly stop as he instinctively pulled his hands back. "I need more," she continued. "More than your fingers. I need you... I *need* you in me..."

Leon's heart calmed as she stared at him, her eyes hazy and her skin flushed with lust. Despite his earlier playful admonishment, Leon didn't bother taking the slow method. With barely a thought, his lower garments vanished into his soul realm, letting his manhood spring free.

Maia's glassy eyes followed his erection like a beast eyeing food, but before she could move again, Leon took a hold of both of her calves, spread her legs open, then slid in between. He let her legs then come down to rest on his hips while he aligned himself with her veritable overflowing fountain.

Leon then leaned in and grabbed her hips, locked eyes with Maia, and then thrust in with one smooth motion as far as he could go.

Instantly, Maia let out an ear-piercing wail of pleasure and her legs around Leon's hips squeezed so tightly that he couldn't pull back to thrust again. Not that he needed to, though, for Maia's tunnel clenched down on him so firmly that it was impossible not to know that she'd just climaxed.

It took almost an entire minute for Maia to come back down, during which Leon patiently waited, simply admiring her with a loving smile on his face. A few seconds after her body began to relax, some awareness returned to Maia's eyes and her breathing steadied.

"Wh... was..." she mumbled, still unable to form a coherent sentence.

"I hope you're not completely satisfied," Leon softly said as he leaned down to press his forehead against hers. "I've only just begun..."

—

"So, where does this leave us?" Leon asked as he and Maia basked in the afterglow on the boulder, neither with a stitch of clothing to cover themselves with. They'd gone at each other for at least an hour, but Leon honestly hadn't any idea how much time had actually passed, and the tree cover here was too thick for him to see the sun to gauge the passage of time.

Maia took a few seconds to catch her breath and compose herself—Leon's attentions had worn her out.

"... We are connected... our soul realms have connected, and our power feeds each other. We can sense each other's location, we can sense each other's emotions. We can communicate from great distances.

We have been joined. I think by human standards, it would probably be fair to say that we've even married each other, for our bond is permanent."

"Permanent?" Leon asked, a sharp edge creeping into his voice.

"... Yes?" Maia hesitantly replied.

"... I think I would've preferred a little discussion about that, first," Leon whispered. "Something permanent ought to be agreed on by both parties."

"But... you're not angry..." Maia said as she sat up and twisted her body to look down at him, a look of concern on her heart-shaped face.

"Not really," Leon said, his voice softening as he pulled Maia back down into his arms. "I would've agreed anyway. Just promise me that from now on, you'll talk to me before making a permanent change like this again."

"Deal," Maia heartily replied, snuggling in closer.

"Oh, and one more thing," Leon said, "let's not claim that we're married, at least not until we reunite with Elise. I don't want to lie to her, but let's just find a different way to describe this."

"Wouldn't want her to feel left out?"

Leon silently nodded. He missed his fire-haired lover, and while he knew she'd want him to reconnect with Maia and bring her home, he wasn't so sure how happy she'd be if Maia beat her to that milestone. All three of them would have to talk about it before anything like marriage could happen, officially speaking.

"Another thing," Maia said, "before, I wasn't entirely aware, but my mother told me that no matter how much time we spent reproducing, it never would've worked."

"What do you mean?" Leon asked, cocking his eyebrow in curiosity.

"I never could've given birth, not without first telling you my true name and speaking to you in my true voice," she answered. "Without the bond that formed between us, we never could've made a child."

"And now? Is that something we should be worried about? You getting pregnant at an inopportune time? As someone with two Inherited Bloodlines, I don't think it would be that easy, anyway."

"I would hesitate to label any time as 'inopportune'," Maia replied, flashing him a cheeky smile, "but I suppose there are *better* times to focus on that. And you're right. It's going to take some serious work for us to fulfill our original contract. At the very least, I won't turn into a gorgon anymore, no matter how long we go without mating with each other."

"I'm certainly willing to spend the time to do a thorough job..."

The two chuckled and went silent for a few seconds, simply enjoying cuddling together like this. They hadn't done so in so long, and now they seemed practically stuck together.

"What should we do now?" Maia asked.

"There's still a war going, and I would think it would go a lot faster with you on our side," Leon said. "Shouldn't be too much longer, though. Or, well... we've almost beaten them in the south, at least."

"Wherever you're going, I'll follow," she replied, propping her chin upon his chest so that she could give him a smile so bright that it shamed the sun itself.

"I'd have it no other way..." Leon replied. He then filled Maia in on everything that had happened since she left, though he didn't go into too much detail. He skimmed over some other especially important details, too, such as his new relationship with Valeria. That, in particular, was a bigger discussion, not one to be had in the afterglow of spectacular sex.

"So," the river nymph said once he was finished, "we have to hunt down this 'Duke Durnoium' and then take his head? That's our current goal?"

"It's 'Duronius', and yes, that's what we need to do right now," Leon answered. "We should get to it, I suppose. We've..."

Leon trailed off as he realized a mistake he'd made. He'd sent Valeria off to prepare Alix and Anzu to depart, and then he'd ran off and spent who knows how long fucking Maia in the woods.

He bolted upright, surprising Maia, and said in a mild panic, "We need to go now. I've left some people waiting..."

Spurred on by Leon's attitude, Maia followed his lead in quickly dressing and taking off for the recovery camp. She was more surprised by the fact that she actually had to struggle to keep up with him, despite their differences in power. But then she had to stop thinking about it, because thinking about Leon's power only made her want to get back to mating, and they had other things on their plate. Things like linking up with Leon's retinue, then Prince August and the rest, and then killing Duronius.

Maia was looking forward to it; she'd never really fought at Leon's side before. She'd interrupted his fights a few times, but never had they fought as equals side-by-side. She couldn't wait, the simple prospect excited her in ways she never would've thought possible before.

Staring at Leon's back as he bolted through the forest, she smiled and knew that they were ready for whatever would come next.

Chapter 458: Making Everyone Look Bad

It was long past noon, and Alix and Valeria had been waiting at the stables for almost two hours, both growing increasingly impatient. It had been more than long enough for all the joy that Alix felt at Leon's awakening to have died down.

Letting her frustration get the better of her a little bit, Alix asked, "And you have *no* idea where he went?"

"No," Valeria coolly replied. "I'm still getting the hang of using magic senses, and he *very* quickly moved outside of my limited range, anyway. He just went and ran into the forest."

Alix sighed. "I suppose if he's busy with other things, I can get back to brushing An—"

Before she could finish, Valeria's head perked up and she almost cried out, "I can see him!"

Alix's head whipped around in the direction Valeria was looking in, and for a moment, all she could see were the crowds that were coming and going in the compound. But only a few seconds later, she saw Leon, and relief flooded her body. Two hours was long enough for fear to have settled into the pit of her stomach about what happened to her friend, despite Valeria's insistence that Leon was fine.

More surprising was the sight of a bronze-skinned, buxom, *gorgeous* woman running just behind him—a woman that Alix recognized as the same river nymph who had saved all three of them when vampires attacked Leon's villa during their housewarming party.

Naiad.

Alix didn't overly like Naiad, but she didn't hate the river nymph, either. More like, Naiad had always been too aloof to allow the friendly Alix to build much of a relationship with her.

Still, Alix knew how powerful Naiad was, and she was happy enough to see her in these times, especially after the river nymph left Leon almost half a year ago.

"Sir Leon!" Alix called out as Leon approached. "It's good to see you up and about, Sir!"

Leon smiled back at her with an uncharacteristic amount of warmth. "It's good to *be* up and about," he replied. "I apologize for taking so long."

"I don't mind," Alix replied. Valeria silently nodded her head in agreement, though both Leon and Alix noticed that her eyes had barely left Naiad. Hoping to defuse any tension, Alix asked Leon, "How are you doing?"

"I'm fine, all things considered. I managed to ascend to the seventh-tier, and I think that's why I took so long to wake up."

"The *seventh-tier*?!" Alix almost shouted, and Leon could see even Valeria suddenly look to him in shock, which confused him until he realized that he hadn't told her about his ascension, yet, and as a fifth-tier mage, she hadn't enough power of her own to have found out without that explanation.

"Yes," Leon replied.

Alix looked dumbstruck, while Valeria's surprise quickly vanished. Leon was the descendant of the Thunderbird, and the silver-haired woman knew that he would probably be quickly gaining power through that connection. For her part, Alix knew that Leon had some advantages as the last living heir of House Raime, but a seventh-tier mage at the age of twenty wasn't something she had ever thought *possible*.

After a few moments of silence during which Leon let them both process the news, he glanced at his river nymph companion with a questioning look on his face as if she'd just said something strange, then quickly made some reintroductions. "You both know Naiad—Naiad, you know Alix and Valeria. Naiad will be accompanying us. I hope that isn't a problem?"

"Not for me," Alix immediately responded, though her facial expression seemed almost stuck on 'surprised' after Leon's reveal of his ascension. She couldn't even bring herself to mention her own ascension to the fourth-tier.

Valeria took a few moments to think, both her and Naiad staring at each other. Naiad had a proud, almost provocative smile on her face, while Valeria's face remained stoically neutral. After a few moments, though, the silver-haired woman whispered, "Shouldn't be a problem."

[It's a pleasure to see you two again,] Naiad whispered into their minds, startling them a bit. Her tone was fairly imperious, but not quite as dismissive of them as she had been when they'd met. Despite that, it was fairly difficult to tell if she was being serious or not, but both Valeria and Alix gave her the benefit of the doubt as Naiad added, [I look forward to fighting at your side.]

"Good to hear," Leon said before he cut their introductions and reunion short. "Let's get Anzu saddled up and ready, we're burning daylight and I'm hoping to catch up with Prince August before sunset."

Alix and Valeria agreed, and the four proceeded into the stables and made their way over to Anzu's cell. The griffin was overjoyed to see Leon back on his feet and began scratching at the cell door so furiously that the door seemed like it was about to be torn from its hinges. When Leon laughingly unlatched the door, Anzu burst through and almost barreled him over in his attempt to nuzzle and cuddle with his human.

Leon spent a few minutes playing with Anzu before getting back to work. Anzu was saddled up and half an hour later Alix and Valeria were both mounted up and ready to fly. Anzu wasn't thrilled at carrying them instead of Leon—Valeria even less so, considering their recent history—but he was starting to get used to the situation and trusted Leon enough to allow it.

Naiad, meanwhile, would travel overland. In the southern wetlands, she'd be able to move just as quickly as Anzu could in the air. For his part, Leon would rely on his flight suit.

Once all the arrangements were made, Leon checked in with the commander of the camp as a courtesy, to ensure that the Legate knew that he was awake and moving on and to get Prince August's rough position, and then the group set out.

There wasn't much conversation during their flight. They stuck fairly low over the trees, but at the speeds they were going, trying to talk to each other would only slow them down and wouldn't lead to much other than frustration.

Leon was more than happy for that, for he was able to completely focus on refining his flying skills. With his new seventh-tier power, he was able to more finely sense the magic around him, which also neatly translated into a great amount of control and finesse with his magic power. All in all, he found flying to be much easier and even more enjoyable.

His flying skills had advanced so much, in fact, that he spent much of the latter half of the flight musing over improvements he could make to his flight suit, in addition to what weapons he might be able to make to complement it. After all, if he were to use his wind magic to aid his flying skills, then he couldn't at the same time use his lightning or fire, meaning he'd need to either use wind attacks with his own power, enchant an item to add onto the suit that would expand his airborne capabilities, or rely entirely on the suit's enchantments to fly and give up the power that was now making it so easy so that he could use his lightning or fire as he flew.

He was leaning towards the second option, for having a diverse magical skill set was one of his greatest advantages.

Leon put these thoughts out of his mind for the time being, for after several long hours of flying, during which they crossed almost two hundred miles, they finally came within sight of the rear of Prince August's marching column.

"Make for the ground!" Leon shouted to Anzu, and the two went into a dive, softly landing in the wide path that the army had made through the forests as they marched. Alix and Valeria nimbly hopped off Anzu's back, while Naiad materialized out of a small nearby stream.

[Why not go all the way by air?] Naiad asked as she approached, projecting her voice to the other two in a show of courtesy.

"Last time I did that, we got held up for a little while by the Prince's guards," Leon replied. "I don't want to spook them into attacking us, even if that possibility is unlikely. Better to make the final approach on foot. Besides, I think they'd definitely attack you if you were to just appear in the middle of the marching column as you do."

Naiad frowned, but she said nothing more about it.

The group began walking toward the rear of the column. They didn't hide or try to avoid attracting attention, and as such, after about fifteen minutes, about a dozen riders peeled off from the main column to investigate their appearance. It didn't take much for Leon to prove who he was; the riders took one look at Anzu, recognized Leon as 'the White Griffin'—much to Leon's consternation—and then escorted him and his group to the column.

The back of the column was mostly devoted to the baggage train—after they got past the units assigned to guard it, of course. Most of the critical supplies were kept in the soul realms of higher tiered mages, but there were a lot of things that just weren't worth transporting that way, such as camp materials and the personal effects of the soldiery. Plus, it was risky to have all supplies kept in a storage manner that could disappear if the mage keeping them were to unexpectedly die, so some of their food was also kept on wagons in the baggage train.

More relevantly, though, were the messenger horses that were also kept back there. These horses were light and fast, not trained for war but only to carry their riders as far and as fast as possible. The most expensive of these horses could travel almost two hundred miles in a day without rest. Two of these horses were lent to Alix and Valeria, while Leon took his place astride Anzu. Naiad was offered a horse, but she refused, instead taking her place behind Leon on Anzu's back, where she could wrap her arms around him and hold him tight against her. Anzu, surprisingly, had no problems with allowing her on his back.

Once everyone was mounted up, it was easy enough to ride along the edge of the marching column, passing soldiers marching in formation, horse-drawn wheelless wagons and carriages, and the more disorganized levies and noble retainers. The marching column was long, but after about two hours, the group reached the front where most of the leaders could be found. Camp had already been made, so they were shown immediately to August's command tent where August himself, Roland, Marcus, Alcander, the Duchess of Vesontio, and Gaius were waiting.

Notably absent was Marquis Aeneas and Gratian, Gaius' brother and Duke of Lentia—but this wasn't a meeting of the higher-ups in the army, so Leon was hardly expecting *everyone* to welcome him back.

Roland was the first to greet Leon upon his entrance, rising from his seat and extending an arm to the younger man as he exclaimed, "Sir Leon! Wonderful to see you up and about! Absolutely wonder..."

His voice trailed off as he began examining Leon's aura and found that he could no longer accurately identify how strong Leon was. The younger man's aura was completely opaque to him, defying his attempts to perceive Leon's power other than 'stronger'.

"... You ascended?" he asked in disbelief, stunning the others who were about to offer their own greetings.

"Wait, what?" Marcus asked.

"Sir Leon?" August asked, his eyebrow cocking in surprise and elation, a hopeful smile spreading across his face.

"I'm now a seventh-tier mage," Leon confirmed.

"By the Ancestors!" Marcus shouted as he leaped to his feet, his face one of disbelief and abject shock. "How did you even *do* that?!"

"Sir Leon, please, you have to slow down," Alcander said, his voice shaking as he rose from his seat as well. "You're making the rest of us look bad..."

Vesontio maintained a dignified silence, though she nodded to Leon in recognition.

Gaius' reaction was a little more subdued. He stared at Leon unable to truly process what he had just revealed. So surprised was he that he barely even registered Valeria walking in right behind Leon.

"Congratulations!" Roland said as he clapped Leon on the shoulder. "I think that *has* to be a new record! Seventh-tier by twenty years old!"

"Indeed, Sir Leon, that's spectacular! Truly admirable!" August added. "Now, with Brimstone, we have two seventh-tier mages we can bring to the field instead of just one! We can match my brother tit for tat."

"Indeed," Leon said, turning to Marcus and Alcander. Both had, like Alix, ascended during the previous battle—and she walked in just as he was thinking about her, so he glanced at her to make sure she knew that she was included in what he was about to say. Gaius was the only one among them who remained a third-tier mage. "Congratulations to you three, as well, for your ascensions."

"Thanks..." Marcus murmured, hardly sounding happy about his achievement in light of Leon's.

Alcander's attitude was a little better, but he still sounded remarkably unenthusiastic as he thanked Leon, too.

Alix smiled and waved, feeling awkward as all the hells and not feeling like there was much to celebrate with Leon completely overshadowing everyone.

Only a moment later, Naiad walked into the tent. She made no attempt to hide her aura, proudly letting it radiate from her without a care in the world. As Roland and the other sixth-tier mages in the room laid

their eyes upon her, they went deathly quiet, and the sudden change in atmosphere affected even the others, who all began staring at Roland and Vesontio on one side, and Leon and Naiad on the other.

“... Ah, and who may you be?” Roland asked, his hand subtly reaching for the sword hanging from his waist.

Leon frowned, as he could detect that Vesontio was also preparing herself for a potential fight, judging by her aura.

“This is Naiad,” he said. “She’s my lover. She’s not a threat to you.”

“Wait, ‘Naiad’?” Vesontio suddenly asked, standing up in alarm. “Are you saying that she’s a river nymph?!”

Once the others processed her words, they began to stare at Naiad in fear, with those standing slowly backing up and reaching for weapons. All trace of celebratory mood in the air following Leon’s reveal had vanished in an instant.

Before anything could kick off, however, Leon quickly stated, “Yes, she’s a river nymph, and she’s my woman. She won’t harm you, and anyone who harms her will have to answer to me—assuming of course, that they survive her retaliation. Other than that, so long as you leave her alone, she’ll leave you alone.”

“You say that, but river nymphs are notorious maneaters!” Vesontio protested.

“Indeed,” Roland agreed. “Sir Leon, river nymphs have been hunted down to near extinction for a reason...”

“Naiad is no threat,” Leon coolly insisted, his voice taking on a hard edge. “In fact,” he continued, turning his gaze to August, whose face remained passive though his cheeks had turned rather ashen and his eyes constantly flitted between Leon and Naiad, “if you would allow her, she’d fight with us against Prince Octavius. With her, we’d have *three* people of seventh-tier strength or higher on our side.”

“What do you mean, ‘or higher’?” August calmly asked.

Leon simply smiled in response.

August stared at the younger man, searching for any signs of hostility or duplicity. He didn’t say a word, and the others took their cue from him, especially as Valeria and Alix took their places at Leon’s side, making it clear which side they’d be on if a fight broke out.

“... I am going to choose to trust you, Sir Leon,” August finally said. “I will trust that you know what you’re doing and that Lady Naiad will not be a threat to us or the people of this Kingdom.”

“Your Highness—” Roland whispered before being immediately cut off by the Prince.

“Sir Roland, whatever you have to say can wait. I’m sure Sir Leon and his retinue are tired, so let’s let them rest. We can talk about the rest later.”

“... Yes, Your Highness...” Roland muttered.

“Sir Leon, I’ll have some of my adjutants show you to a suitable tent for you and your retinue,” August said, quickly ringing a small enchanted bell that could be heard outside of the magically sound-proofed tent. “Please, feel free to get some food and rest. We’ll talk more tomorrow morning.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Leon replied, the corners of his lips twitching as he suppressed the instinct to smile. He had to admit that they had discovered what Naiad was a lot faster than he’d expected, and while their near-violent reactions were within his expectations, he was quite grateful that August had made quick moves to keep the peace.

A moment later, Leon and his retinue were escorted from August’s tent to a tent of their own, leaving the others alone in August’s tent.

“Your Highness!” Vesontio almost shouted once the tent flap had closed, sealing them off from the outside world once more.

“I’m going to stop all of you right there,” August said, though only Roland had looked like he was about to speak up, too. Marcus, Alcander, and Gaius had all remained silent as their elders started hashing this out amongst themselves. “I understand your concern. This ‘Naiad’ is of a race of being that is notorious for eating people. However, did you actually *look* at her? That woman had eyes for no one but Leon, I don’t think she even glanced at anyone else while she was in here. There wasn’t a hint of killing intent to be found in her aura, and given her obvious strength, if she wished us harm then I daresay we would’ve been harmed most grievously!

“As I said to Sir Leon, I’m going to trust him on this. He isn’t the most... *steadfast* of supporters, but if anything, that makes me trust him more. If he says that Naiad is no threat, then I will not regard her as one.”

Vesontio sighed, returned to her seat, and said, “If that is Your Highness’ will, then so be it. But I shall keep my eye on that monster, and if she tries anything, then I will do everything within my power to stop her.”

“As will I,” Roland whispered as he, too, took his seat. “Still, now that Sir Leon’s a seventh-tier mage, Duronius at the very least is now practically ours. Should we move ahead with our plan?”

“Yes,” August replied. “We’ll let Sir Leon rest, and then we’ll move in the morning. We *can’t* let Duronius reach the coast!”

Chapter 459: Diplomatic Mission I

“So, what’s up with the name thing?” Leon said as he and Maia entered their ‘room’. The tent that August’s adjutant had shown them to was quite large, as befitted Leon’s status as one of the champions of August’s army, with separated sound-proofed sections for the resident leader and their knights. But his retinue was so small that Leon barely filled the place, with more than half the tent remaining empty. Still, Alix and Valeria gave the two lovers their privacy, though Valeria seemed a little reluctant to leave Maia alone with Leon.

“What do you mean?” Maia asked, the sound of her heavenly voice sending shivers down Leon’s spine.

“I meant, why did you ask me to introduce you as ‘Naiad’?” Leon asked. When making reintroductions between her and his knightesses, she’d mentally asked him not to share her true name.

“Right now, that name is only for you and my mother to use,” she whispered as she snuggled up to him from behind, pressing her buxom chest into his back as she wrapped her arms around his toned waist. “As happened with us, knowledge of my true name can allow someone hostile to us to attack my soul realm directly. I believe you humans have a similar concept, that of a Mana Glyph.”

Leon nodded, suddenly understanding completely. Someone who had her name could attack her source of power, her soul realm if they wanted. “What about Elise? Will you be sharing with her as well?”

“Of course.”

Leon smiled, twisted in her embrace until they were facing each other, and then began hugging her back.

They stood there in the room just silently enjoying each other’s company for several long seconds, basking in the other’s presence. They’d been too long apart and now just wanted to be as close to the other as possible. Leon wondered just how intense moments like these would be once they reunited with Elise, and his desire to see the war ended quickly redoubled.

After a long moment, Leon and Maia parted from the other just enough to look each other in the eyes, then press their lips together in a prolonged and extremely intimate kiss. Soon after, they began to tug at each other’s clothes. Maia was only wearing a soft ankle-length full-sleeved dress without anything beneath, so she was naked much sooner, with Leon only having to pull her dress up over her head. As soon as she was, Leon pushed her back against the bed that had been set up, and she tumbled onto the mattress with a look of surprise and arousal.

Leon then spent the next few minutes lavishing his river nymph lover with oral attention, reveling in every moan of pleasure. But that only took them so far, and he quickly shed the remainder of his clothes and joined Maia on the bed. They spent at least an hour making love to each other, pushing the other over the edge of ecstasy more than a dozen times, with their extreme power filling them with energy and the drive to continue where they might’ve otherwise been spent.

They might’ve continued for hours more, spending most of the night joined above or below—or some combination thereof—but for a wave of magic senses that subtly washed over them. With the realization that they were being spied upon, Leon and Maia’s moods turned in an instant. They’d been cuddling in between rounds, letting their hands explore each other’s bodies, and then only a second later they were on their feet, adorned instantaneously with fresh clothes summoned from their soul realms.

They knew from what direction that pulse had come from, but they were in the middle of a massive camp, it could’ve been any number of people who projected their magic senses like that. However, that list narrowed significantly when they factored in how warded the tent was. It took someone intimately familiar with its defensive enchantments to slip their magic senses past them like that, someone of high rank.

But still, there were several dozen people who fit that description in range, and none of them appeared to have done so. Leon and Maia scanned each and every person with their magic senses, but all were busy with other tasks.

No second pulse came, but their guard remained up.

"Well, that ruined the mood," Leon said after they waited for longer than a minute in complete silence.

"Only a little bit," Maia replied, flashing him a cheeky smile. "Have any idea who might've wanted to sneak a peek?"

"None..." Leon replied.

"Maybe it was a vampire looking to kill you," she suggested. "I killed a few out in the forests before you ran after me that seemed to have been following you..."

"You did?!" Leon asked in alarm. "Why didn't you tell me earlier?!"

"They were incredibly weak, none stronger than the fourth-tier," Maia replied with a shrug. "They didn't seem important at the time."

Leon scowled. "They might've been a part of a larger nest. Let's keep an eye out for anything unusual. And please *tell me* if you do something like that again. I don't want to be caught unprepared..."

Maia nodded, looking suitably chastened.

Leon wasn't too upset with her, though. At the very least, it was nice to know what had happened to those demonic auras he'd sensed earlier in the campaign, and he knew that Xaphan would likely be tickled pink when he heard the news, assuming he wasn't currently listening in.

—

Not far away, the Duchess of Vesontio sighed and leaned back in her bed. Prince August may trust Leon Ursus, and by extension, those Ursus vouched for, but Vesontio wouldn't, especially not when Ursus was accompanied by a *river nymph*, of all things.

She caught a brief glimpse of her eldest brother in her mind's eye. He'd drowned forty years ago when they were both children. They'd been playing in a lake near the capital of their home Duchy when a river nymph appeared, ensnared her brother with her monstrous charm, and then pulled him beneath the water.

Vesontio's brother didn't appear again for a week, and when he was found, he'd been almost completely eaten. There was little left save for bones and his swimming attire.

No, Vesontio would remain vigilant. That Naiad was going to be a problem, she *knew* it.

But... that scene she had just witnessed when she'd projected her magic senses into Leon's tent, a scene of such love and tenderness between a northern barbarian and a monster that had been hunted to near extinction in the Bull Kingdom... That gave Vesontio pause as her heart raced. She hadn't known the intimate touch of anyone in years and seeing so much naked flesh had her feeling some type of way.

Her thoughts began to turn to Prince August and how well he'd filled out since his blood had awakened. She was curious to see what *he* looked like without any clothes, with that broad chest, wide shoulders...

'No! Idiot!' she silently scolded herself. 'This isn't the time for that! We have a war to win and a monster in the camp!'

She'd remain vigilant. If that Naiad so much as breathed at someone improperly, Vesontio would be there to put her down, regardless of power, and with what she knew about the weaknesses of the Bull Kingdom's warding scheme, she'd be able to check in on the river nymph at her leisure.

Just not so soon, the way those two had immediately leaped up after feeling her attention had been more than a little intimidating.

—

In the morning, Leon and Maia walked out of their room in the tent to find that Valeria and Alix were already awake. Alix was smiling at them knowingly, while Valeria followed Maia with her eyes like a wolf waiting for a single moment of weakness before it challenged its alpha for control of the pack.

It was a little disconcerting, but given what Leon knew about her, he couldn't blame her. For Maia's part, she returned the probing gaze with one of her own. For now, the two ladies seemed content to stare at each other, as if waiting for the other to make the first hostile move, and all while Alix was stuck between them, wondering just what in the hells she missed.

Leon wasn't looking forward to telling Maia all the sordid details about his current relationship with Valeria. He'd definitely need Elise there with him when he did, just to ensure that the river nymph didn't immediately fly into a murderous rage at the thought of Valeria being their enemy.

After a few long minutes of tense silence, a messenger from Prince August arrived, inviting Leon to a meeting to discuss their next steps. So, with some work in front of them, Leon and his tiny retinue left their tension behind to focus on that.

Several minutes later, after making sure that Anzu was being well-taken care of by the army's beastmasters, they arrived at Prince August's command tent.

Figuring that it might be best not antagonize anyone with Maia's presence but also not wanting to alienate anyone, Leon turned to the ladies behind him and said, "I'll be right back out."

Alix and Valeria nodded and moved back to wait in the crowded gathering area. Maia hesitated, staring at him until he nodded to her, wordlessly conveying that he wasn't going to be leaving. She glared at the guard, almost giving the poor man a heart attack, before turning around to join the other two.

Upon pushing open the tent flap, Leon was greeted by the sight of Marcus, Alcander, Roland, and August all hunched over a map. All four looked up as Leon entered.

"Sir Leon," August said with a smile. "Please, come in. We were just going over some plans."

Leon did as he was bid, sliding in between Roland and Marcus to take a look at the map, which he found was a regional map of the south-eastern Southern Territories. On it, the army was marked quite prominently, with them being about two hundred miles from the southern coast. About sixty miles to their south was another mark, which Leon took to symbolize Duke Duronius and the rest of the survivors in his army. Even further south was a third mark directly on the coast, which Leon wasn't too sure about.

"Are we waiting for anyone else?" Leon asked before they got started.

"No, the others are currently coordinating the army's movements," Roland said. "We can afford to take some time to get you up to speed, but the rest of the nobles and Legates have to move tens of thousands of people, and that takes time, and time is not something we're flush with."

"True," August said before pointing to the map. "Let's start with where we've found ourselves following the last battle. We lost somewhere on the order of ten thousand soldiers and retainers. Duronius, on the other hand, lost more than forty thousand."

"Forty thousand *dead*?!" Leon asked in shock. That was a staggering number, especially considering how many would've been wounded or potentially captured.

"Yes," Roland answered, "however, that isn't where things end. If they were, I don't think that arrogant bastard would be running away quite as quickly as he is."

"Following that battle, our good Duke lost nearly all the support of the remaining nobles in his army," August said with a smile, obviously relishing his enemy's situation, even though a moment later his face darkened as he remembered the cost in lives that had been paid to make that happen. "Most of them deserted his army during the fighting or when he fled the battle. At this point, he has an army of maybe forty thousand Legion soldiers, and that's us painting a bad picture."

"We, on the other hand," Marcus proudly added, "picked up quite a few new supporters from those deserting nobles and even some from the Legions that were under Duronius' command!"

Leon clicked his tongue in distaste. "And they were just welcomed in with open arms?" he asked. "They were our enemies only a few days ago, are they just getting a free pass now?"

"No," August said. "Right now, it might seem like it, but once we win and I reestablish order in the Kingdom, those nobles will receive their reckoning."

Leon lightly frowned. It was *fine* as far as reprisals went, but he was hoping for something a little more... *viscerally satisfying*... a hope which he immediately regretted when he thought about Valeria. He was well aware that he was more than a little hypocritical when he thought about how he was giving her a chance despite everything her family had taken from him, while at the same time wishing bloody vengeance upon those who had chosen to fight for Octavius, only to defect to August when Duronius looked like he was about to lose the Southern Territories.

"So where does that leave us?" Leon asked, leaving the introspection for later.

"We're at about two hundred and fifty thousand," August proudly declared. "Duronius has less than a fifth of our army."

"Where's he going, then?"

August's good mood flagged a little as he turned his attention back to the map.

"He's trying to link up with the Consul of Discord."

Leon nodded in understanding. The Consul of Discord, or alternatively, the Consul of the Gulf, was the admiral in charge of the fleets in the Gulf of Discord. One of those fleets had been seized by the forces loyal to Prince August under Constantine, Trajan's trusted knight who had been left in charge of the Bull's Horns, but all the rest of the fleets in the Kingdom were in Octavius' hands.

"How bad is it?" Leon asked.

"We're not sure, we haven't gotten eyes on the entire armada, yet," August admitted. "They're in a natural harbor that we haven't been able to fully get access to, but Sir Publius has sent us some missives saying that at the very least we ought to expect five fleets, perhaps as many as seven."

Leon's face dropped. The Kingdom had fifteen fleets split between the Gulf of Discord and the Endless Ocean. The Ocean was assigned the greater number, but that didn't mean the Gulf's fleets were lacking. In fact, every fleet had hundreds of ships, though most of those ships were relatively small. Still, there were at least half a dozen capital ships with thousands of Legion sailors and marines aboard in every fleet, most of which had Flame Lances installed, as well. Leon remembered those terrifying weapons well—they used fire magic to melt stone, then earth magic to launch the molten mass at terrific speeds. Leon couldn't even begin to comprehend how magically complex such weapons must be, but from what he'd seen during the war with the Talfar Kingdom, they were not weapons he was eager to face down. If there were even five fleets present, then that was thirty capital ships, possibly more. Each capital ship could have two Flame Lances installed, making it nearly suicidal to attack the fleet even with their swelled numbers without some kind of hefty advantage.

"Is there a plan to deal with that?" Leon asked.

"... We have the makings of one," August hesitantly said, "though we were waiting to see what you thought about it..."

"Should I take that to mean that I'll be playing a central role in whatever this is?"

"Yes."

Leon took a deep breath, but he quickly replied, "Well, then let's hear it. If it'll end this war sooner, then I'm all for it."

"That's good to hear," August said. "We're hoping to sway the Consul of the Gulf to our side. If he defects to me, then not only would we gain access to a massive fleet, but we'd also trap Duronius between us. He'd be forced to surrender."

"Assuming that the Consul accepts your offer," Leon said with a cynical tone.

"Assuming that, yes," August replied.

"Where do I come in on this?"

"You have a griffin, you could fly above Duronius' head and reach the Consul before he does."

"I could also drop down atop him and end him right there," Leon said. "At my current level of power, I don't think the Duke has anything that could stand in my way. He's only, what? Sixty miles ahead of us? I could end this before noon."

August cringed a bit. "That's always an option, I guess..."

"Sir Leon, we're hoping to take the Duke hostage. He is Octavius' grandfather, you know," Marcus said to Leon with a hint of reproach. "Besides, I don't think it's a wise message to send to the nobles to see

one of their most respected collaborators killed so unceremoniously. In battle, sure, but assassinated? That might present a problem..."

'Damn politics...' Leon bitterly thought.

"It would be better to have the Duke and those who fought with him face the Arbiters and then the headsman," Marcus continued. "Or killed in battle. It all just looks better that way, and we might be able to persuade more nobles to abandon Octavius if we show that we have a sense of mercy. Likewise, I wouldn't recommend trying to kidnap him. For all your confidence, he still has plenty of sixth-tier mages around to defend himself with, enough to even fight off a Paladin who can fly..."

Marcus' words about mercy struck a chord with Leon, again reminding him of his and Valeria's relationship. He reluctantly set aside his idea.

"If your plan doesn't work, I'm going to be a tad irate," he said, saying no more on the subject.

"You won't be the only one," August said placatingly. "So, that's it. I want you to deliver my terms to the Consul of Discord. Will you do that?"

"That'll be incredibly dangerous," Leon said. "Anzu might get shot out from under me if I take him that close to such a strong enemy position." The others looked like they were about to offer some words of protest or comfort, but Leon cut them off when he continued, "But I'll do it. I have some ideas for getting around their defenses. In the meantime, I'd appreciate it if someone could watch out for my retinue. I'll be taking Naiad with me, though, so no need to worry about her."

August nodded, then waved his hand and conjured a sealed envelope from his soul realm.

"This is my offer to the Consul," he said. "Time is of the essence. Leave as soon as you are able. I will personally see that your other two knights are not left hanging in the wind."

"Thank you, Your Highness," Leon said, taking the envelope. He took one last look at the map, then at the other four. "I guess I'll see all of you later."

"Good luck, Sir Leon," Roland said, the others quickly offering the same words.

Given what he had now been tasked to do, Leon would take all the luck that he could get.

Chapter 460: Diplomatic Mission II

Aulus Arrius Abronius was in a terrible mood. This was a rather stark departure from his usual professional stoicism, but he felt like his current mood had been well earned.

The first thing to try his patience happened several months back when he received word of Prince August's trial for the murder of Prince Trajan, followed soon after by the word of August's escape and the start of the civil war. All of Abronius' attempts to get more information were blocked and stymied by bureaucratic horseshit that he had little patience for, and the only reason why he hadn't taken a galley straight up the Naga to wring some truth out of the bastards in the capital was that the war was still ongoing.

Making matters worse, once Prince Octavius *did* get in contact with him, it was to insult him by placing him under the command of Duke Duronius, who'd recently been appointed the new Consul of the

Central Territories after Avidius was forced into retirement. All of that was concerning enough, but when Abronius heard that the Consul of the South had been subordinated, too, he was furious. Consuls were answerable only to the King—or if they had the proper orders, Paladins—not to other Consuls!

Abronius felt humiliated, a feeling which only compounded when Duronius refused his recommendations to take Ariminium by sea. Abronius felt like he could do it since the city was now only defended by a single Legion, even if that Legion had commandeered the local fleet. Abronius still had six more fleets, more than enough to take the city, he believed.

But Duronius refused, stating that he wanted to take it by land *and* sea—or, as Abronius suspected, he'd wanted to take the city himself rather than letting the fleets do it. The problem there was that the land army had been stalled by the rebel Prince August himself. Abronius wasn't sure if the term 'rebel' still fit August after his communications with some of the King's councilors whom Octavius had dismissed, but it was still the 'official' term so long as Octavius held the capital.

So Abronius could only wait for Duronius to get his head out of his ass or to capture Prince August and win the war. Given how their past engagements went, Abronius wasn't optimistic about the latter, a sentiment which proved prophetic when he was informed that Duronius had recently lost a battle so badly that most of his surviving troops deserted him, leaving him with a paltry two Legions, and that he was retreating to link up with Abronius' fleet.

'Figures he only wants to use the armada now,' the Consul thought, a scowl crossing his darkly tanned, sun-kissed skin, his hands running through the woolly black hair that he inherited from his foreign, dark-skinned father. His mother had been a landed noble, and he'd been her tenth child, while his father had been her sixth husband, an exotic warrior from far to the south with skin as dark as the midnight sky.

Abronius had gotten more than a few sideways looks and dismissive comments from those in noble circles due to his obvious foreign heritage, which was part of the reason why he joined the naval Legions—more foreigners were working on the seas than there were on land. In the fleets, he wasn't so much of an outsider.

But now, he was waiting on Duke Duronius, one of the men that, in Abronius' eyes, at least, was a walking symbol of that feeling of isolation and otherness that he'd felt in the Kingdom of his birth. He had to wait for the Duke to arrive, then wait on the man like he was the King that Abronius served, as if *he* were the King that had so accepted Abronius years ago, who had shown so much trust in him as to give him a Consulship.

No, Abronius was not in a good mood. But the letter on his desk that he was reading promised that his mood would improve, if only he did what was being asked of him.

The Consul sighed and leaned back in his chair, his gaze wandering around his office. He was on his flagship, in his office just across a large hall from the ship's bridge one level above, with the primary doors to the main deck below. A grand staircase was the main showcase of the open, multi-leveled hall, which was the one consideration for aesthetics on the Legion ship; nowhere else in its structure was the ship so open and wasteful of space.

His office wasn't too lavishly decorated for a man of his rank, with no works of art adorning its walls, no thick carpet, no marble statues anywhere. It was purely functional, with the polished wood and comfortable if simple furniture its only nod to the luxury expected of such an office.

He found the simplicity comforting, but he doubted that the Duke would agree. In fact, he was looking forward to Duronius' reaction to the understated welcome that Abronius had prepared.

'No doubt that man expects to be received like an Ancestor returned from the pyre,' the Consul smilingly thought. After a few more minutes of sitting alone in his office, Abronius finally took one last look at the letter he was perusing and made his decision. *'All right Publius, let's see if you can deliver...'*

—

Duke Duronius came into the natural harbor where the armada was stationed like a conquering hero. His armor glistened in the late evening sun, his white steed standing tall and proud, his gray hair perfectly groomed. He looked the very picture of the noble and mighty knight ready to defend his King and Kingdom.

The same couldn't be said for his retainers, however. They wore harried looks, their armor dirty and crusted with blood, their formations ragged, their morale clearly broken from the way they collapsed almost as soon as they reached safety.

They numbered roughly eight hundred and had moved out far ahead of the rest of the remnants of their army—to properly coordinate the fleet's movements, they weren't *running*, Duke Duronius did not *run* from his enemies!

But still, they had left forty thousand of their comrades behind and made a death march to the coast, crossing a distance of more than three hundred miles of swamps and forests in less than five days. None of the Legion sailors who were there to witness their fatigue could blame them, though they weren't in a rush to provide any comfort. Word had been passed down from the Consul, they were to only do the bare minimum to greet their 'esteemed guests'.

In contrast to the Legion soldiers, the sailors were tight and proper, displaying a professionalism as they went about their business maintaining their camp that hadn't been seen in Duronius' army since before it had been smashed by August earlier in the week.

And what a camp it was. It was the closest natural harbor that the armada could dock at, but the closest city that could service their ships was more than two dozen miles west. That meant their camp had to be quite large, otherwise all of their ships would have to stay out in the Gulf, and with the size of their combined fleets, that just wasn't feasible.

Most of the armada was still out in the water, though, stretching out as far as the eye could see. Duronius' followers breathed a sigh of relief when they saw it—or those that remained on their feet did.

Duronius himself wasn't in the mood for taking in the view. A welcome party had been assembled for him, but the Consul himself was nowhere to be seen. A mere Legate had been left out to greet him, seriously offending the Duke.

Walking right up to the Legate while ignoring the man's greetings, Duronius demanded, "Where is Sir Abronius?!"

Completely unfazed, the Legate instead smiled at the Duke's rudeness and said, "The Consul of Discord is currently aboard his flagship. He's given orders to escort you there immediately so that you two may speak."

"Then get moving," the Duke imperiously commanded, but again, the Legate seemed to take it completely in stride.

The Legate and his retinue led the Duke and his entourage down to the beach where several rowboats awaited them. The Consul's flagship was out on the water at the moment, and since there were no docks large enough for it to moor at the coast, they'd have to take smaller boats to reach it.

The Duke scowled but kept his peace as he stepped into the first of the rowboats with several of his knights and half a dozen sailors. Ten minutes of rowing later, the boat was hoisted up the side of the flagship by an apparatus employing earth and air magic, and Duronius stepped out onto the deck of the Consul's flagship. Again, he was greeted by several dozen high-ranking knights, but the Consul was notable for his absence.

"Where is he?!" he irately demanded of the Legate.

"In his office, I'd imagine," the Legate serenely replied, his attitude only serving to further infuriate Duronius. "This way, Your Grace."

The Legate then led the Duke past the other knights, all of whom didn't even bother offering any greetings, only silently falling in behind the two as the Legate took the Duke toward the Consul's office. By this point, the Duke was so angry and offended that he didn't even notice that the rest of his retinue aside from the handful that had accompanied him in his rowboat was missing.

When they arrived at the door to the office, the Legate held it open and graciously gestured for the Duke to enter first. Duronius, scowling, arrogantly strode in like he owned the entire ship. Within, he found the Consul waiting for him, the darker-skinned man leaning back in his chair and propping up his chin with his arm, looking for all the world as if he were bored and waiting on a late lunch rather than the single most important noble in the entire Kingdom.

Standing around the room were a dozen more Legates, their auras towering and oppressive, their expressions stern and unyielding. Walking in behind the Duke came the first Legate along with half a dozen more, loudly slamming the door shut behind them.

Suddenly, the Duke realized his position. His entourage wasn't with him, his secretaries, assistants, and other followers weren't at his side, and he was surrounded by powerful sixth-tier mages. With the door closed and the office sealed, he couldn't release his magic senses, nor could he hear what was happening outside.

"What is the meaning of this?!" he demanded.

"I'm sorry, Your Grace, but the meaning of *what*, exactly?" the Consul asked, his voice a deep, intimidating baritone, his aura calm and unfazed by turbulent emotions.

"Where are my people?!" Duronius shouted.

“How should I know?” the Consul smarmily replied with a provocative grin. “Do I look like the person whose job it is to keep track of *your* people?”

“Listen, you insubordinate mudsk—” the Duke began, but before he could finish, two of the Legates behind him kicked him in the back of the knees, while several others grabbed him and wrestled him down to the ground. The Duke shouted in wrath, but one of the Legates pulled out a long rag to tie around the Duke’s head and gag him. The Duke tried to call upon his magic, but there wasn’t much stone or dirt around for him to manipulate, and before he could try and use his magic to create some for him to use or to call out a weapon from his soul realm, one of the Legates slammed his head down into the floorboards of the office, stunning him momentarily.

The Duke came to just a few seconds later, but by then it was too late, the Legates had gotten him into restraints. They’d used enchanted silver manacles meant for powerful mages which inhibited the use of their magic and prevented mages from accessing their soul realm. It wasn’t a perfect solution since it didn’t completely stop magic use, but it was enough to stop Duronius from fighting back in any meaningful way before they got him to a cell where his magic *would* be completely inhibited.

“Bold of you, to try insulting me in my own office, when I’m surrounded by my own knights,” Abronius drily stated, his expression not changing much despite what had just happened.

The Duke began to scream and curse and fight against the Legates as they hauled him up to his feet, but the gag kept him from making any sense.

“Sorry, what was that?” Abronius insincerely asked, his attitude poking fun at the restrained Duke.

“Whatever, it doesn’t matter. Take him to the brig, let him wait for Prince August’s arrival in chains. Pull up camp on the shore, too, just in case those Legions coming in behind him try to rescue their commander.”

—

Leon stared down at the masses of ships below and frowned. None of the ships were by the coast, and it didn’t seem there was much of a presence there, anyway. It made going to them peacefully much more difficult than he would’ve liked.

He was riding Anzu, and he was alone, for the most part. Alix and Valeria stayed behind at the camp, while Maia had accompanied him most of the way and then merged with the swampy ground once he started drawing near the coast. She was still around, but she would stay out of sight until he started his return.

Assuming he *did* return and wasn’t shot out of the sky on his approach. There wasn’t much armor he could put on Anzu that wouldn’t weigh him down too much to prevent flight, and making matters worse, the two Legions that Duronius had with him were closing in from the north. If Leon had to guess, then he’d say if they weren’t stopping for the night then they’d arrive at the coast by daybreak.

He sighed and signaled Anzu to descend. It looked like the camp on the shore had been mostly pulled up, immediately indicating to Leon that something was very wrong, but there were still a few sailors and smaller boats on the coast who he could talk to. At the very least, he could check in with them and extend his request for a formal meeting with the Consul of Discord.

Leon checked himself over one last time before their descent was noticed. His armor had been too heavily damaged for him to wear, so he was only dressed in some lightly enchanted mail, over which he was wearing his old snow lion coat, still as glossy and brilliantly white as it had always been. He was vaguely entertained that he and Anzu now matched.

He wore no weapons at his side, hopefully sending a more diplomatic message than he would normally. It had taken a while, but he was finally starting to come around to the idea of talking things out first rather than immediately resorting to violence. He didn't want to repeat his mistake with Valeria from almost a week ago. The sight of her bleeding and in pain wasn't one he wanted to see again, let alone *cause*. He was even starting to regret some of his earlier, rasher actions when he'd acted without thinking, but he pushed those thoughts out of his mind. He had a job to do.

As the two descended, they were finally noticed by the sailors still on the coast. He could hear some shouting and the indicative sounds of clinking metal, indicating that the sailors were arming themselves.

Leon did his best not to seem overly aggressive, landing a good distance from the sailors and well into the tree lines just past the beach. He then had Anzu approach at a slow, unthreatening pace as the sailors spread out over the beach. When he emerged from the trees, he paused, letting them see him and react accordingly.

In short order, he found himself surrounded by more than twenty Legion sailors, though none of them were stronger than the fourth-tier.

"Identify yourself!" a fourth-tier woman demanded, brandishing a long spear at Leon.

He presumed her to be the leader, and she certainly was dressed better than the others, with a prominent silver bracelet adorning her right arm.

"I am Leon Ursus, a knight here representing Prince August. I've come to deliver a message to Sir Aulius Abronius, the Consul of Discord."

"What proof do you have of this?" the woman demanded, her demeanor not lessening in the slightest despite Leon's lack of concern and his towering aura.

Leon didn't get angry at her, though. In her place, he knew that he'd demand proof, too. As his response, Leon retrieved first his Heaven's Eye ID, then a letter stating his purpose that had been signed by Prince August and marked with his personal seal. As far as identification went, it was about as good as Leon was going to get.

The woman spent a long time examining both documents, her eyes frequently alternating between them and Leon.

After more than a minute, she tossed Leon back his ID and said, "Wait here, I'll relay your request."

Leon nodded and made no further movements. With a few strokes of Anzu's feathers, the griffin, too, relaxed, furling his wings and softening his predatory gaze. In response, the rest of the sailors that had surrounded Leon also relaxed, though their spears were always pointed at least vaguely in his direction.

Fortunately, Leon didn't have to wait long. He was worried that he would be stuck there for hours until Duronius' Legions arrived, but after only twenty minutes, the fourth-tier knightess returned with another knightess, a Legate if her sixth-tier aura was anything to go by.

"Sir Leon Ursus? The Thunder Knight?" the sixth-tier knightess asked as she approached, her expression turning into one of shock as she registered the fact that she wasn't able to perceive his aura, providing a strong indicator of his strength and lending a great deal of credibility to his claims.

"That's me," Leon replied through barely unclenched teeth.

"Sir Abronius will meet with you," she replied, not missing a beat despite her surprise. "We can escort you there, or you can fly yourself. His ship is the closest dreadnought."

It was Leon's turn to be surprised. These were supposed to be the enemies of the Prince he was here to advocate for, and yet they were going to allow him to approach their flagship without an escort?

[Careful, Leon, this stinks like a trap,] Xaphan murmured from his soul realm.

[Maybe...] Leon muttered back. [Or maybe... maybe I won't need to employ violence for this job. That would be a nice change of pace.]

[Plan for violence anyway, don't be caught off-guard,] the demon cautioned him.

Leon didn't respond. After the business with Valeria, he was starting to get a little tired of Xaphan and the Thunderbird's way of thinking. They advocated for a violent approach that had served them well, that Leon had embraced, that had already seen him assassinate Tiberias back in the capital more than a year ago.

But that wasn't what he wanted right now. With Valeria's offer of peace, he wanted to believe stronger than he'd ever admit that such a tactic could work. But he knew that the demon and his Ancestor would never agree to that and would more likely than not advise him to kill Valeria now that they had laid out their cards on the table if he were to ask their opinions on his current situation.

"I'll go without an escort, I'm sure they can shoot me down if I make any hostile moves and there's no need to take any of you away from your duties here," Leon replied, giving them what he hoped was a reassuring smile—he wasn't sure, though, being reassuring wasn't something he was used to expressing.

The sixth-tier knightess seemed to relax a bit, though, so he figured he couldn't have done that poor of a job.

"Very well, then, Sir," she said. "Best not to linger here..."

The knightess pointedly glanced out into the forest behind Leon.

"Right. Thank you," he said, spurring Anzu forward and back into the air.

'Now... Sir Abronius... why are you so trusting?' Leon wondered as Anzu flew slowly and lazily over the water, staying highly visi