

## Storm King 471

### Chapter 471: Post-Bellum

[Maia, I'm on my way out,] Leon whispered into Maia's mind, a smile gracing his lips as he reveled in the bond that they shared.

It took a moment for the river nymph to respond, and when she did, even in Leon's mind she sounded breathless. [Ah... we'll... be ready...]

*'She sounded a little... strange...'* Leon thought. *'Probably shouldn't have used her name like that so flippantly...'*

Leon quickly left the King's private estate, feeling almost like he was ditching shackles that had constrained him for years as he did so. He'd been serious when he told Bronze that he was going to resign from his knighthood now that the war was effectively over. There were bigger and better things on his mind now than rebuilding the hollowed-out bureaucracy of the Bull Kingdom.

Picking up the pace as much as he was able to without appearing completely ridiculous, Leon soon found himself at the docks grinning like a madman. He easily found his small retinue nearby thanks to his bond with Maia, staying out of the way as the fleets and Legions occupied the docks. Leon, for just a moment, watched as the soldiers and marines disembarked from the smaller ships, glad that he wasn't going to be around for when the word was finally passed down for them to all go home. He figured that there would be a lot of people angry that they had come so far only to be sent home without doing anything.

Of course, there would also be people who were relieved that they'd be able to go home without killing any more of their countrymen, but those weren't the people who would create problems.

Regardless, that wasn't his mess to clean up. He strode over to Maia, Valeria, Alix, and Anzu, a smile still plastered all over his face.

"What's up, Sir Leon?" Alix said as he approached. "You look happier than I've seen you in a *long* time."

"War's over, King's back in charge, armies and fleets are being sent home, Octavius is in prison... I'm feeling pretty good right now," Leon replied, not feeling at all shy about expressing his happiness to almost being done with all of this. "We've got nothing else to do, so let's get out of here."

"To the Tower?" Valeria asked as if she'd read his mind.

"To the Tower," Leon confirmed, his eyes turning over to Maia. "If Elise is going to be anywhere, it's going to be there."

Maia smiled but didn't reply. She simply sat up a little straighter on Anzu's back, anticipation, excitement, and a few traces of fear written all over her face.

As they started walking, though, something occurred to Leon.

"Alix, do you have any plans for the future?"

"Huh?" she replied, completely blindsided by the question.

Leon glanced over at her, his smile fading as a look of utter seriousness replaced it. "Let's say I wanted to leave this Kingdom and I wanted you to come with. Would you do so?"

"Can't imagine leaving little old me behind?" she teasingly asked.

Leon responded with a stony look, wordlessly telling her that he wasn't joking.

Alix frowned and averted her gaze. "I... I don't know," she muttered.

"I understand that that's a big decision," Leon continued, "and that you'll need some time to think about it. But I also wonder if Dame Minerva's transferring you to my retinue was meant to be permanent. If this war is well and truly over, then I want to move on, and I would like it if you were to come with me. I'll need friends where I'm going. But I also know that it might be a more attractive choice to stay here where your family is, maybe taking up a leadership role in the Legion."

Alix silently listened, not giving him an immediate answer. The Bull Kingdom was all she'd ever known, and though she'd known that Leon wasn't going to stick around, she thought there'd still be time left before that happened.

"How long... do you think you'll stay?" she asked.

"I can't say, depends entirely on how the next few weeks play out," Leon replied. "If the King manages to make this peace of his stick and Octavius is punished, then I think I'll resign almost immediately. If not... well, I don't know what'll happen because I don't know what might crop up. I might stay here for a year or two more as I wrap up some old business, but suffice it to say that I've got some other things on my mind than the squabbles of House Taurus and I'll be leaving relatively soon."

"Like the problems of another powerful House?" she asked, giving him a pointed look.

Leon was almost annoyed, but given the rumors about him, he wasn't going to get upset at her public implication of his true identity. Besides, there didn't seem to be anyone paying attention, anyway.

"Might be," he said. "Just think about it. I won't be sticking around the Bull Kingdom for much longer if all things go according to my current plans. I don't want you to be blindsided by that, and now you have an invitation to join me whenever you might want to take that up." Leon glanced at Maia and Valeria, who were listening in without saying anything. He knew both were going to follow him out of the Bull Kingdom as well—or at least he knew that Maia would, Valeria was a little more up in the air. "That offer extends to you two, as well," he said, just in case it wasn't clear.

Valeria smiled and nodded, a gesture that Leon returned. He didn't think she would leave, not after they agreed to try and give peace a chance.

[As if you even need to ask me,] Maia playfully scoffed. [Don't forget that you still owe me a child, no matter if our circumstances are now different. I'll get that child even if I have to chase you down to the ends of the universe itself and take it.]

Leon chuckled at the thought of Maia tearing through the Void searching for his manhood as the river nymph shot him a sultry smile.

[I doubt it'll come to that,] Leon replied.

"I'll give your offer some thought," Alix said. "I still have family in the Northern Territories, family I haven't seen in a while. Dame Minerva has also been quite good to me, she practically took me under her wing during my time here. I'd like the opportunity to speak with her before making any decisions."

"I understand completely," Leon responded. "No matter what you decide though, you're still my friend, and you'll always have a place in my home should you ever get the idea to come by."

Alix grinned at him and playfully threw a soft punch into his shoulder. It might've been far too disrespectful of a thing to do, but if Leon wasn't long for the Legions, then she wasn't going to hold back her friendly demeanor in public anymore.

The group didn't say much more as they proceeded back across the bridge to the city proper, then onward to the Heaven's Eye Tower. It was a quiet and eerily peaceful journey since most of the capital's citizens had either fled the city or holed up in their homes. The main thoroughfares were overrun with August's troops who had yet to start pulling out of the capital, but no one got in their way.

Still, it took about an hour of relatively leisurely walking to arrive at the Tower.

Leon paused for a moment at the door, unsure how exactly to proceed. His heart was hammering away in his chest and his hands were lightly shaking. He wondered if this was the best course of action, or whether it was better to go to Emilie's estate since he couldn't fathom that the Tower would even be open given the circumstances. At the very least, the nearby stables were empty, so he couldn't board Anzu while he was in the Tower.

[Let's go,] Maia whispered into his mind. [No more delays.]

Leon glanced back at his river nymph lover and met her lake blue eyes. They were set and determined, ready to see Elise again. She even slid off Anzu's back to walk in on her own two feet. He nodded and pushed open the doors.

Leon, Maia, Anzu, Alix, and Valeria all strode into the Tower. Beyond the entrance area, the main lounge area was just as deserted as Leon expected it to be, though given the fact that the doors hadn't been locked, he questioned his thought that the Tower was closed.

There at least seemed to be a few attendants on duty as only a few moments passed before a Heaven's Eye attendant made her presence known and approached the group.

"Welcome, Sir Leon," she said in greeting. She briefly turned to acknowledge the others, but she continued to address Leon, her attitude one of utmost respect, "Lady Elise is waiting for you on the top floor. We can board your griffin for you if you would like."

"Thank you," Leon replied. "I would like that very much."

He turned to Anzu and managed to coax him into staying by the door as the attendant gestured back over her shoulder for a beastmaster—a beastmaster that Leon recognized as the man most responsible for training Anzu into a proper war beast. Anzu allowed him to lead him off toward the Heaven's Eye stables, while the attendant escorted the remaining four to the magic lifts in the back of the lounge.

It was a quiet and fairly tense ride up to the ninth floor, but also mercifully short, not giving Leon and Maia time enough to stew in their excitement and anxiety. As soon as the lift opened, Leon and Maia

wasted no time walking down the short hallway toward the set of doors at the end of the hall which Leon knew would lead into Emilie's office.

Emilie's office was circular, with a great fire pit in the center, decorative columns sectioning off several parts from each other without diminishing the open floor plan, and an enormous desk on the far side of the room, behind which sat Emilie herself, a gentle smile on her face as she watched Leon's party enter. The room was richly decorated, but neither Leon nor Maia absorbed any of it as their eyes searched the room for Elise.

They didn't have far to look, for Elise rose from where she had been seated as the doors opened and began walking toward them, an enormous smile on her face, her long black dress hugging her body in ways specifically designed to entice without sacrificing dignity. She sashayed over to the door, her brilliant emerald eyes fixed on Leon.

"It's about time you—" she began, only to freeze in place as she finally registered Maia's presence, the rest of her statement dying in her throat.

Leon immediately rushed forward to pull Elise into a tight embrace while Alix and Valeria maintained a respectful distance. The attendant bowed and left, closing the door behind her, while Maia only took a few hesitant steps forward.

"We're back," Leon whispered into Elise's ear as he reluctantly separated from her. She'd only partially returned the embrace as her eyes hadn't yet left Maia.

"Where..." she began, only to trail off as she took a step toward Maia, her face contorting in surprise and confusion. After a few quiet seconds, though, her expression hardened, and she began striding toward Maia with a look of absolute determination. It almost seemed violent, but her aura remained relatively calm and free of killing intent.

Maia was able to stand strong and didn't flinch as Elise approached her, but her eyes did flit once or twice in Leon's direction, communicating to him her intense worry. But attention was swiftly brought back to Elise as she wrapped her arms around Maia's waist and pulled her in for a passionate kiss, pushing herself up onto the balls of her feet just a bit to reach the tall river nymph's mouth.

Reactions were fairly mixed. Leon smiled as he walked over and hugged Elise from behind, and Emilie leaned back in her chair with an enormous grin on her face. Meanwhile, Alix burst out laughing and Valeria's face went scarlet as she tried to avert her gaze, only to continue staring at the scene from the corner of her eye.

After what seemed like both an eternity and barely a moment, Elise separated from Maia—at least, above, for her arms remained locked around the river nymph's waist.

"Where have you been?!" she demanded to know.

"Maybe we can talk about that later?" Leon said before Maia could respond, sending a quick apologetic look Alix and Valeria's way.

Elise suddenly pulled back from Maia as if suddenly self-conscious and said, "Yes... um, we've some stuff to do, yes?"

"If by 'stuff' you mean getting our house back, then sure," Leon playfully stated, refusing to let her go as she tried to pull back a bit from him, too.

"Has everything been resolved in the Royal Palace?" Emilie interjected as she rose from her desk and sauntered over. Only under her teasing smile did Leon pull away from Elise, but not so far that they would have to reach far to touch the other.

"Yes," Leon quickly answered. "The King is awake, and he ordered an immediate end to all hostilities. Octavius has been arrested, and August's armies should be dispersing soon."

"That's good to hear," Emilie responded. "This war has played hell with the Bull Kingdom's economy, let me tell you, but all things considered, I'd say it's going to pull out of all this unpleasantness fairly well. Might take a few years, though..."

Leon nodded, but he wasn't too interested in the economics of the Kingdom.

"Now, let's head home," Emilie continued, looking to Elise. "We've some guests to arrange sleeping arrangements for, I presume?"

"That would be most appreciated," Valeria said, speaking for both her and Alix, who furiously nodded.

"Wonderful," Emilie said as she led everyone out of her office.

Once she passed Elise, Leon, and Maia, Elise quickly took Leon's arm and pressed her lips against his.

"Welcome home," she sensually whispered as her head retreated from his. "We've much to... *catch up* on, don't we?"

## **Chapter 472: Commitment**

"So, where were you?" Elise demanded of Maia, her voice even and carefully measured, her attitude imperious and demanding. Leon could tell that she was trying to project authority as she suppressed both her joy and anger at seeing Maia again.

She, Leon, and Maia were now alone in Elise's room, with Anzu moved to Emilie's stables, and Alix and Valeria shown to guest rooms in Emilie's estate. Leon and Elise's villa was still technically in the hands of the Bull Kingdom's government, so moving back in would probably take a few days even with the power of Heaven's Eye on their side.

"I had to go back to Saron..." Maia explained as she told Elise of her journey back to the city of the river nymphs and the meeting with her mother.

Elise nodded in understanding once the story was over. She didn't once interrupt to ask a question, she just listened quietly as Maia filled her in on the details.

"... and Leon chased me down and forced me to reveal myself," Maia finished as she smiled radiantly at Leon.

Elise then directed her gaze his way, fixing him in a sharp, almost uncompromising stare. Leon returned one that was almost defiant; he didn't think he'd done anything wrong, he understood that Elise was just angry that Maia had left in the first place.

"You could've done me the courtesy of sending word," Elise complained, turning away from them both with almost exaggerated haughtiness. "This isn't something I wanted to be surprised with."

"How would you like to be surprised?" Leon teasingly asked. "I can accommodate you however you want..."

"Unless it's a ring, don't bother," Elise said in a clear joke.

But Leon didn't take it as a joke. He went quiet, glanced over at Maia, then stood up from his chair.

"... What—" Elise began as he dropped down to both knees in front of her as she sat in her chair, staring at her with such serious intensity that there was no way in any hell she could've averted her gaze.

Without a word, Leon reached into his soul realm and retrieved his gift for her, something which he and the Thunderbird had labored over for weeks after he had it commissioned in Ironford.

It was the golden lotus bracelet, its petals now thoroughly enchanted to emit light based on the time of day, just like the flower it had been inspired by. The sapphires in its petals pulsed with magic power while the gold petals themselves glowed red in the morning, purple at midday, and a gentle blue at night. It had far more practical enchantments than just those, though.

"I love you," he said to her without a shred of insincerity, "and I could barely stand to be away for so long. I know that this is just a 'thing' and so shouldn't mean much, but I wanted to get you something that showed how often you've been on my mind."

Elise's eyes were as wide as plates, the green in them sparkling in the purple light of the lotus bracelet. She started making strange blubbering sounds as if she were trying to say something but just couldn't quite form the words. After a few seconds, she just stopped trying and quickly extended her wrist.

Leon took her hand in his and briefly brought his lips to her knuckles, then the back of her hand, then her wrist, only to then clasp the bracelet around it.

"I'm not good enough with the kinds of magic you employ so I had to get the Thunderbird's assistance. That thing isn't just decorative; once you unlock your elemental magic, it should boost your abilities with earth magic quite a bit, plus a little bit with water and light."

Elise barely heard what he said as she was utterly captivated by the intricate piece. The way the light spilled from the sapphires set within its golden petals, the swirling root-like clasp, and the power that she could feel within it was almost too much for her to process right now.

"Do you like it?" Leon hesitantly asked, unsure as he was how to take her reaction.

Elise looked up at him, stared into his eyes for a quick second, and then threw herself into his arms, practically sobbing from the emotional overload of the gift and Maia's return, all of her attempts to remain domineering and in charge utterly ruined now.

"I love you," Leon whispered into his red-haired lover's ear.

"... I-love you too," Elise managed to sputter, though her smile had practically split her face in half and tears streamed down her face. She glanced at Maia still sitting in her chair, staring at the two of them

with a longing gaze, and gestured to her to come over. Maia happily jumped out of her chair and threw her arms around the two of them. “W-we can go over the details later,” Elise said to them. “Right now, nothing matters except that you two are home!”

The sentiment was certainly shared among all three of them, and it wasn’t long before they were ditching their clothes right there so that they could express their feelings in more ways than just with their words.

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Elise moaned in satisfaction and snuggled closer to Leon as he collapsed on the bed next to her. Maia was over on his other side, earlier pleasure leaving her utterly unconscious, her arms still above her head even though Elise had untied them from the bedposts almost half an hour ago.

Leon smiled and pulled her closer, their naked bodies pressing together as if they were trying to join themselves into one. “It’s good being back,” he whispered into her ear. “If I have my way, I’ll never be gone for so long again.”

“I’m... not sure that’s... a promise you can keep,” Elise replied, still a little breathless after receiving his affection.

“I’ll be doing my best, though. At the very least, I doubt I’ll last another month in the Legions with the King taking charge again.”

“I can’t lie, it’ll be nice to have you around more,” Elise said as her fingers idly stroked Leon’s broad chest. “What do you want to do after that?”

Leon took a moment to consider how to broach this topic, but settled on straight-up honesty. After all the waiting he’d had to make Elise do in their relationship, the least he could do was to be honest about his intentions.

“I want to leave the Bull Kingdom,” he said.

Elise’s hand froze on his chest. Her entire life had been spent in the Kingdom, the idea of leaving wasn’t as enticing to her as it was to Leon.

“If you don’t,” Leon continued, “I can wait until you’re ready. I’ll wait as long as you want, but... I can’t stay here forever. You know that I have many places to visit here on Aeterna outside of the Kingdom, and then the Nexus after that...”

Leon briefly thought about Valeria and the information she’d shared. He’d yet to talk to Elise about the things that happened between him and her silver-haired friend while they were gone, and he wanted Valeria there with him when he did.

Suddenly, Elise raised her head to look him in the eye and gave him a self-deprecating smile. “Give me some time, all right?” she asked. “I want to go with you when you leave, but... I can’t just yet.”

“However long you need,” he repeated.

They went quiet for a long moment. Elise's eyes eventually fell on the golden lotus bracelet that she still wore—it was the only thing she was still wearing, in fact. "You know," she said, "some might consider this a gift worthy of a marriage proposal..."

"Do you include yourself when you say 'some'?" Leon playfully asked.

"Maybe I do," she replied, indulging in the teasing for just a moment before her tone took a more serious and apprehensive turn. "Would... that be a problem?"

Leon pulled her tighter against him and, without a trace of hesitation, said, "Absolutely not." He kissed the top of her head and wrapped his other hand around her, keeping her against him in a tight embrace. "I love you, Elise. I don't need to put a title like 'married' on what we have to make my feelings any stronger. For you and Maia, I would forsake all others. As far as I'm concerned, I'm already committed to you two. But I also know that marriage... means a lot to a lot of people. I don't really think I need it, but if that's what you want..."

He trailed off for a second as he gently took a hold of Elise's chin and tipped her head up so that they could make eye contact.

"... then I'll do anything."

He heard her breath hitch in a tiny gasp, and he leaned down as far as he could to press his lips against hers. It was uncomfortable, so he couldn't hold it for long, but he wanted her to *feel* his honesty, his love, and his commitment.

When their lips separated, Elise smiled up at him, twisted herself so that she was resting atop him instead of against his side, and then pushed herself up to straddle his waist.

"That... *is* something I want," she admitted, her eyes meeting his.

Leon felt his heart flutter in that moment, and he wanted nothing more than to make Elise and Maia as happy as he could. He was already bonded with Maia, but he needed to do more with his relationship with Elise.

"Then let's get married," he said.

Elise burst out laughing, her body going limp against Leon as she threw her arms around his neck.

"I... I can't... believe... that's how... how you asked!" she said in between bouts of laughter. Leon might've been a bit concerned had he not been able to hear the joy in her voice, and she pulled back just enough to seal his lips with hers. A few seconds passed like that, neither moving much in order to stay connected, both feeling the other's rapidly increasing arousal as their bodies ground against each other.

When they finally did separate their lips just a little bit, Leon asked, "Is that a no?"

"As if!" Elise cried. "I don't want some elaborate proposal ceremony, that you asked in the first place was enough. I wasn't sure if you would, to be honest..."



Her voice took on an insecure tone as she stopped talking, one that Leon didn't think he'd ever heard her use before. So he pushed himself up even more, far enough that Elise's legs fully left the bed, then he turned and tossed her back down on the bed.

"I get the feeling that I still need to *show* you just how much I love you," he said, a playful gleam in his eyes. Elise smiled and tried to rise back up to embrace him, but he only pushed her back down, his eyes drinking in the sight of her fit, well-endowed body as it hit the mattress. After a moment, he grabbed her legs behind the knees and lifted her lower half until it was positioned directly over his hips and rapidly stiffened manhood, his lower head gently rubbing against her lower lips. He could feel her desire, all heat and wetness. She wanted him, he wanted her, they needed no more preparation.

He leaned down, pushing inside of her as he went. She gasped in pleasure as he filled her, her eyes glazing over, her heart only settling once he bottomed out and paused. She glanced back up at him and saw him gazing over at Maia, who had begun to stir.

"Maia..." Elise whispered, reaching over to take the river nymph's hand in her own.

Maia's eyes shot open. She glanced over at them, and once she registered what they were doing, she rolled over next to Elise and pressed her breasts into the red-head's face. Looking back over her shoulder, she gave Leon a rather cheeky smile, which he took as a sign to begin round eight—or was it ten? He'd lost count—in earnest.

It was an overwhelming feeling, having both of these women here with him again. He couldn't believe the luck that had led him to them, even if their relationships—with Maia in particular—didn't exactly start off in the best of places. That didn't matter anymore, he loved them both, and he wouldn't give them up for anything.

They were his family.

### **Chapter 473: Jormun in the Isles**

As Leon woke up with Elise and Maia snuggled up against him, he couldn't help but relish the moment, not wanting it to ever end. If any concept of heaven existed, Leon figured that he was living it right now.

Having both ladies in bed with him wasn't anything new, he'd experienced this same exact scenario many times before Maia left. However, now... it was something else, something far more intense. The bond forged between Leon and Maia and the proposal he'd made to Elise had changed everything, even if nothing outwardly seemed different.

But as much as Leon didn't want to leave that moment, it had to end at some point. They'd spent far more than twelve hours in bed—though most of that had been spent in a sex coma following their vigorous exertions—and Leon could hear Emilie's servants moving about beyond Elise's door. He vaguely remembered a quiet knock on the door the previous night while the three were in the midst of their passions, but all three had silently chosen to ignore it in favor of more carnal pursuits. Now that he was a little more even-headed, Leon figured it had simply been a messenger coming to inform them that dinner was ready.

His belly rumbled, though as a seventh-tier mage, food was more of an indulgence than a necessity. Still, his stomach had yet to realize that and was demanding he rise and find something to fill it. Leon was able to ignore this demand until Elise and Maia began to stir.

It took almost an hour for them to finally struggle out of bed, get ready, and then join the others for a late breakfast. Alix teased Leon a bit for his bedraggled hair, but he didn't mind. Just being back in the capital had lightened his mood more than he'd thought was possible.

But after a while, his mood began to darken as he made more frequent glances at Valeria. The events at Calabria played out in his mind again, the feel of her lips against his as vivid now as it was back then.

And he knew that it was better to discuss all of what had happened between them with Elise and Maia sooner rather than later.

So it was that he found himself alone in a private room with Valeria, Elise, and Maia following breakfast.

"So, what's so important that you had to pull us all aside?" Elise asked, her tone playful but masking an undercurrent of anxiety that Leon could pick up on.

Leon was quiet for a long moment, and when he glanced at Valeria, he could see that she was more than a little nervous, too. He'd asked if she was all right with having this conversation now rather than putting it off, and she'd reluctantly agreed.

"First of all, I suppose I should say that no matter what Valeria and I are about to reveal, we are not enemies." Leon mostly focused on Maia as he said this, for he knew that if she thought Valeria was a threat to them, then she'd act without mercy, and he didn't think he'd have the power to stop her before she did something irreparable.

"OK..." Elise said, her unease growing as her eyes flitted to Valeria in confusion. Maia, meanwhile, only silently nodded to Leon in acknowledgment, but he saw her eyes narrow in suspicion as they turned to Valeria.

"Valeria and I... um... well, I suppose you can say that our families have been made enemies by circumstances, but we've... the two of us have reached something of an accord..." Leon said, not quite sure how he should broach the issue. Fortunately, once that much was out, he managed to spit the rest out too, with Valeria pitching in here and there to further explain her father's side of things.

By the end of their long, only somewhat rambling explanation, Maia and Elise had been completely filled in on how and why Leon's father had been killed by Justin's assassins.

Elise had known most of these events before from what Leon had told her before the civil war, so she wasn't too surprised by this reveal. Maia, on the other hand, had been kept almost entirely out of the loop on this front, but fortunately, she kept to her tacit agreement and didn't attack Valeria. Her aura had a hidden thread of killing intent, though, that Leon thought meant that if it weren't for that agreement, Valeria would probably already be a red smear on the wall.

Leon lightly shook his head to get rid of that grim image and turned his attention back to the matter at hand.

"... You two have made peace, then?" Elise hesitantly asked, looking at Leon in steely expectation.

Leon quickly glanced at Valeria and waited for her to speak first. Given the harm he'd done to her, he wasn't about to start making assumptions about her intentions.

"Yes, we have," Valeria replied, surprising Leon with how unhesitating she was. "I... don't want to be enemies with anyone, I just want to practice my magic in peace. So I'll do whatever I need to do to maintain that peace and keep the people I love safe."

Valeria warmly smiled at Elise, who smiled back, though the red-head's was a little more thin-lipped and forced. Leon soon found out why when Elise turned back to him.

"The way you handled this was terrible. I can't overstate that."

Leon withered a bit under her gaze, but he didn't try to deny it. She was right, and he deeply regretted his confrontation with Valeria.

"I can't disagree. I made a grave error in judgment with how I approached this with her and it won't happen again."

"It'd better not," Elise said, an icy chill in her voice.

"Please, that's not necessary," Valeria interjected before anyone could say anything else. "I understand why he confronted me like he did. Without knowing what I was capable of, it was best to project strength and take control of the situation as much as was possible. No permanent damage was done, I don't even have any scars! So let's not go making such a big deal out of this."

Elise shot a glare at Leon, but then quietly nodded to her silver-haired friend. "If that's what you want, Val, then I can let it go. But I won't forget it."

Maia seemed to growl at that, her face one devoid of amusement, but for a different reason. [It isn't a big deal,] she said to all three, surprising no one more than Elise, whose head whipped around in surprise. [Leon acted to cut off a threat. If anything, what he did during that confrontation was *too* soft. Were / the one confronting you...]

Maia trailed off, but her threatening gaze and suddenly much more obvious killing intent was enough to finish her statement.

"No!" Elise shouted before Valeria or Leon could respond. "That's not how *people* act! We are not beasts! We exhaust our options for peace, and only when we do should we resort to violence!"

Maia clicked her tongue in disagreement, not even bothering to point out how infrequently people followed Elise's guideline. [Better to just end the threat, I say. Kill your enemies and be done with them.]

Leon cringed inside, knowing that he'd spoken those very words before. But it wasn't just his regret for attacking Valeria that had him rethinking many of his habits and instincts; after going through the war and seeing how many people defected to August's side, how his mercy and restraint had grown his forces, how often the senior knights had been right when they'd advocated for more lenient strategies to use against their enemies... He was starting to call many of his beliefs into question.

"There is *something* to be said for both schools of thought," Leon stated before what looked like an inevitable argument kicked off. "There is no guidebook for us to follow in these things, and there's no

single answer that'll solve *every* problem we have, not in civilized society. Killing everything that threatens you only works out in the wilds, not here—or so I've been told..." Leon's pathetic attempt at a joke didn't seem to land, for no one laughed. He cleared his throat and quickly moved on. "Things like that don't work, not where people look out for each other and might seek revenge... Killing Valeria would only ensure that her family and those who back them will remain our enemies forever, while making peace with her could save us a lot of bloodshed in the future. In this case... I think it's the better option."

Maia scowled, but she didn't argue the point. Leon found her expression quite familiar, recognizing many of his own failings in it.

Deciding to add her voice to the mix, Valeria said, "Lady Naiad, as I said before, I understand the desire to inflict violence upon me. If you choose to indulge that desire, I won't blame you. But know that I am not your enemy. I am not Leon's enemy. My father abandoned me at a critical moment, leaving me alone and vulnerable. I still love him, but as far as I'm concerned, I'm with all of you, now."

Maia's scowl deepened, and she replied, [So you say. Time will tell if you're lying, and if you are, know that I will be the last thing you see.]

"Fair enough," Valeria cheerily replied, showing not an ounce of fear at the river nymph's threat.

"There will be no violence here!" Elise shouted. "I don't want either of you fighting each other!"

"No one's fighting here," Leon said, looking between Maia and Valeria. "Right?"

"I'm not going to start anything, you know that," Valeria replied.

[If you're certain about this girl, then... I can restrain myself,] Maia said, haughtily turning away from Valeria in favor of pretending to examine a mural on the wall as if the silver-haired woman was beneath her concern.

"I suppose that's the best we're going to get..." Leon said as he frustratedly ran his fingers through his hair. He almost thought everything they had to discuss was done, and that they had gotten one of the best results they could hope for after revealing his and Valeria's complete relationship, but when he looked up and made eye contact with Elise, he knew from her subdued glare that things weren't quite as done as he'd hoped.

But it seemed that whatever was on her mind, Elise didn't want to make a big deal out of it. She glanced at Valeria, grabbed her arm, then practically dragged her out of the room, silently telling everyone that their little meeting was over, at least for the time being.

—

Far to the west of the Bull Kingdom, across a great swathe of the Endless Ocean, lay the Serpentine Isles. Once, the main island chain numbered eight, but after the Bull Kingdom subjugated the islands, they numbered only five.

Almost a century ago, they were great shipwrights and sailors who made their living raiding the western and southern coasts of Aeterna. The Serpentine pirates were known and feared far and wide.

But the Bull Kingdom put a stop to that, slaughtering their pirates, burning their fleets, and executing the Jarls of the eight islands, destroying the three westernmost islands in the process. Now, the islands were ruled by Earls, rulers elected by the aristocrats of the islands and confirmed by the Bull King. The Serpentine peoples were pacified, their great skill in shipcraft turned to more mercantile pursuits, or building the smaller ships of the Bull Kingdom's fleet. Their people manned the decks of merchant and Legion ships alike, providing the tribute that the Bull Kingdom demanded after their subjugation in timber, ships, and their young men.

Or so it was supposed to be...

—

Jormun smiled as the Earl was dragged out of his stone palace, built with white stone imported from the Bull Kingdom. With a quick nod of his head, Jormun gestured toward the nearby cliffs, from which the palace overlooked the city to the east, while the west was covered in jungle so dense and so dangerous that no one had ever managed to reach Muspell, the great mountain at the center of the island, the biggest in the entire island chain, by land.

Kraterok, the only settlement on the entire island big enough to be called a city, was the seat of power for the Serpentine Isles, as it was the one closest to the Bull Kingdom, lying on the eastern coast of the northeastern-most island. It had been built along a huge natural bay, so large that the remnants of the Bull fleet that burned within it seemed tiny in comparison, the fires that danced across even the biggest of their enchanted hulls looking like little more than candles in a lake.

Jormun crouched down behind the Earl as the nobleman was forced to his knees and forced to look at his city as Jormun's pirates stormed through its streets, looting and burning, killing and raping with abandon.

"See that?" the Pirate Lord whispered into his ears, pointing first at the destroyed fleet, then at the burning forts along the coast. "No one's coming to save you. You've lost."

"Then... just... get it over with!" the Earl demanded, spitting a wad of blood onto the ground.

"No, no, no," Jormun replied as he stood back up, his face contorting in displeasure. "Rolf! Fetch me that knife!"

A giant among men, towering at just over seven feet tall and built like a statue come to life, Rolf grinned and stepped out of the crowd of watching pirates, pulling a wicked-looking hooked knife out of his soul realm as he approached Jormun and the Earl.

"I'm not done with you, yet," Jormun said, staring down at the Earl in disgust and taking the knife from Rolf. "You defied me one too many times. You no longer get to decide how you die."

Jormun began to laugh maniacally as he ran his fingers through the Earl's hair, before then taking a handful of it and pulling the Earl's head back. Jormun then raised his knife and slashed across the Earl's chest, slicing through his clothes and leaving his chest bare, with a long gash across his left pectoral muscle. Jormun then raised his knife again, laughing as he did, but before he slashed the Earl again, he paused. As if sensing the looks of the dozens of people behind him, Jormun turned to the rest of the crew of his personal flagship that had followed him to shore, his most trusted followers.

“What?!” he asked, his tone suddenly lightening up. Dozens of his crewmen were staring at him, several with looks of exasperation, others smiling in resignation as Jormun indulged his need for drama.

“He only defied you once, Jormun!” one of them shouted, smiling like everything was just one big joke.

“Once was enough!” Jormun insisted.

“Then just get it over with already!” another of his followers shouted, treating this show like it was only the opening of a play before it got to the good parts. “Come on, we still have to get those surviving ships stripped of their armaments before we can move on! That’ll take *days*!”

“All right, all right, you damn spoilsports!” Jormun chuckled as he turned back to the Earl in front of him. “Honestly, can you believe these guys? No patience for this dance, no desire to do things the *right* way. They just want to slash and burn and pillage, without care for the finer points of such serious matters.”

Jormun stood there with the Earl for a silent moment, just watching the fires spread through the city below them. Then, with one clean movement and not another word, Jormun used the hooked dagger to open the Earl’s throat and kicked him off the cliff and down into the streets hundreds of feet below. No one down there would notice, not with all the rest of Jormun’s thousands of followers doing what they do best down there.

“Show’s over folks, thanks so much for coming!” Jormun shouted, taking a dramatic and sarcastic bow as his followers cheered and clapped. “Now get back to stripping those ships! I want us able to proceed south in a week!”

Jormun and half a dozen of his closest comrades began to walk toward the palace. His crew, meanwhile, began to make their way back down the winding road toward the city, eager to complete their work and leave—and maybe to get a little plunder from the city as they returned to the ships. As they did, however, one sailor from one of Jormun’s other ships came sprinting up the hill as if a flock of Thunderbirds was on his tail.

“Jormun!” he shouted as he drew near. “Jormun! I bring news!”

“Eh? What is it?!” Jormun shouted back, only somewhat irritated at the distraction.

“The war in the Bull Kingdom has come to an end! Prince Octavius has been imprisoned!”

Jormun grimaced in displeasure. There weren’t many others with Inherited Bloodlines left in Aeterna for him to take. To accomplish his task without the use of beings with such powerful blood was just not practical. He’d been counting on their little civil war going on a little longer while he made the necessary preparations in the Serpentine Isles so that he could then take one of the Princes and finally finish what he’d started when he was cast deep below his home island so many years ago.

But it seemed that wasn’t an option anymore. Once one of those Princes settled into power, they’d be long gone, never vulnerable again. If he wanted to take one of them for himself, then he’d have to move quickly.

Jormun sighed, then glanced at his comrades, the six friends that had stood by him through and thin, the men and women who wanted him to succeed, the man and women who wanted to see the birth of a god.

“... It seems,” Jormun said, “that we’re going to have to pay a visit to the Bull Kingdom a little earlier than we’d planned...”

#### **Chapter 474: Royal Summons**

After Elise and Valeria left him and Maia, Leon didn’t go looking for them for a few hours. He didn’t want to interrupt anything they might be discussing, and he wanted everything that had been talked about in their previous conversation to have its chance to sink in.

It wasn’t because he was nervous about facing Elise after the way she left, after facing such dangers in the civil war he knew that that reaction would just be *silly*.

But eventually he did work up the nerve to go looking for Elise and talk to her one-on-one.

He found her alone in a sitting room, idly staring out of a nearby window with an open book in her lap. She looked up when he walked in, but her usual smile was tinged with sadness when they made eye contact.

“Hey,” Leon said as he walked over.

“Hey,” she replied as she glanced back out of the window, then closed her book. “Come to chat?”

“You could say that, though ‘chat’ might be a bit too casual for what we might need to discuss...”

As Leon sat down, he didn’t slouch over, he remained upright and formal, his eyes on Elise to underscore how seriously he was taking this.

Elise bitterly smiled but didn’t say anything for a long time.

When it became clear that she didn’t want to start, Leon said, “I know that I handled the situation with Valeria quite terribly.”

“Hardly an astute observation, I think *everyone* knows that you handled it terribly,” Elise replied, a comforting hint of playfulness in her voice. “It’s probably for the best that you refused to take her into your harem, your families’ history notwithstanding—she’s too good for you for having forgiven you so easily. I think such forgiveness beyond most people.”

Leon nodded, finding no fault with her statement.

“After talking with her, though, I think I can understand why you did what you did,” Elise said. “I am so sorry about Lapis... your giants, your unit...”

Leon nodded again, not wanting to talk about them right now, but knowing that their loss greatly contributed to his decision-making back then.

“I felt like I had to act against any threats I saw, even if Valeria hadn’t yet done anything hostile to me,” he said, his eyes turning downward in shame. “It’s no excuse for inflicting such wounds upon her, though... No excuse for rash behavior...”

He went silent, and Elise stared at him for several long seconds with a shallow smile on her face.

"You're definitely different now than you were when you left," she said. "I can see that plain as day. I don't think I've ever seen you so remorseful."

"It's... been a hard few months," he replied, his voice cracking halfway through, his stoicism cracking just a hair with no one but his fire-haired lover—*fiancée*—there to see.

The two went quiet for a few seconds again, neither quite knowing what to say to the other. Elise was, again, the first to break it.

"I love you, Leon. More than I can ever properly express. And Valeria is one of my only friends, one of my *best* friends. I've said this before, but it seems it needs repeated; I could never stand by and watch the two of you fight each other. The idea of one of you killing the other... is one I just can't take."

"I think, at this point, it's not something you need to worry too much about," Leon said. "I... don't want to repeat that mistake. I'd rather be friends with her than enemies. Even if we do wind up enemies in the end, I'm not sure I could go through with killing her..."

"And why is that?" Elise asked, giving him a searching look. She didn't know him to be the sort of person who forgave so easily, who was so willing to let someone who was connected to his enemies go. He and Valeria were quite similar in a lot of respects, but in this they seemed to greatly differ.

Leon endured her silent assault as well as he could, but her brilliant green eyes cut through him like a hot knife through warm butter, and he had to look away despite knowing that it would only make him look guiltier.

"I..." he hesitantly began, warring within himself about whether or not to tell Elise the truth—whether or not to *admit* the truth to himself.

Before he could answer in full, however, one of Emilie's servants knocked on the door and poked her head into the room.

"Forgive my intrusion, but Sir Leon, the Bronze Paladin has arrived looking for you! His Majesty has requested your presence!"

"Thank you, I'll be right out," Leon replied, and the servant retreated from the room to wait for him out in the hall. Leon, however, was in no hurry to leave, and he remained right where he was sitting, his golden eyes locked on his fire-haired fiancée.

"Seems like you have to go," Elise reluctantly said.

"Seems like it," Leon replied. "However, I'll not leave until I've said my piece."

This wasn't something he wanted to kick down the road. He made a mistake, and he wanted to make sure that Elise knew in her heart that she wouldn't have to worry about either him or her friend.

"I like Valeria," he declared. "And when I say 'like', I don't necessarily mean romantically, but the seeds of romantic interest are certainly there. I know she feels stronger about me than I do about her, but..."

"You can envision a future with her in it?" Elise asked, an easily detectable trace of hope in her voice.



"I can," Leon affirmed. "I truly meant it when I said I wanted to make peace with her, I... would like it if she stayed in our life."

Elise finally let a smile show on her face, but it was brief and soon replaced with a more serious expression. "I'm happy to hear that," she said. "It might take some time, but I think I can forgive you for this. But let me tell you that you are *beyond* lucky that Valeria was so quick to do the same."

"I know," Leon softly said as he rose to his feet. "I love you, Elise."

"Love you too, fiancé," she replied as one last smile graced her lips before she looked back out of the window.

Leon stepped forward, gently took her head in his arms, and kissed her forehead. It wasn't only Valeria who was too good for him, he knew. He pulled back only a second later and said, "I think I should go see what's going on with Bronze."

—

Leon found himself back at the King's private villa, and this time, it looked quite a bit different. Rather than being fairly remote and deserted, now there were dozens of officials waiting in the courtyard and outside the villa's gates, easily over a hundred people who had some business with the King.

But Bronze led Leon right past all of them, straight into the King's bedroom. They walked in on a meeting about some bureaucratic nonsense that Leon almost immediately tuned out, but at least the King himself seemed to be doing much better than he was the day before. He displayed a bit more vigor as he listened to the officials speak. Likewise, his aura was a little heavier; Leon was still unable to see through it, all-but confirming that the King had managed to ascend to the eighth-tier despite the injury that left him comatose for years.

Once Julius' eyes landed on Leon, however, they remained fixed for an uncomfortable amount of time, after which the King dismissed everyone else. Bronze and Penitent almost stayed, but the King told them to wait outside, as well.

Leon almost thought the two old Paladins were going to make a bigger deal out of wanting to stay, but to his surprise, they said nothing more and left the room, only pausing to ensure the door was shut and the sound-proofing enchantments were active.

"So, Sir Leon 'Ursus', was it?" the King said, his voice still hoarse and gravelly from lack of use in the past decade, though he didn't seem pained by it.

"That is, indeed, my name," Leon replied, hardly bothering to be respectful. He was already planning his exit from the Bull Kingdom, so he wasn't going to genuflect to the King in private, no matter how offensive it might seem to Julius.

Fortunately, it didn't seem that offensive to him, as the King proceeded onward as if everything were normal.

"Is it really, though?" the King asked. "My Paladins have told me a different story. They say your name isn't 'Ursus'..."

“Your Paladins aren’t all-knowing,” Leon replied, smiling at the King. “However, I will concede that my name was different before I came south. Back then, I was ‘Leon Raime’.” With Justin missing and no one else around, he wasn’t at all afraid of confirming who he was to Julius.

The King sighed in surprise and gratification as he leaned back into his pillows. “I thought so,” he whispered. “You look so much like your father and his father, I knew immediately.”

Leon nodded in acknowledgment.

“Ancestors, I miss them,” Julius sighed. “I think your family would have loved you, judging by what I’ve heard. You would’ve been one of their best knights. Now, you could be one of their best Archdukes.”

Leon’s smile grew a little strained and cocked his head slightly.

“Sir Leon, I would like to acknowledge you as the heir of House Raime and directly enfeoff you as the Archduke in Teira. That way, we can all skip the legal hurdles that might come up if you petition the court for such an acknowledgment and a return of your ancestral lands. What do you say?”

As if the possibility that Leon would decline never entered his mind, Julius reached out his hands, clearly expecting Leon to fall to his knees before the bed, take his offered hands, and kiss the golden signet ring emblazoned with the charging bull of House Taurus on his right middle finger. Or so it seemed to Leon, at least.

Needless to say, Leon did not do that. Instead, he suppressed a chuckle and replied, “That’s... not going to happen. Far as I’m concerned, you can keep Teira and the entire Plateau. Though, there is a little bit of business I still have up there...”

Contrary to Leon’s expectations, the King didn’t seem at all aggrieved with his response. Julius simply let his hands fall back to the bed and gave Leon a bitter smile.

“I can’t deny that I’m sorry to hear that, Sir Leon,” the King said, his tone sad and regretful. “This Kingdom was greatly lessened without Kyros, without your family.”

Leon nodded again, appreciating the sentiment behind the King’s words.

“I suppose I understand your decision,” Julius continued. “I hoped—more than I reasonably should’ve, I suppose—that your presence heralded the return of House Raime. Ancestors know we could use your House’s steady stewardship in times like these. However, your decision is yours to make, and it’s a reasonable one. But tell me, what business have you up there if you don’t intend to succeed Kyros?”

“Well, first off, before we get to that, I wanted to look into getting my villa in this city back after it was seized by Prince Octavius.”

“Consider it done,” the King instantly replied, his tone almost dismissive as if it weren’t even a big deal to him.

“Secondly, I was hoping to poke around Argent Palace a bit. It was the seat of my House for so long, and I just wanted to connect with my past a bit, if I could. Doesn’t mean I want to become the next Archduke, though. I’m just looking for a few sentimental things.”

“Anything in particular?”

“No.”

Julius’ tone had been a tad suspicious, but Leon’s quick answer shut down any further questioning in that direction.

“I will grant you a special dispensation to explore Argent Palace,” he said after a few short seconds of thought. “I intend to consecrate the place as the memorial for House Raime, then, if you don’t want it back. Leave it untouched, leave it for the wilds to reclaim.”

Leon chuckled a bit, knowing that Julius *really* wanted him to take that title back since he kept giving him so many chances to recant his decision. But that wasn’t going to happen. His future lay outside the Bull Kingdom, outside Aeterna itself. He wouldn’t be able to reach it if he allowed himself to be tied down to the Great Plateau and be answerable to the Bull Kings, and even though he was *slightly* tempted by the offer of the title, Teira was hardly portable.

“That sounds fine,” Leon responded. “I’m sure my grandfather would’ve been greatly touched by your gesture. But I’m fine with letting the Archduchy of the Great Plateau stay in Royal hands.”

The King was silent for a long moment, stretching out this one last chance for Leon to change his mind. Only when it became more than abundantly clear that Leon was not going to do so did the King finally sigh and say, “Very well. Sir Leon, I wish you luck in your future endeavors.”

“Thank you.”

“If you don’t mind indulging me... I don’t suppose you would share with me what those endeavors entail?”

Leon bitterly smiled and shook his head. “I’m not at liberty to say,” he said. “Partly because I don’t want people following me, but also because my plans aren’t exactly solid, right now.”

He had the archives in Teira to follow-up on, and then the map he found in the Cradle. He knew that his future would involve investigating the remains of the Thunderbird Clan on this plane until he’d gained the power to achieve Apotheosis, after which he’d try to make his way to the Nexus, rebuild the Thunderbird Clan, and take the head of Lord Kamran. However, that was about as detailed as his plans currently were, and he could think of few things he wanted to do less than try and explain all of that to Julius.

“How about, then, you tell me about your childhood?” the King asked, his tone relaxing as his emaciated body sank further into his bed. His dark brown eyes, however, remained bright and attentive, showing Leon that he was simply getting more comfortable, not losing strength.

“Any particular reason why you want me to do so?” Leon asked in confusion.

“Your family and mine have always been close, and I’m simply curious as to the events which transpired regarding Lord Artorias and the destruction of his villa.”

Leon couldn’t sense any deceit in the King’s words, so he indulged the older man with a brief overview of his time in the Northern Vales when it was just him and his father alone in the Forest of Black and White. He gave the King no details about Justin’s involvement in Artorias’ death, but he did bring up the

fact that his father had been killed. He wanted to solve that problem on his own, if he could, and he didn't want to drag Valeria into any trouble with the King if it could be avoided.

"No..." Julius whispered as Leon ended his story with the death of Artorias and the beginning of his journey south. "Young Artorias... I can't believe it..."

Leon was a little uncomfortable talking about such things, even in the vague and lacking-in-details way he was, so he simply waited in silence for the King to regain his composure. He ended up waiting a long few minutes before the King managed to look his way again.

"Sir Leon—"

"I suppose this is as good a time as any," Leon said, suddenly interrupting the King and changing the subject. "I am hereby informing you, Your Majesty, that I am resigning my titles as a knight and as a Legate in the Royal Legions."

The King was stunned into silence as he stared at Leon in disbelief. He could tell that Leon wasn't going to stick around, but this declaration had still caught him completely off-guard.

"So... So be it," the King replied. He was again disappointed, but he wasn't going to get in the way of Leon's ambitions. He owed House Raime that much.

"Thank you," Leon said, a little surprised at how easily the King accepted his resignation. "By the way, I don't suppose you can tell me what you intend to do with Octavius?"

The King grimaced as Leon brought up another terribly painful subject.

"Octavius... will be tried once I regain my strength, so in several weeks at the most," Julius replied. "I've met with both my Chancellor—whom I had to *rehire*—and the High Arbiter, both of whom have explained many things to me that have happened over these past few years. I... think I may have to order my son's execution for high treason."

The King's voice was carefully measured, but Leon could hear the subtle wavering that betrayed the King's true feelings. He didn't want to have his son killed. He'd missed almost an entire decade, and once he woke up, everything about his Kingdom had changed, and just about none of it for the better. It occurred to Leon that he was probably also mourning Trajan, and the prospect of losing another family member was likely devastating for the frail-seeming King.

Leon nodded, unsure of what to say. Eventually, he settled on, "... And... August?"

Julius sighed once more. "I don't know," he said. "House arrest for the time being, but he's amassed too much support to just send him immediately to the headsman right now. He's too popular among the Legions and the nobility. Hells, I have half a mind to retire as soon as I've recovered and make him the new King just to put an end to all this! Make *him* King since he fought so damn hard for it!"

The King chuckled for a few seconds as if what he said was nothing more than a joke, but Leon didn't think it was. He could easily see the King choosing to retire rather than punish another of his sons, especially since August had been acting mostly in self-defense.

"Will you be staying here to see this through to the end?" the King asked.

“Maybe,” Leon replied. “Depends on how long my journey north takes me—I’ll be taking you up on your dispensation to visit Argent Palace as soon as it comes through official channels. I also want to check in with some friends in the Northern Vales before leaving this region of the plane, so I might be gone long enough that I miss Octavius’ trial and punishment.”

“Well, if this is the last we see of each other, Leon Raime, I wish you all the best.”

“Right back at you, Julius Taurus,” Leon replied with a nod of his head.

The King didn’t even bat an eye at Leon’s lack of respect. In fact, he responded only with a warm, almost fatherly smile as Leon rose to his feet and made his way to the door. Leon spared the older man one last look back before he opened the door and departed.

He ignored the looks he got from the people in the courtyard as he emerged from the King’s bedroom, and only barely acknowledged Penitent and Bronze as they moved past him to rejoin the King.

Freedom. Absolute freedom. He was no longer a knight, beholden to the Legions, with superiors and orders and political enemies. He was a free man. His smile about split his face in half as he breathed in the fresh air of the King’s private forest, and he took a leisurely pace walking back toward the Royal Palace. There were some people he’d want to say goodbye to before he left, but he supposed he could postpone those to later. Right now, he just wanted to revel in the fact that his time in the Bull Kingdom was all-but done.

Or so he hoped.

*‘Better not make assumptions...’* he thought to himself, trying not to lose himself in the feeling of liberation that suffused his body.

But even amid his joyous mood, that thought settled in the pit of his stomach like a bad meal, refusing to let him forget. The King had just let him leave with barely any resistance, and Leon couldn’t help but feel that it had been too easy and that the Bull Kingdom wasn’t quite done with him yet.

## **Chapter 475: Changing Circumstances**

As Leon leisurely strolled through the grounds of the Royal Palace, his thoughts eventually turned to what to do next. He had no timetables, no responsibilities that forced him to be somewhere, he was well and truly free to decide what to do next.

Or, at least as free as Elise and Maia would allow him to be, and he’d still have to inform Valeria and Alix that the King had accepted his resignation—though it still struck him as far too easy, as far as he was concerned, it was now an indisputable fact that he was no longer a knight or a member of the Royal Legions.

At the very least, he wanted to go back to Teira for a little while. Those archives below Argent Palace were calling his name, and he wanted to leave as soon as the order from the King that granted him unfettered access came down.

*‘But where to go after that?’* he wondered. And then it hit him, a grave duty that he had to tend to. *‘The stone giants need their dead back...’*

Instantly, his mood began to turn as he remembered Lapis and the hundred dead giants in his soul realm.

"Sir Leon!" called out a familiar voice, breaking him out of his rapidly-souring thoughts. When he looked toward the source of that voice, he saw Dame Minerva walking toward him, several of her assistants at her back.

"Dame Minerva," he said in greeting. "It's good to see you, but I have to correct you on something: I'm no longer a knight."

"Oh? Have you been made a Paladin? Something *more*?" Minerva asked, smiling at him in congratulations.

"Uh... no, I actually quit," he replied, instantly freezing her friendly expression.

"You... quit?" she asked in momentary confusion. He's already told her multiple times that he wasn't going to last long in the Legions, but she hadn't thought he'd be resigning so soon.

"Uh... yeah," Leon replied, suddenly feeling incredibly awkward for springing this on her like this. "The King just accepted my resignation, so... I guess it's just 'Leon' from now on, sans the 'Sir'."

"I... see," she whispered. She then turned around to her assistants and said, "Go take a break, I'll see all of you back in the office."

Leon cocked an eyebrow as his heart began to race in anxiety. Minerva was pissed, that much he could tell even if she wasn't showing it too obviously.

Once the two were alone, Minerva demanded, "What are you thinking?! The Bull Kingdom needs you here!"

"No it doesn't," Leon immediately replied, despite wilting just a bit under the weight of her disappointment. Trajan may have been his mentor, but he'd struck up a fairly good relationship with Minerva, too, and disappointing her was one of the last things he wanted to do, even if he knew he had to in order to leave.

"What are you saying?! Prince Trajan didn't take you under his wing just so you could abandon the Kingdom he sacrificed so much for!"

Minerva's icy exterior began to crack and her true anger began to shine through, with her eyes narrowing and her voice beginning to rise in volume.

But Leon, oddly enough, began to calm down instead of growing more nervous. "I would disagree with that sentiment," he said. "Prince Trajan didn't do his best to make me a good knight in the service of the Bull King, he did his best to make me a good *man*, full stop. It's something that I've spent a rather shameful amount of time not letting sink in, I think, but... I'm ready to start trying to live up to that example. But with all that said, I'm just not a good fit for the Royal Legions.

"Besides, I *didn't* abandon the Bull Kingdom, and I'm *not* abandoning it now. My job here is just done, you don't need me here anymore. I mean, my skills kind of start and end with putting sharp bits of metal into people's fleshy bits, I'm hardly the person the Bull Kingdom needs right now. People like you

and Prince August are indispensable, but I'm just another guy with a knack of ending lives. You don't need me, so I'm moving on."

As he spoke, Minerva began to compose herself, her immediate anger slowly vanishing with every word. He knew that she was well aware of his shortcomings.

"Dame Minerva, let me ask you something: if you so believed that my place was here, as a knight in the Legions, why did you have me only stay home after Prince Trajan was killed?"

"I didn't..." she began before trailing off, Leon's point having struck home. She nodded in understanding. "I'm sorry for losing myself like that, Leon, I just... it's just been a long few months."

"That it has," Leon agreed, a warm smile blooming on his face. "I think the months to come might be longer, though. Fixing what Octavius broke won't be easy."

Minerva sighed and shook her head. "No, it won't. He hollowed out the government about as much as he was able. There just weren't enough nobles around for him to replace everyone that he purged. I'd say only about ten percent of the bureaucratic positions that have to be filled were by the time we arrived in the city."

Leon visibly cringed.

Minerva continued, "We've already started working on re-hiring as many of those administrators and paper-pushers as we can find, but it's probably going to be years before the Kingdom is running as smoothly as it was only six months ago. Perhaps even as long as a decade or two. We're also waiting on seeing how the King will deal with the nobles, and if enough of them rise up in rebellion over Prince August's stated goals, then... Well, I doubt that'll happen, the nobility has been fairly well decimated during the war, so I doubt they'd be able to muster enough forces to try and force the King's hand, but you can't always count on nobles being practical and willing to cooperate."

"I can't pretend that I don't envy you for that," Leon jokingly stated.

"Keep it up, smartass, and I might consider being more justifiably angry," she replied, lightly smiling. "I suppose it's for the best, though, that you're not going to stick around. I know that even if you stayed, I wouldn't have anything for you to do that would complement your skills."

"I *do* make some pretty mean omelets, though," Leon replied. "Just... you know, don't ask how long it took for a Heaven's Eye chef to teach me what was required..."

Minerva chuckled as she gave Leon an odd look. "You look a lot happier than I think I've ever seen you."

"I'm *feeling* a lot happier right now than I have a long while," Leon replied. "A sudden lack of responsibilities along with a reunion with my lovers can do that for a man."

Minerva sighed in envy. "Good luck to you, boy, though I suspect you won't need luck if you pursue whatever you intend to come next with as much passion as you train with..."

"Thanks. I don't suppose while we're here, you could tell me a little bit more about the current situation... I have to admit that I'm kind of curious..."

"I'm not sure I should be saying this to someone who just *resigned*," Minerva teased, but she didn't deny Leon the knowledge. "Both Prince August and Octavius have been arrested. Octavius was moved to the dungeon while August is in his old apartments, though, so it's pretty clear which side His Majesty currently falls on."

"What about the Princesses?"

"Princess Stefania and Princess Cristina are already on their way home. I don't know what will happen with regard to them. I suppose Princess Stefania will return to her old life while Princess Cristina will finally be presented to the Royal Court and allowed to choose what to do with herself."

Leon nodded appreciatively. He was already chafing from just four years in the Legions, he couldn't imagine what Cristina endured during her eighteen years stuck in the Royal Harem.

"Beyond that, Bronze has effectively been appointed Regent until the King is back on his feet full-time, and we're already starting to work with the old minsters and the Consuls to establish an interim government, keep the peace, and make sure the armies are sent home until the bureaucracy has been completely restored. So, things are a little touch-and-go right now, and there are a *lot* of nervous people with the Legions taking a more active role in governing, but most of the Exarchs are still in power and the nobles haven't had their territories stripped—yet—so even with everything that's happened, I'd say we're about as mercifully stable as we could possibly ask for."

"That's honestly good to hear," Leon replied. "I'd hate for things to get so bad that you'd have to turn to me for help."

Minerva momentarily glared at Leon, only to be met by his cheeky smile. She, in turn, couldn't help but smile and lightly punched him in the shoulder. "Keep up that attitude and I'll recommend to the King that you be drafted as a Paladin, Sir seventh-tier-mage!"

"Ah, you've got me shaking in my boots," Leon said as he exaggeratedly rubbed his shoulder.

"You're wearing sandals, not boots."

"Would you look at that, so I am. I'm also clearly not shaking."

"All right, boy, get out of here," Minerva cried with good-natured humor. "Go enjoy your life, do whatever it is you're planning on doing!"

"Don't have to tell me twice," he said as he turned to leave. Before he did, though, he glanced back over his shoulder and said, "Hey... if we don't see each other again... thank you."

"What for?" Minerva asked.

"I suppose... everything," Leon answered, and he refused to elaborate. He simply waved at her and began walking down the road back toward the bridge to the city.

Minerva smiled as he walked off, a feeling of melancholy settling into her stomach as she watched Leon 'leave the nest', so to speak. But that feeling quickly passed as she remembered just how much work was on her plate, and she started making her way back to the Royal Palace.



For his part, as he walked, Leon began to think about everyone else who he might want to say goodbye to. First among them were Charles, Henry, and Alain. He hadn't seen them in more than a year, and if he had a blade at his throat, he might admit that his friendship with them was probably over if he didn't see them soon if it wasn't already. It was painful to admit, but he was starting to learn that friends don't necessarily stay that way after enough time spent apart. But he still wanted to know for certain, he didn't want to leave the Kingdom without getting together with them at least one more time.

Then there was Marcus and Alcander. It was still quite possible that they remained in the city, for while they were related to landed nobles, they were also knights in the Royal Legion. After they fought at his side for a couple of battles, Leon at least wanted to touch base with them before disappearing into the wild blue yonder.

Lastly was Gaius. Leon's feelings of anger and hatred towards the young nobleman had long since cooled, then warmed again into something that resembled respect. And Leon didn't want to leave before he played another game of keeps with him and unambiguously won.

Beyond them, there weren't many people that Leon was close enough to that he wanted to seek them out before leaving the Kingdom—at least, none that he wasn't soon going to be related to once he and Elise tied the knot. Assuming he didn't screw up badly enough to get her to call the thing off.

He groaned a bit, remembering their conversation right before Bronze showed up to summon him to meet with the King. It seemed to him that Elise, in her desire to keep the peace between him and one of her best friends, wasn't taking the destruction of his family seriously enough. Hells, it seemed that Valeria was taking it much more seriously than Elise was, given how quickly she'd forgiven him for confronting her the way he did.

*'I'll need to talk to Elise about this before we take the next step,' Leon morosely thought. 'I'll just wait a little while longer until any lingering anger from this morning has dissipated...'*

When he returned to Emilie's estate, he found almost everyone gone. Elise was at the Tower working, while Alix and Valeria had gone out to train in a nearby park. Only Maia was still in the palace, idly lounging in a garden near Elise's private wing.

Before he could move to join her, however, one of Emilie's servants intercepted him.

"Sir Leon!" the young man said as Leon walked across the atrium.

"Hmm?" Leon responded as he turned around. "Feel free to drop the 'Sir'. Just resigned."

The servant blinked in confusion, but then quickly said, "As Good Sir wishes. Lady Emilie requested to meet with you once you returned."

"Where is she?"

"Just follow me."

A minute or two later, Leon was shown into Emilie's private offices in her estate. Unlike her office in the Tower, this room was far smaller and cozier, as well as far more private since there weren't dozens of attendants, secretaries, and servants waiting in the wings. At least, as far as Leon could tell.

Emilie herself was sitting behind a desk pouring over some documents with a look of seriousness that Leon rarely saw on her face. However, as soon as she looked up and saw him, a more familiar playful smile appeared on her face as she rose from her seat and walked around her desk.

“Leon!” she said in a warm, motherly greeting. “Please, come in, have a seat!”

Leon complied, and she sat down across from him, her eyes seeming to bore holes in him with their intensity. She and Elise looked so much like each other, the same shade of brilliant green eyes, the same fire-red hair, the same voluptuous, hourglass figure. The same frivolous attitude, in some respects.

“What’s going on?” he asked, feeling a few twinges of discomfort as the silence stretched on.

“I wanted to touch base with you,” Emilie said, smiling at him. “You know, feel out your intentions, where you want to go, what you want to do. Your plans for the future, essentially. I mean, you’ve ascended to the seventh-tier—congratulations, by the way—so I wanted to know if you had any higher aspirations than what you’ve already attained.”

“I see.” Leon quickly filled her in on the meeting he had with the King, including his resignation and the agreement to return his and Elise’s villa. “... though I kind of doubt that we’ll be living there for too long. I was hoping to leave the Bull Kingdom soon.”

“Oh? Where will you go?” Emilie inquired.

“Probably the Central Empires,” Leon replied. “There are some things in those regions that I want to check in on.”

“Care to share what they are?”

“I... would like to keep those matters private, if possible. No offense, I trust you implicitly, but it would just take a depressingly long time to explain.”

Emilie lightly frowned, but a moment later she said, “I suppose I can restrain my curiosity for a while. However, your resignation does lead nicely into something I wanted to bring up with you.”

“What is it?”

“How would you like a position with Heaven’s Eye?”

Leon blinked in surprise. *‘Wasn’t expecting that, especially not so soon...’*

“I... uh... don’t know? Can you be more specific?”

Emilie smiled. “Heaven’s Eye is always on the lookout for new talent, and if you’re not going to be a knight in the service of the Bull Kingdom anymore, you’ll need something to do. I can write a letter of recommendation to the bigshots down south that’ll ensure you a nice, cushy position down there if you need it.”

Leon chuckled. “You know, Elise asked me to join you way back during my days at the Knight Academy. I can’t lie that I *really* wish I took her up on that offer. However, right now, I’m not quite ready for that. I just left the Legion, and I have some personal business to take care of. Places to see, you know how it is.”

"I do," Emilie replied as she nodded sagely. "You need some time to explore your freedom."

"I couldn't phrase it better myself."

"Take all the time you need, Leon. My offer will remain open indefinitely."

"I appreciate it," Leon honestly replied.

"I'd recommend taking it up sooner rather than later, though, I may be recalled back to Heaven's Eye Central Tower soon. I *may* have... *bent* a few regulations not too long ago..."

"Wait... what?" Leon stared at her, utterly flabbergasted. However, she simply leaned back in her seat and chuckled, treating the whole thing like a joke, and he wasn't sure if it was genuine or if she was just putting on a show for his benefit.

"Oh, don't worry about it. If I were you, I'd worry more about when I plan to marry Elise."

Leon froze up, wondering just how in the hells she'd found out so soon about his proposal. Elise may have told her, but he thought they had an unspoken understanding not to tell anyone, yet.

*'Maybe I should've made that a spoken understanding...'* Leon thought in panic.

"We... haven't set a date, yet, and I don't have one in mind..." Leon replied.

This time, it was Emilie's turn to freeze up, her eyes locked on Leon, the only part of her body that moved was her lips as they slowly blossomed into a wide, utterly joyful smile.

"So..." she whispered as her voice returned, every word bringing more and more joy and boisterous energy into it, "... you and my daughter... have... gotten... *engaged*?"

Leon cocked an eyebrow as his heart skipped a beat. "Did Elise... *not* tell you?" he asked.

"She did not," Emilie replied as she shot out of her chair and sat down next to Leon on the sofa. "What happened? How long ago did you propose? Was it even *you* that proposed! Oh, tell me *everything*!"

Leon, feeling more than a little overwhelmed with her sudden enthusiasm, moved back a little as she got closer with every question.

"Ne-Never mind!" he almost shouted, cursing at himself for making assumptions and spilling the beans. Emilie didn't back off, but she still stared at him, her eyes bright with expectation, her smile so wide that it was a wonder she could maintain it. "Please don't tell Elise I said that," he asked.

"Trying to keep this a secret?" Emilie asked, pulling back slightly.

"I... asked her last night, we haven't spoken about when to tell everyone else..." Leon murmured. "*Please* don't let on that you know!"

Emilie began to laugh as she finally gave Leon some space back. "I... will do my best..." she said, her smile not lessening in the slightest.

Leon felt like he just made a huge mistake, but he thanked her regardless and got out of the office as fast as he could without being overly rude, leaving Emilie still sitting there, any possibility of punishment for interfering in the civil war now driven from her mind in light of this most joyous of news.

*'My little girl is finally getting married!'* she thought with unrestrained, utterly unrepentant glee.

## **Chapter 476: The Imprisoned Prince**

A week passed in relative silence after the King awoke. The capital remained largely under lockdown, despite all military forces save for the 1st Legion departing the city to return to their assigned positions. The noble armies were disbanded and ordered to return home, the most rebellious of the nobles were arrested, and all-in-all, a period of relative peace settled in.

While that was certainly a cause for celebration, the capital was still shrouded with a heavy and somber atmosphere as the King and his ministers did their best to restore the bureaucracy and get the Kingdom functioning again. It didn't help matters that the noble district remained desolate, with only about a quarter of those who owned property there still in the city, and vast swathes of more affluent common neighborhoods being devoid of people, as well.

The Kingdom's economy had also taken a serious blow as trade—both internal and external—slowed when hostilities began. Food stopped flowing from the fertile west into the more barren north and east, while many smaller merchants in the south went under when foreign ships stopped coming.

Perhaps the most serious issue, however, was what to do about the Princes. The King focused mostly on bandaging the wounds of his Kingdom and healing his own injury, leaving him with little time in the day to devote to dealing with August and Octavius. At the very least, however, his other children came to see him regularly—even Herculanus was able to tear himself away from his duties as a blood priest of Lineage Hall to see him. Stefania and Cristina also returned home, and in an attempt to apologize for being gone so long and, by extension, preventing Cristina from being presented to the Court, the King didn't require her to return to the harem. Instead, she was given opulent apartments in the palace proper, though she still wasn't allowed to leave the capitol island just yet.

By the time that week was over, the King had managed to rise to his feet. He was an eighth-tier mage, now, and as terrible as the injury to his soul realm had been, he still made a rapid recovery thanks to his power and the skills of the doctor that August had hired.

He wasn't the steadiest on his feet, though, so when he finally left the villa, he did so in a specially-made chariot that would allow him to sit as he was driven around the capital by Penitent, while also letting the people see that their King had returned and was back in charge. Unfortunately, he didn't have the energy to spare for a long tour, so he and his escort stayed on the main thoroughfares so that they could return to the Royal Palace in good time.

After that tour came a more important duty—the King had spoken a great deal with his former High Ministers, who had all been reinstated, as well as with the High Arbiter. He had a good idea of what had happened during the time he spent comatose, and as a result, he went to go and see Octavius first.

The Second Prince was being held in the dungeons. His cell wasn't as bad as the one he'd briefly imprisoned August in following the trial, but it was far from the splendor and majesty that he was used to as a Prince.

And yet, when the King managed to hobble down to the cell and look in through the window on the door, he found Octavius just sitting on the cot, staring at the wall, not doing anything, least of all raging at the guards about his accommodations.

"Give me a moment," the King said to his entourage. He had several dozen guards with him, along with an equal number of his higher-ranked ministers, and both the Bronze and Penitent Paladins. Everyone but the Paladins immediately obeyed his command, retreating from the cell to give the King and his son some privacy. The Paladins hesitated to leave, but when the King nodded to them, they left accordingly.

That left the King and his son alone, with only a heavily enchanted steel door between them. But the King could see through it easily enough. He could see the bare walls of gray stone, completely seamless in construction and so well-enchanted that Octavius was completely unable to use his magic. The floors were likewise bare stone, but there were a few pieces of furniture that ensured the Prince wasn't entirely uncomfortable. The cot was far from being a proper bed, but a few blankets and fine linens had been provided for him. There was also a small table and a chair, along with a toilet and sink in the corner.

"Octavius..." the King murmured, his voice having regained most of its deep, authoritative rumble in the week he'd spent recuperating.

There was no way Octavius couldn't have heard his voice, but he didn't react at all. He just sat there on his cot, his back pressed up against the wall, staring at nothing.

"Can you hear me, my son?" the King asked.

Again, Octavius didn't seem to react, though the King did notice a few slight twitches that showed it was just a front.

"Speak," Julius commanded, his patience wearing thin. "Your King commands you to speak."

Octavius' eyes flitted over to the small window in the door, barely large enough to show the King's eyes and a bit of his nose.

"My *King*..." the Second Prince scornfully muttered, making no attempt to stand up or follow any of the proper ceremonies that were expected in the King's presence. "Is that all you are?" he asked contemptuously. "*Just* my King? Here for no other reason than to punish a traitor? Might as well get it over with. I had Uncle Trajan killed and started a civil war. Send in the headsman and put me out of all of our miseries."

Julius' stern demeanor cracked just a little in both rage and pity, and he asked with a strained voice, "Is that what you want, boy? A swift end on the headsman's block?"

"There are worse ways to go," Octavius replied in resignation. "One swing and everything goes dark."

"After everything you've done, you think you'd get off so easy?" the King responded. Octavius had just admitted his guilt to him, and it infuriated him. Julius loved and idolized Trajan, and the only thing stopping him from breaking the door down to wring his son's neck was the fact that it was his *son's* neck.

"I can hope," Octavius replied, his tone light and detached, as if they were discussing something as inconsequential as the weather rather than his impending execution.

The two were silent for a long moment, with Octavius content to sit and wait while Julius had to restrain his anger.

“... Why?!” the King demanded to know. “Why do all of this?! You would’ve been King after me anyway!”

Octavius finally deigned to level his gaze toward the door and hold it, his eyes narrowing in fury and righteous indignation. His voice, however, remained deathly calm. “Oh? Could’ve fooled me when you forced me to share power with that underage *bastard*! Or, I suppose, you *did* fool me.”

“He was your brother!” the King roared back. “You were supposed to be his mentor! To show him how to wield *real* power! He was only *fifteen* and your blood had been awakened, and yet you felt so threatened by him you abandoned the capital! I suppose it only serves to prove your fears true, you *didn’t* and still *do not* possess the qualities of a good King.”

“And whose fault is that?!” Octavius retorted, his voice rising in pitch and volume. “When I was a boy, the only one of us you ever had time for was Herculanius! You moped around the palace like an abandoned dog when your firstborn son ran off to join the blood priests!”

Octavius suddenly stopped, taking a moment to check himself. The King did likewise, recognizing that his anger wasn’t going to help these matters.

The Prince, after steadying himself, continued, “Even back then, I was never good enough for you. None of us ever were. Why do you think Antonius left to become a scholar, and Stefania quit politics altogether to do... whatever the hells she does. If you want to know who to blame for all of this, look no further than the fucking mirror, old man.”

The King glared through the window at his son, his heart beating madly in his chest as adrenaline freely flowed through his body and his primitive instincts demanded that he go into the cell and punish his son for challenging his Royal authority. But he was almost two hundred years old, and blood of the Sacred Bull or not, he was just too old and experienced to let his anger get the better of him.

Instead, he took a deep breath and said, “Whatever your problems were with me, they were with *me*. They do not excuse the murder of Trajan. They do *not* excuse the damage you’ve done to this Kingdom and its people, the lives you’ve ruined, the people who’ve died because of the actions you took. You are a traitor, and you will be sentenced as such. Your trial will be in several weeks. I have to work on fixing all of that damage, otherwise this would’ve been your trial.”

The King moved away from the door, but as his face disappeared, Octavius suddenly asked, “Wait! Father...”

The King paused, wondering just what his errant son wanted.

“What about... what about Sapphire?”

The King briefly frowned as he thought about all of his Paladins. The way he saw it, he only had three left—Bronze, Penitent, and Brimstone, and even the last one was tentative. Roland was too weak and Julius had already stripped him of the title. Roland had been refreshingly gracious about it, but Sapphire was going to be another matter. She was just as much of a traitor as Octavius, and Julius wasn’t entirely sure what to do with her. He only counted himself fortunate that Leon had killed Earthshaker a couple of weeks ago, otherwise, he might’ve found himself hesitating to punish two Paladins rather than only

one, despite the crimes Earthshaker was responsible for, both recent and old, that would've seen anyone else made a head shorter.

"I haven't decided. Your *Queen* might just be following you to the headsman's block regardless of what the loss of a seventh-tier mage might do for this Kingdom."

Octavius was silent for several long seconds. Finally, just as the King was about to leave, the Prince said, "If it's not too much trouble, could you tell her that I'm sorry?"

Julius didn't immediately respond. The audacity that Octavius was displaying had already boggled his mind, but this was straining his already taxed patience.

"Out of everyone you could've asked after... you wanted to express your sorrow to the Paladin you made unfulfillable promises to? The one who assisted in murdering my brother—your *Uncle*! The one who subverted the rule of law in this Kingdom and helped you start a civil war that has left hundreds of thousands dead?!"

The King's tone wasn't so much anger as it was disbelief. Octavius had, by this point, already blown right past his ability to be angry and the King couldn't even be bothered to raise his voice beyond 'mildly miffed'.

"I notice you haven't asked after your sisters," Julius observed after a few moments of silence.

"They're not my sisters," Octavius replied. "We may share the same father, but not the same mother. Stefania and Cristina are nothing to me. Then again, I suppose Cristina would've been useful for a political marriage, but that hardly changes my personal feelings. I care far more for the woman who would've been my Queen than those so-called sisters."

The King had no words with which he could respond. After that declaration, as far as he was concerned, he and Octavius were done. They had nothing more to talk about, and their relationship was essentially nonexistent.

He closed the window and began hobbling away with as much dignity as his weak body could muster. He didn't end up making it that far, but it wasn't because his body failed him; rather, it was because he lost himself in thought and needed to take a few minutes to think things over.

Octavius wasn't entirely wrong, in some respects. The burdens of Kingship were heavy, and Julius rarely had much time for his family. Perhaps that was why his children weren't particularly familial, despite their shared blood. The only sibling Julius had was Trajan, and Trajan was decades older than him. Julius' father didn't have any siblings at all, so Julius had little idea how to be a part of a real family. That he had six children at all was practically a miracle; even more so since they were all born within half a century.

Julius sighed. He'd have to meet with August. His youngest would undoubtedly ascend to the throne after he retired, that much was already certain. This war hadn't made August King, but it had made him the unofficial heir. As a result, Julius was going to have to get on the same page as August, and that probably meant taking on some of his proposed policies.

At the very least, most of those policies were influenced by Trajan and Julius himself, so Julius was hardly chafing under these circumstances. He even lightly smiled as the thought that this war had given

him the excuse he needed to start revoking titles from the landed nobility. The Bull Kingdom had almost forty Dukes, twenty-one Marquises, more than a hundred Counts, and thousands of Barons.

There were about to be a lot less of all of them.

He'd also have to deal with his Queen. She hadn't set foot outside of the Royal Harem in years, but that didn't stop her from being at least partially responsible for some of what had happened. Octavius didn't use his connection with her to get to her brother—Earthshaker—and her father—Duronius—without consulting with her.

*'Hells... I'm probably going to have to clean out my entire harem if I'm to oust that woman...'* the King thought to himself. *'Ancestors help me... I wish you were here with me, Trajan, Kyros...'*

—

The day after Julius visited Octavius was the first day he managed to return to the Court and take the throne since he awoke.

The throne room seemed much bigger than he remembered, but since almost half of the nobles who were normally a part of the Court were either in prison or under house arrest, and many administrative posts yet remained unfilled, this made sense. The throne room was much less filled than it should've been.

Notable for their presence, though, were both Leon and August.

Leon was there dressed in simple gray and white, though he stood with so much dignity and bearing that he appeared nobler than those who decked themselves out in gold and silkgrass.

Of course, that dignity and bearing may have had more to do with his aura and the gorgeous red-haired woman at his side than the way he held himself, but regardless, the King was happy to see him, even if he and his lady were off to the side watching everything from a relatively secluded alcove.

August, meanwhile, appeared much less humble. He was dressed as a Prince ought to be, with the deep greens and sparkling golds of the Royal House, and a dozen well-dressed knights at his back, including Roland. With his blood awakened, his body was now tall and tremendously well-built. His aura was stable and dense, well on its way to the sixth-tier, and he carried himself with neither a sense of arrogance nor servitude.

All of this combined made for an arresting sight, and August drew almost as many eyes as the King himself once Julius walked into the throne room.

The palace seneschal drew everyone's attention, and they all genuflected as was appropriate—even Leon, the King was amused to see, though his bow was token and shallow. The King, feeling a little run-down and ready to get this business over with, spoke no words until he sat upon the grand silver throne.

He took some comfort in the mural above the throne that depicted the First Bull King standing triumphant after forging the Kingdom in the fires of war. However, his mood quickly soured again as his eyes drifted to the side and landed upon the Raime, the last Thunder King that had surrendered during the Bull Kingdom's formative conquests and been named the first Archduke of the Great Plateau, at the



First Bull King's side, tearing at the hole that Kyros left in the King's heart and a reminder that Leon was not going to stay.

With a sigh, the King sat upon the silver throne and said, "Let's get this over with. Bring them in."

If anyone in the Court was surprised or offended at his curt attitude, they didn't let on. They could all see the linens on the ground in front of the throne that were specially enchanted by the blood priests to absorb blood, and the block upon them.

Only a moment later, a host of guardsmen came marching in, all of them at least fifth-tier, dragging a dirty, weak person between them. As the guards parted, the aged figure of Duke Duronius, trussed up in chains and a gag over his mouth was revealed. Captivity hadn't been kind to the old man, even though he'd been afforded as many luxuries as his rank demanded when under arrest. Julius took some small amount of satisfaction in that.

The seneschal wasted no time laying out the crimes of the Duke for the entire Court to hear, but the room was deadly silent. It was if no one was sure that Julius was going to follow through on what he was obviously intending.

Julius noted that Leon's golden eyes stayed locked upon Duronius even as the seneschal spoke. Similarly, he noted Dame Minerva's hawkish gaze locked upon the chained Duke. From the unspoken promises of violence that the King read in their eyes, he suspected that if he were to pardon the Duke for whatever reason, Duronius would find himself dead soon after, anyway.

But Leon wouldn't get that opportunity. As soon as the seneschal finished, it was the King's turn to speak.

"I sentence you to death," the King rasped, hatred and antipathy constricting his voice enough that he could barely form the words. Duronius was one of the leading minds behind the civil war, and he was about to learn what the King's justice was. His rank wouldn't help him here.

From off to the side, Bronze stepped out into full view of the court, his dark brown armor glistening in the light shining in from the windows. In his hands, he held his massive bronze ax, and as he approached the Duke, the guardsmen forced Duronius down onto the block, right into the perfect position.

Bronze didn't hesitate, nor was Duronius ever given a chance to speak. In only a moment, Bronze separated the Duke's head from his neck with a single, clean stroke.

"The Duchy of Valencia and all other titles that were held by the former Duke are hereby revoked," the King intoned, his voice gaining strength now that the deed was done.

The guardsmen quickly removed the Duke's body, and the doors opened again, letting in another group of guardsmen enter with a second chained figure between them. Quite a few landed nobles had been taken prisoner who were guilty of too many crimes to be forgiven, even if their lands were taken. Duronius was only the first of many.

The King sighed again. It was going to be a long day, but the Kingdom would be immeasurably improved by the end of it, even if the administrative burden these new lands would place upon them compounded

their existing problem of a hollowed-out bureaucracy. The King proceeded undaunted, dealing out justice to those that most sorely

### **Chapter 477: Wavering Certainty**

Leon wasn't going to pretend to anyone that seeing the executions of Duronius and dozens of other nobles who had thrown their lot in with Octavius wasn't satisfying. However, he didn't revel in it, and Elise, who had accompanied him to the throne room to witness it, had even less enthusiasm for it than he did. As a result, they soon took their leave, meeting up with Maia who had waited in the lake nearby.

They returned to their home—not Emilie's palace, but their villa, which had been returned to them by the King. It had been effectively looted by Octavius when it had been seized, but there had been little of worth there anyway since Elise and Leon had taken pains to leave nothing behind that they would miss.

Still, Leon's enchanting workshop had been completely emptied of all its stored resources. Even the poor-quality, unenchanted gear that he had stored there to test his enchantments on had been taken, though he wasn't about to start trying to pressure the Kingdom into giving that garbage back.

In restocking the place, Leon had also turned in his ruined armor to be repaired. He'd have to reapply all the enchantments once the repairs were finished, but he considered that a bonus since his skills had greatly improved in the years since he started, and he knew he could do a much better job of it now than he had when he first started.

*'Perhaps I'll even be able to combine my armor with my flight suit somehow, or install some miscellaneous magical weapons on it...'* he'd thought as he handed over the scrap metal and tattered fabric that his armor had become.

Leon and Elise's relationship had improved since the initial fallout from Leon coming clean about his confrontation with Valeria. That wasn't to say that everything was all fine, but Leon greatly preferred it to the way things had been before the civil war had kicked off. She had known about Valeria back then, too, but Leon was loath to return to keeping such things from his lover.

Or rather, *lovers*, for Maia had joined them in the villa, and this time, she certainly wasn't sleeping in a guest bedroom. She was a much simpler person than Elise, preferring to spend her days lazing around the villa when she wasn't helping Leon with some of his water magic training and learning to use her mental communication technique, or lost in the pile of limbs that the three became whenever they were in bed.

Valeria, on the other hand, was far more involved in Leon's affairs. She insisted on training with Leon whenever he was in the training dojo and accompanying him whenever he left the villa. As his first knight, she reasoned, it was her place to be at his side wherever he went. As a result, she had taken up residence in one of Leon and Elise's guest bedrooms, as she was still technically a knight in his service even though he was no longer a knight himself.

Fortunately, she didn't insist on being with Leon when he was restocking his enchanting workshop, and when Asiya and Cristina returned to the city, she had a few more reasons to leave rather than staying in the villa waiting for Leon to do something.

As for Alix, she decided that she still needed some time to think about her future. She didn't want to leave the Legion or the Kingdom behind so flippantly, even if she was sorely tempted to follow Leon south to the Central Empires. As a result, she wound up staying in the barracks at the Legion Headquarters instead of Leon and Elise's villa, and she didn't swing by all that often in the week they'd been home.

Any other knight might've been offended or angry that one of their subordinates wasn't attending to them, but Leon understood her reluctance to leave everything behind and gave her all the time and space she needed to decide what her future might look like. He did, however, make sure that she knew his upcoming schedule, just in case, for he wasn't going to be staying in the capital for much longer.

He felt that it was about time he returned to Teira.

—

Leon woke up spooned up against Elise's toned backside. Maia was on the other side of their fire-haired lover, the two practically buried against each other with Leon's arms around them.

It took every scrap of strength Leon possessed to rise from his bed and leave them sleeping, but he had some last-minute work he needed to finish. He should've gotten it done the night before, but his ladies had been rather aggressive in pulling him into bed—not that he'd resisted all that much, but it did mean that he had to get up early.

It had been almost two weeks since he returned to the capital with August and the rest. No one had stopped by to visit him and neither had he gone to the palace to visit them. From what he knew, though, he was certain it was more because they had to stabilize the Kingdom rather than because they didn't want to see him. He felt sure that August and Roland would've tried to persuade him to stay by now otherwise, but it was what it was.

He felt a little uneasy about the entire affair, though, now that he had some time to think and take stock. It felt a little bit like he was abandoning everyone by quitting so suddenly, and he had to admit that he kind of was. However, his future lay outside the Bull Kingdom, and he didn't want to get pulled into any more of the Bull Kingdom's wars before he could leave. With Octavius bound for the headsman's block, there was little else that he wanted to stick around for, even if he was going to grudgingly miss some of the people he'd come to know.

Leon made himself a quick breakfast and went to his workshop. He'd completely depleted his stores of offensive spells in the early stages of the civil war and hadn't much of a chance to restock, so that was what he threw himself into during most recent days as he waited for his armor to be repaired and the King's permission to access Argent Palace to come down.

It was quite liberating, not having much of anything to do and no one to answer to, he could devote all of his time to his personal goals and passions, such as studying enchantments and training.

But those were only short-term goals. The King had sent the promised dispensation that cleared Leon to have access to Argent Palace only several days previously, and Leon wanted nothing more than to return to his family's archives, this time with more time to explore and search for secrets and knowledge. Those bronze golems that maintained the place he found particularly fascinating. If he had to guess,

they were probably similar to the stone giants, and if he could make more of them... the possibilities were almost limitless.

It wasn't long before Elise, Maia, and Valeria were all awake. It was going to be a long journey north to Teira, so they didn't waste much time before they packed themselves into a huge wheelless carriage and got on the road. Anzu rode behind them in another carriage built to transport war beasts like him in comfort, while all of their luggage that Leon wasn't carrying in his soul realm was packed into a third carriage. Then they had three more carriages for their Heaven's Eye escort, making for quite the caravan escorting them to Teira.

"So," Elise said as they got themselves comfortable in the carriage—it was spacious enough for them to all have enough room to sleep if they wanted, "let's go over everything again, just to make sure we're on the same page."

"We'll stop by the Tower first," Leon said, the carriage pulling out into the noble district and leaving their villa behind. His tone was a little down, less enthusiastic than he might've thought it would be. He felt some small pangs of regret, leaving the place so soon after moving back in, but he had a terrible sense that if anything happened in the city while he was still there, he'd get pulled in regardless of the fact that he'd quit. It just made sense to him to get out of the capital for a while and let everything cool down and stabilize before spending too much time at home.

"Right, we have to visit Lord Ajax," Valeria responded. "We'll get ourselves situated before doing anything, we don't know how long we might spend at Argent Palace."

"Hopefully not too long," Leon replied as he turned his eyes out of the window. "I don't think there's much of worth left there that isn't in my family's archives. Still, that might take us at least a week just to take a cursory look at what all is in there."

Maia visibly stifled a yawn. She couldn't read, and there was little that bored her more than staring down at thick stacks of paper and ink.

"What else can we do in the city?" Valeria asked. She'd never been to the city before and didn't know what kind of attractions the city had.

"I was hoping to check out the Lightning Fields," Leon said with a little more energy. "I can't help but get a little worked up over the possibility of seeing a field of lightning rods designed to help lightning mages train..."

"Not surprising," Elise replied with a resigned smile. "I was there for two years, but I confess I didn't get out too much. Maybe we could see a few races or plays? Konstantine's Dome features at least one series of gladiator matches every week, and there are chariot races at least once a month. They even have other kinds of magical competitions there almost every day. There are also plenty of other places on the plateau we could spend some time. I think there are hot springs close by that we could visit, a few lakes where we could spend some time swimming, maybe go hiking in some of the more exclusive reserves."

"Maybe your uncle will have some suggestions," Leon replied, his eyes still turned out of the window, "but most of that does sound like fun."

A brief silence followed as Elise and Valeria stared at him.

"Love," Elise whispered.

Leon's eyes finally swiveled back to her. "Hmm?"

"Are you all right?" his fire-haired lover asked, her face lined with concern.

"... Yeah," Leon unconvincingly replied. "Yeah..."

"You don't seem that confident in your answer," Valeria observed as she leaned back in her seat and stared at him, her concerned look demanding an answer from him. "You seem like your attention is elsewhere, not here with us."

Leon frowned, instinctively almost denying that assertion, but he caught himself.

"I suppose it is..." he murmured, his voice barely audible despite the carriage being incredibly silent.

[You're conflicted...] Maia said into all of their minds. [I can sense it, you're having second thoughts about leaving.]

Neither Elise nor Valeria said anything, but they leaned in, prompting Leon to give voice to whatever was weighing upon his mind.

"I suppose..." he hesitantly began, unsure exactly how he ought to articulate it. "Well, when I quit and the King accepted it, I suppose I felt free. Freer than I had in years. I could do anything I wanted, go wherever I wanted, devote myself to my own pursuits for once. I guess it really hammered home just how discontented I was in the Legions..."

"Are you having second thoughts?" Valeria asked. She took this incredibly seriously, given the tone of her voice and the stony expression on her face. She and Leon had a tentative alliance, but if he was now thinking about not leaving the Bull Kingdom...

"Absolutely not," Leon replied, instantly dispelling those thoughts. "I'm just... I just kind of regret how I went about it. Not the resignation itself, though. Should've waited a little longer, I think. Maybe... I don't know, I guess now that I've had some time to think and relax, I just feel a little guilty about leaving everyone hanging in such a tumultuous time. Not that I think I could've helped much... they need administrators, not swordsmen..."

Elise and Valeria went quiet for a moment, empathizing with Leon's feelings. Maia, however, was a little less empathetic.

[Let those who have the skills and the will fix what's broken, it's no longer our business,] she declared. Leon raised an eyebrow and turned to face her, only for her to take his face in her hands and literally hold his gaze. [You owe them nothing. You've killed for them, brought that Austin or whatever back to this city, and ensured the defeat of their enemies. What more could they ask for?]

Leon smiled, agreeing with her on most levels and not intending to go back, but there were still a few twinges of guilt running through his mind. "It's not about 'owing' anyone anything," he said, taking her hands and pulling them down into his lap. "I wouldn't really consider them friends, but... I have a good impression of men like Roland and August. If they'd asked me to stay, if they'd *insisted* they needed my

help... I can't say my conviction to leave would've held. I might've gotten myself stuck here for years more. But I can't help but think that maybe they could've used my help in some way, keeping the peace or whatever. It feels right that I did this, that I quit and left, but... I'm still more invested than I'd like to be in seeing this place at peace."

"Is that why you quit as suddenly as you did?" Elise softly asked, reaching over and resting her hands upon Leon and Maia's. "You wanted as clean a break as possible between yourself and this Kingdom?"

"... Yes," Leon replied. "Maybe I wasn't as conscious of it in the moment, but that's what I wanted. Just to go my own way, to move on from here and deal with my own horseshit from now on."

As he spoke, Leon's eyes found Valeria's. Wordlessly, he communicated that he wasn't forgetting about their deal and the business they shared. Or at least, he hoped that's what he was communicating.

"Focus on that, then," Elise said. "We'll make plans to leave the Kingdom soon-ish. Maybe in a few months, just to make sure this place is as peaceful as you want it to be. A year, maybe."

"I *really* hope it doesn't take that long," Leon responded with a tired chuckle.

"It shouldn't," Elise replied. "The King is back in charge, August is now Crown Prince, Octavius is in the dungeon... Everything is fine. So how about we all just settle in, then, and enjoy this peace that all of you worked so hard to achieve?" Elise pulled a small metal lever on her seat, letting it slide down almost into a thin bed. "It's going to be a long journey to Teira, so we might as well get comfortable."

The other three smiled and leaned back in their own seats, continuing to talk about nothing in particular as they relaxed and enjoyed the ride in all the comfort that Heaven's Eye could provide.

## **Chapter 478: Tower Security**

Teira was much the same as it had been when Leon last passed through it. The Julian Road was flanked by large marble statues of heroic figures, all of which were painted. The entrances to the city proper were gates built into triumphal arches, and everywhere Leon looked, he could see evidence of the city's prosperity. That it had been the site of bitter fighting when Brimstone and Minerva had come through could barely be seen thanks to the efforts of the Legion engineers who took pains to rebuild much of the infrastructure that had been damaged. Only a few cleared areas where buildings clearly once stood spoke of the harm that had been done to the city.

Leon briefly wondered if the slums on the northern side of the city received such treatment. He doubted that Minerva would consciously exclude them from any needed repairs for any reason, but he couldn't help but wonder anyway.

As the Heaven's Eye caravan wound its way through the city, Leon's eyes were glued to the window. The streets were crowded, and the people went about their business without any widespread fear that Leon could detect. He didn't have much emotional attachment to the city, but Leon was still glad to see that the seat of his family's power for tens of thousands of years hadn't been ruined.

When the caravan arrived at the Heaven's Eye Tower, Leon, Valeria, Elise, and Maia all got out of their carriage. Anzu was also brought out, and after letting Leon give him some head pats, he was led off to the stables while the caravan proceeded on to Ajax's palace. Elise had written ahead, so Leon knew

they'd be staying with Ajax while they were in the city. However, he wanted to stop by the Tower before doing anything else.

Upon walking in through the front doors, Leon paused. He vividly remembered walking in almost five years ago, completely unsure of what he was doing, where he was supposed to go, or who he was supposed to talk to. He'd been overwhelmed with the opulence of the Tower and its patrons and found himself completely lost.

And then he met Elise. He'd been captivated by her from the moment he first saw her. Standing there in the Tower entrance brought all of those memories pouring back, and Leon's lips turned upward into a bright smile.

Elise slid up against him from behind, entwining her fingers with his. Leon turned to her, his golden eyes locking with hers. Neither said a word, but from the smiles they exchanged, they knew they were thinking about the exact same thing.

The moment quickly passed, and the group advanced further into the Tower. Ajax was going to meet them in his office, so they made for the magic lifts in the back, ignoring the looks the wealthy-looking patrons gave them as they passed. Elise was relatively well-known among the city's elite after spending two years working in this Tower, and she knew she'd been recognized by several of the local nobles relaxing in the lounge. But she didn't once entertain the thought of wasting time to go around to greet these people.

Only a few minutes later, they were on the top floor with Elise knocking on the door of Ajax's office.

Long seconds passed in silence as they waited for word to enter. When none came, Elise gave the others a strange look and knocked again.

Once more, the door remained closed and no one permitted them to enter.

"That's strange..." Elise quietly said.

"Is he not in?" Leon wondered aloud.

"Maybe... It's not like him to be far from his offices, though. But now that I'm thinking about it, it *is* strange that he didn't greet us downstairs... Even if he were busy, there should've been *someone* waiting for us."

"Do you think he thought we'd go to his palace and is waiting for us there?" Valeria conjectured.

"No, I specifically told him that he didn't have to take off of work just for us and that we'd meet him here..."

Elise knocked again and again received no answer.

"Hold on a moment," she said, quickly walking back down the hall and opening one of the smaller doors branching off of it. "You!" Leon heard her call out.

"Ah! Lady Elise!" came the slightly panicked and surprised reply.

"Greetings! I'm looking for my uncle, do you know where he might be?"

A moment later, Elise stepped away from the door as a young man—clearly one of Ajax’s secretaries—appeared. He was rather slight of frame and build, but his dark brown eyes and easy-going smile gave an impression of a warm and intelligent young man.

“My Lady, there was a security incident last night, and I believe Lord Ajax is still dealing with it...” the man said, his tone one of utmost respect.

“What? What security incident?!” Elise demanded, a hint of panic entering her voice. Leon could understand that reaction, for this was Heaven’s Eye, security incidents just weren’t supposed to happen here.

The secretary paused for a moment as he cast a suspicious look toward Leon, Valeria, and Maia, but with Elise still there silently pressuring him to answer, he must’ve figured that it wasn’t worth questioning them when Elise was right in front of him. So, he joined them in the hall and began his explanation.

—

It was a day like any other for Ajax. It was spent pouring over various documents that required his attention—mostly communiques from various nobles inquiring after their property. There was a higher volume than usual, but he understood that there were a lot of people who were anxious about their valuables and other accounts they held with Heaven’s Eye now that the civil war was over.

Still, it was a lot to keep track of, as well as keeping all of Heaven’s Eye’s operations on the Great Plateau running smoothly. But it was a job that Ajax took to remarkably well. He enjoyed his free time, to be sure, but he wasn’t nearly so carnal or hedonistic as his sister Emilie down in the capital, taking new husbands and concubines whenever she started getting bored, but it was Heaven’s Eye that he lived for, and its great mission.

Ajax was working late into the night, for Elise and Leon were arriving sometime around noon the following day. He wanted his plate to be completely clean for when they arrived to ensure that he could spend time with his niece and her lover. Consequently, save for a relatively small complement of guards and a handful of Ajax’s own assistants, the Tower was completely empty.

Suddenly, a bright red light appeared near the front of Ajax’s desk and began silently flashing like a strobe. Ajax’s heart almost stopped as it captured his attention. He knew what that light meant, but he’d never seen it activated before.

It was the silent alarm.

Pressing one of his fingers down on the light, a light projection appeared in front of him like a screen, while his desk became covered in runic circles like a console, allowing him to control most of the major security enchantments that filled the Tower at his leisure.

Quickly sweeping most of the papers off his desk, Ajax pressed his fingers down in the center of several runic circles, and the light screen in front of him changed from pitch black to showing him the source of the alarm: the offices for the Heaven’s Eye blood mages on the fourth floor. Standing behind the main desk was one of the senior blood mages, an older third-tier man who had forgotten more about blood magic than most people would ever learn. Standing just behind him was a tall woman with strawberry



blond hair, sharp features, and, from what the enchantments were indicating, an aura stronger than the fifth-tier.

Judging by how she'd managed to get into the Tower without him sensing it, Ajax guessed her power was *much* higher than the fifth-tier.

Clearly, she'd taken the blood mage captive. He wasn't even supposed to be working right now, and from the look of terror on the old man's face, Ajax didn't think for a moment that he was there willingly.

They were in the middle of some kind of ritual, with several glass orbs in front of the old man. Single droplets of blood were suspended in the orbs, and the orbs themselves sat in the center of several enchantments that the old man was manipulating with his magic. Most concerning was that one of these orbs was wrapped in golden talons which symbolized the head of House Raime. As far as Ajax knew, it was Kyros' orb that was still gripped in those talons.

Ajax took all of this in in less than a second, and he activated a few more of the runic circles on his desk. He didn't sense anything in the Tower change, but he knew that the Tower's defenses had been raised to their maximum level. The magic lifts were locked down, the guard detail had been alerted, and a number of traps and weapons were brought online.

The one that most interested Ajax, though, were light enchantments hidden in the magic lanterns that illuminated the entire Tower. With only a few quick flicks of his fingers, he could use those lanterns to fire beams of light magic and slice apart anything that he could see.

He would've done so immediately if the blond woman weren't standing directly behind the old man, keeping him too close for Ajax to be comfortable firing the beams without hitting his own employee.

For several long seconds, Ajax hoped he'd get a good angle, but the woman didn't move from behind the blood mage. Ajax eventually lost his patience and rose from his desk, though not before sealing almost every door in the Tower and preparing several other traps beforehand. After he was done, only Ajax and the Heaven's Eye guard detail would be able to move through the Tower with impunity.

As calmly as he could, Ajax strode out of his office and toward the lift at the end of the hall.

"My Lord!" someone shouted as he passed one of few other doors.

Ajax paused a moment to see who it was and found his sixth-tier head of security walking out of the security office.

"What's going on?"

"Did you not see the silent alarm activate?" Ajax asked, his concern growing.

"No, My Lord," the man replied.

Ajax didn't take long to ponder what that meant. Dealing with the threat was far more important right now, but it did make him raise his estimation of this woman's capabilities.

"Someone's taken one of our blood mages captive..." Ajax explained, quickly filling the guard in on the situation at hand. "... grab your best people and come with me. Have everyone else sweep the Tower for any other interlopers. This is a breach of the highest level, so be careful."

“Yes, My Lord,” the head of security replied as he ducked back into his office.

He was an efficient man, and in this situation, Ajax appreciated that above all else. The head of security returned less than a minute later with his three guard-captains, all sixth-tier and decked out in some of the finest weapons and armor that Heaven’s Eye could afford to equip its personnel with.

“My teams are already starting their sweeps,” the head of security said as the five began marching toward the lifts.

“Good,” Ajax whispered, feeling his pulse start to quicken as they stepped into the lift. They dropped to the fourth floor, all five of them preparing themselves on the way down for what they saw as an inevitable fight.

When the lift stopped and the doors opened, they spilled out into the blood mages office with a precision that would’ve shamed the Royal Legions.

Ajax seemed to be a lot less prepared than the guards, striding out of the lift as if he were walking in a park, but he was ready and able to call upon not only all of his immense magics, but also those of the Tower as well.

The scene that awaited them hadn’t changed from when Ajax had taken his eyes off of it. Only about five minutes had passed, and the woman was still standing behind the old blood mage watching him as he performed some kind of ritual.

“M-My Lord!” the blood mage cried out as Ajax and his people stormed into the room.

“What is going on here?” Ajax demanded to know, his eyes locked on the woman, his brow rapidly furrowing in concern. Now that he could put his eyes upon her, he could see that her aura roughly matched his own—she was a seventh-tier mage, and a powerful one at that. Ajax flooded the room with his magic senses and was gratified to see his guards taking the situation deadly seriously.

The woman glared imperiously at Ajax as if she were daring him to challenge her. She showed no signs of having been caught doing something off-limits and stood with the pride and confidence of someone who thought without a shadow of a doubt that they belonged where they were—or someone who thought that they were untouchable.

“I had some urgent business to take care of,” she coolly replied. “Time is of the utmost importance and I couldn’t wait for the Tower to reopen in the morning.

Ajax smiled, but there was no mirth or welcome in the upturning of his lips. Rather, his smile was predatory, a baring of his teeth in a primal threat to someone trespassing in his territory.

“Theokleos, are you all right?” he asked the blood mage, though his eyes never left the woman.

“Y-Yes, My Lord,” the old blood mage replied. “This woman snatched me off the street and demanded I test this blood sample she brought! She threatened my family if I didn’t comply!”

Ajax’s demeanor grew sharper, his hands glowing as they filled with his light mana.

"I'm terribly sorry about that, but lives depend on the results of this test," the woman said. She continued to stand there, unmoving even as Ajax's subordinates began to creep closer and Ajax's aura became more turbulent and violent.

"You can explain in a cell once we verify your identity," the Tower Lord growled. "*No one* takes my people prisoner and threatens their families!"

Without another word, the four guards surged forward, swords appearing in their hand as they made to secure the woman as quickly and painlessly as they could.

Ajax's head of security reached her first. He reached toward her with his empty hand, but even as his fingers were just about to brush her black, almost skintight clothing, she showed no sign of distress. It became immediately apparent why as the head of security's fingers phased right through her as if she weren't there.

'... *Which she isn't!*' Ajax thought, recognizing the wisps of dark smoke that wafted off of her body at the point of contact between her and the head of security. She was a user of darkness magic, and the form they could see was nothing more than an illusion.

Without a moment's pause, Ajax poured all of his magic into an omni-directional attack, letting light radiate from his entire body and fill the office with its brilliance. Pure white light banished every shadow in the room, wrapping around columns and down behind the desk until the office seemed like nothing more than a featureless white void. The only control Ajax expended in his use of magic was to protect his subordinates from his deadly rays, even though such wide-ranging attacks weren't nearly so dangerous as more focused strikes.

He moved not a moment too soon, for his light also froze a pitch black tendril of smoky darkness just before it impaled his head of security in the back, rising from the floor like a stone spike. Ajax only had to follow that spike into the one shadow that hadn't been affected by his light and he had the true location of the woman.

Lunging forward at the shadow on the ground in front of the desk, Ajax reached out for it, intending to drag the woman out of the shadow and into his light. Unfortunately, as his fingers brushed against the shadow, they stopped, unable to proceed no matter how hard he pushed.

The shadow shook under his pressure, though, and slid out from beneath his fingers and shot across the floor. Ajax followed after it, his body almost becoming a beam of light as he dove after the shadow.

But he wasn't able to move fast enough, and the shadow slipped under the door frame of the magic lift.

Ajax was stunned. The defenses of the Tower were raised to their maximum level, that shouldn't have been possible for only a seventh-tier mage!

But he didn't let that stop him for long. With his power and position, the doors were opened a microsecond later, and he raced into the lift. He couldn't see the shadow even as light continued shining from his body, indicating that the woman had slipped not into the lift compartment, but into the lift shaft itself.

Roaring in frustration, Ajax slammed the runic circle to take him down to the ground floor. The lift moved almost pathetically slowly, and once it opened and Ajax stormed into the lounge, the woman's

shadow was long gone, if it had even gone to the ground floor in the first place. Ajax's eyes took in every detail of the room, his light banishing every natural shadow that existed, but still there was no sign of the blond woman.

Darting out of the front door—slamming it shut behind him—and into the square just outside, Ajax continued his search, but the woman was nowhere to be seen.

Ajax growled in dissatisfaction and went back inside. He found several teams of his guards in the lounge waiting for him, half a dozen of whom seemed just about to open the door to join him outside when he strode back in.

As he did, the lift in the back opened and his head of security and two of his three guard-captains came walking out of it.

"I couldn't stop the trespasser," Ajax declared. Keep the Tower on high alert until the morning. Public operations are to be restricted to the lounge without exception until we either find her or determine that she's not hiding somewhere in the Tower."

"Yes, My Lord, I'll see these orders relayed at once!" the head of security responded.

"Good. I need to speak with Theokleos. I want to know what exactly he was being forced to do..."

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"And she wasn't found?" Elise asked in alarm.

"I'm afraid not, My Lady," Ajax's secretary grimly replied. "The guards have been sweeping the Tower all night and no sign of her was found. The only thing we can conclude is that she managed to escape somehow, despite the Tower's defenses..."

"How is that even possible?!" Elise demanded.

The secretary was at a loss as he couldn't explain it even if he tried. He was a paper-pusher, not an expert in the Tower's defensive wards or in darkness magic.

However, there were a few aspects of this that seemed remarkably familiar to Leon as he listened. His eyes drifted over toward Maia as he recalled something that she did soon after saving everyone from the vampires who attacked his villa.

She'd killed a darkness mage who'd managed to infiltrate Emilie's palace that night.

#### **Chapter 479: Disturbed Plans**

[Maia, did you ever tell Emilie or Elise about that darkness mage you killed in Emilie's estate?] Leon asked her, speaking into her mind.

Maia glanced at him, understanding blossoming on her face, followed quickly by embarrassment and slight shame. [No... I didn't...] she replied.

Leon was momentarily irritated, but given they slept together almost immediately after he urged her to tell Emilie about it, he wasn't too surprised she'd forgotten—*he'd* forgotten about it, too, so he clamped down on that mild anger.

"Where is my uncle now?" Elise asked the secretary.

"I believe he's still down with the blood mages supervising the audit of their offices," the secretary replied. "He has to make sure that the intruder didn't steal anything or leave anything behind."

"Thank you," Elise replied as she turned back toward the lift. She and the other three got back in it while the secretary returned to his duties.

Barely a few seconds later, they were stepping out into the head office of the local Heaven's Eye blood mages. The place was a flurry of activity, though there weren't that many people there. Ajax's imposing form was sitting behind the desk with two blood mages pouring over a stack of forms next to him while a handful of blood mages and Tower guards could be heard working in the storage room just beyond.

"... nothing seems to be missing," the older of the two blood mages said. "I can't say for certain whether or not she took anything, but I didn't see her do anything of the sort, and just about everything of note has been accounted for, My Lord."

"Keep searching, Theokleos," Ajax replied. "Any irregularities, I want to know about."

As Ajax looked up and saw his niece and the other three, his stoic, vaguely angry expression instantly softened, and he rose to his feet and stepped out from behind the main desk.

"Little Butterfly!" he exclaimed as he pulled Elise into a fatherly hug. "Ahh, I'm sorry, I lost track of time, otherwise I would've met you downstairs!"

"Uncle Ajax!" she replied, wrapping her arms around his waist—he was much too tall for her to comfortably reach any higher. "Are you all right? One of your assistants told us what happened last night!"

"Oh? Yes, I'm fine, none of us were injured, though not for her lack of trying," Ajax responded. "If I weren't so quick on the draw, one of my guard-captains might've bitten the dust in our brief tussle."

"It's good to see you're all right, then," Leon said as he stepped forward. "I fought a seventh-tier darkness mage myself during the war with Talfar last year. Such magics are difficult to counter."

"You can say that again," Ajax replied, extending a hand out to Leon, which the younger man unhesitatingly grasped in greeting. "It's good to see you doing so well, Leon. I must admit that I was a little bit worried about you after you left last time."

"Thanks for the concern, I appreciate it. It hasn't always been easy, and I've made some bad decisions, but everything's worked out so far." Leon smiled surprisingly good-naturedly, taking Ajax a bit by surprise since the image he had in his mind of Leon from their last meeting was that of an aloof and reserved young man, not someone who so readily and so genuinely smiled.

"Uncle, what else can you tell us about what happened last night?" Elise interrupted, her melodic voice tainted with worry and concern.

Ajax glanced back at the working blood mages, then back at Leon and Elise's small group. His eyes lingered on Maia for an almost worryingly long time, but he showed no other reaction to her obvious power. He then turned back to Elise and said, "Let's... talk somewhere else."

Only a couple of minutes later, the five of them were seated facing each other in the sofas in Ajax's office. Ajax was amused to see Elise and Maia sitting next to Leon on the largest sofa, with Leon in the center. Valeria and Ajax, meanwhile, took single-person armchairs. He couldn't help but wonder as to the exact nature of everyone's relationship, even if the way Maia and Elise were leaning on Leon made how physically intimate they were clear enough.

Elise wasn't about to let him ask any questions on that front, however.

"Uncle, what have you learned?"

Ajax's gentle smile began to dim. "I've learned a bit, but it's not something that I think others ought to hear... Leon, it concerns you..." His eyes drifted toward Valeria and Maia as he said this. It was a subtle signal, but one that he neither attempted to hide nor thought for a moment that Elise would miss.

Leon mimicked Ajax, glancing at Maia and then at Valeria, his eyes lingering on the latter far more than the former. Maia already knew that he trusted her with his life, she could sense that through their connection. Valeria, on the other hand, might've needed a little bit more assurance from him, and he tried to convey his sincerity with his eyes.

"I trust Naiad and Valeria as much as anyone can be trusted," he declared. "They know my secrets, there's little point in keeping anything more from them."

Ajax looked a little startled when Leon said 'Naiad', clearly recognizing the term, but he kept silent about it. The rest of Leon's declaration, however, elicited a sigh of resignation from him before he began to speak.

"... So be it," he said, settled back into his chair for what he thought was going to be a long conversation. "The woman who infiltrated the Tower last night was testing a blood sample she had against several other samples of Raime blood we have in the Tower."

Leon leaned back in his seat, unconsciously pulling Maia and Elise a little tighter against him.

"Was she..." he murmured in thought. "Naiad killed a darkness mage not too long ago, too..." he said, quickly explaining what Maia had relayed to him of their confrontation, with Maia adding in a few more details that she thought might be relevant.

"And... you just pulled him out of his shadow? Just like that?" Ajax asked, astonished. He knew from personal experience just how difficult such a thing was, and he'd even failed to replicate it the previous night.

[I did,] Maia replied, looking a little smug as his eyes narrowed when her voice resounded through his mind.

"Why didn't you tell me about this?" Elise quietly asked, her tone dangerous and angry despite how calm and even it was.

[I... was distracted after...] Maia answered, her smug attitude vanishing like someone had flipped a switch and turned it off.

"We can talk about that later," Leon whispered. "For now, let's focus on the immediate threat."

Elise scowled, but she agreed with Leon about what the priority was right now.

“What was this blood sample?” Valeria asked, interrupting any tensions that might’ve started forming.

“A tattered bandage covered in old dried blood,” Ajax replied. “It was just a small scrap, and it looked like it had survived being burned. Despite that, however, the blood on it was almost useless to her. My blood mages managed to confirm that the blood belonged to someone of House Raime, though they couldn’t glean any further information. This woman probably already knew that, though, given that she had demanded that the bandage be tested against these other samples.”

“Do you have that bandage fragment with you?” Valeria further inquired.

“No, I destroyed it as soon as we were done with it,” Ajax replied, smiling as Valeria gave him a disapproving look. “There’s little need to keep the evidence, Dame... Valeria, was it?”

She nodded.

“The sample was confirmed by my blood mages to be of no further use, and I didn’t want to risk it falling back into the hands of someone who could infiltrate my Tower,” Ajax continued. “Besides, my blood mage whom she’d taken captive told me that she seemed desperate and on edge. I believe that it was probably the only blood sample she had. We’re not bringing this matter to the Kingdom—they’ve got too much on their plate as it is—so there wasn’t any need to keep the sample around for long.”

Leon nodded, finding himself intrigued by what Ajax said. “What made him think she was desperate?” he asked.

“Her general demeanor, her demands for him to hurry, a few small things she said. Apparently, she was sent from somewhere else and her friends or allies seem to be waiting for her in a dangerous place. Whatever that means. Theokleos wasn’t able to get any specifics beyond the fact that she was supposedly sent here alone, though her allies are probably waiting on word from her.”

“So we know that she isn’t working alone, they’re after my family, and they’ve already made an attempt to act against me once while I was in a heavily-warded Heaven’s Eye building,” Leon summarized. His eyes drifted over in Valeria’s direction again and saw her lost in thought.

He hesitated to ask her what her opinion of all this was with Ajax in the room, but he had a suspicion that these pieces were fitting together in her head just as they were in his.

“Is there anything we can do to help?” Leon asked Ajax, hoping for all that he was worth that there wasn’t.

“I don’t think so,” Ajax replied, to Leon’s immediate relief. “My people are handling the investigation here in the Tower, and we have no other leads to go on about who this woman might be. I’m sorry, Leon, I know this is a personal matter for you, but I can’t offer anything more unless we have another encounter with this woman or her allies.”

Leon nodded, doing his best to look appropriately crestfallen, but secretly feeling relieved that he had a little more time to deal with all of this himself without involving anyone else who might complicate matters.

"I suppose it is what it is," he said. "We'll be careful from here on out, but we still have some business to get to while we're here in the city."

"You mean you didn't come up here to visit little old me?" Ajax playfully asked. "Whatever you need, I'll do my best to assist you."

Leon nodded gratefully. "For me, I was hoping to empty out my vault. I'll probably not be staying in the Kingdom for much longer, so I don't want to leave a vault full of stuff here when I could just take everything with me."

"Makes sense," Ajax replied. He might've been a little upset if Leon was closing all of his accounts, but his accounts were remaining open, it was only his vault that he was emptying. No matter where he went after leaving the Kingdom, he'd always have access to his money with Heaven's Eye.

Elise then spoke up, her cadence a little slower and her tone a little lower than usual, indicating that she was still thinking about the attack.

"We're... also intending to look around Argent Palace, but in light of what happened last night, I'm not so sure that's a good idea..." she said, looking at Leon. "If word got around of our visit and this woman heard, then she might come after us..."

[You said that woman was a seventh-tier mage?] Maia inquired, cutting off Elise's thought.

"Yes," Ajax affirmed.

Maia responded with an almost derisive smile, her eyes narrowing into a predatory glare. [If she thinks she can take my mates away from me, then I'll kill her.]

There was no hesitation in her 'voice', she was all confidence and certainty. As far as she was concerned, so long as she was around, Leon and Elise were safe from everything under the sun.

Leon smiled in gratitude, though there were still a few things that Ajax revealed that had him thinking. Where the woman had gotten the burned bandage and whose blood was on it were at the forefront of his questions. Unfortunately, he knew he probably wouldn't be getting answers to those questions anytime soon, if ever.

"I'm very happy that someone so powerful is willing to defend Leon and my niece," Ajax said, responding to Maia, "but I think being cautious is the best bet right now. It would probably be to everyone's benefit to hold off on visiting Argent Palace for the time being, at least until we can be assured of your safety."

"We can both be cautious and still check the place out, though," Leon objected. "We don't have to use the front gate and attract a lot of attention, we only have to send word that we'll be visiting and then enter the palace estate from another way."

"I assume you have another way in if you're suggesting this?" Ajax asked.

"I do," Leon replied. "Several, in fact."

"Several, huh?" Ajax whispered as he started losing himself in thought. "Well you can count me impressed," he sarcastically muttered.



"I still think it's risky," Elise firmly stated.

"It was always going to be risky," Leon replied. "Even before this woman appeared here, there was always going to be the possibility that, in entering the place with the King's permission, my family's enemies would hear of it."

Leon's eyes strayed in Valeria's direction, and she didn't meet his eye. She was instead staring at the floor trying and failing to hide her growing look of horror.

"You know what?" he suddenly said, abruptly changing gears. "Why don't we just take care of the vault right now, then we can sleep on the problem. Even if we decide to go with my idea, we can always wait a little while, it's not like we've a time limit or anything."

"That would certainly go a long way to assuaging my worries, Leon," Ajax replied, his handsome face breaking out into a wide smile. "I'll have the vault brought up here, and once you're done emptying it, I'll accompany all of you back to my palace and get you settled in. I'm sure it's been a long journey and you need your rest."

"That we do, Uncle," Elise replied, her tone exhausted and exasperated from what had been discussed and proposed.

Leon, however, was silent. He had no intention of resting—at least, not immediately. He was more than willing to wait a little bit longer to access his family's archives again, but at the first opportunity, he wanted to get Valeria alone and talk about whatever was obviously on her mind.

#### **Chapter 480: Leon's Guess**

Tens of millions of silver coins and ninety-nine gold talents went into Leon's soul realm. Accompanying them were more than a hundred different gems, from the most valuable diamonds and sapphires down to more mediocre amethysts. He had enough gems to independently power all of his enchanting work for a long time to come.

Once his vault was emptied, Leon and Ajax arranged to have all of those silver coins put into his account with Heaven's Eye, raising his account value to about forty-five million. That, Leon thought, would be enough money to finance his enchanting experiments for quite a while. In fact, just thinking about that massive hoard of money was enough to have Leon practically walking on clouds with a massive smile on his face. That smile only got wider when he thought about the gold in his soul realm, in all of its shining glory.

But once he and his small party were taken to Ajax's palace to rest and relax, his smile vanished, and his good mood began to sour.

The palace was, itself, not too dissimilar to Emilie's down in the capital. It was a little bit smaller and lacked the gardens that Elise had cultivated, but it was more than enough for the four of them to have all the space they could possibly ask for. The stables, too, were open and luxurious, allowing Anzu to have his own tremendously comfortable cell.

Leon, Elise, and Maia all got a spacious suite to themselves, while Valeria was given one of her own, giving everyone all the privacy they needed.

“Sooo,” Elise seductively began once she, Maia, and Leon had gotten a little more situated in their suite and Ajax’s servants that brought in their luggage had left, “what oh what should we do now...” She sat down on the huge bed and leaned back as she hungrily stared at Maia and Leon, one of her hands slowly running over the soft covers and onto her thigh, pulling her dress up above her knees.

Maia needed no other invitation; she walked right over and roughly pushed Elise down onto her back. The river nymph’s hands began playing at the buttons and knots that kept Elise’s dress in place.

“I know exactly what we should do,” she said out loud, her voice acting as a potent aphrodisiac for both of her lovers.

Leon, however, couldn’t participate. He stared at the sight in longing, his lower head at attention and demanding that he join his two ladies, but he had something else he had to do first.

With as much willpower as he could bring to bear, he said in the strained tone of a man who didn’t want to leave but knew that he had to, “You two... have fun. I have something I need to do right now...”

Maia’s hands froze in place as she turned her attention away from Elise’s body and toward Leon as he took a few steps toward the door.

“What business?” she asked.

Elise joined Maia when she sat up as much as she could with Maia straddling her hips and pressing her back in the bed.

“Leon, we’ve barely touched each other on the entire journey north! You can’t leave us like this!” she complained, her tone more pleading than demanding or irate.

“I’ll be back shortly,” Leon replied as he gave the two the most loving and appreciative smile he could. “However, I need to speak with Valeria right now. I think she knows more about that mage that infiltrated the Tower than she was letting on. Even if she doesn’t, she was acting real suspicious back in Ajax’s office, and I just wanted to check in with her and make sure she’s all right before burying myself too deeply in either of you. I know that if I did that, then I’d probably be unable to tear myself away until tomorrow morning at the earliest...”

“Is this something you want to do on your own?” Maia asked despite knowing the answer. She could feel Leon’s emotional state through their connection, and she could feel his desire to be alone and his need for truth right now.

“It is,” he replied.

“Then go take care of it,” Maia replied as she pushed Elise back down into the bed covers. “I’ll keep Elise happy until you return.”

Before Elise could respond, Maia had her dress pushed to her waist from both ends to reveal her tantalizing underwear that seemed to be failing at its job, leaving strategic holes in places to give access to her most sensitive places. Without another word, Maia had her lips on one of Elise’s nipples and one of her hands buried between Elise’s legs.

And so, with Elise's cries of pleasure ringing in his ears and a tremendous sense of regret and longing, Leon bottled up his titanic arousal and got out of the suite before his desires could distract him from what he needed to do.

It helped that once the door was closed behind him, all sounds were blocked and he could focus on the task at hand instead of Maia on top of Elise. A few quick seconds later he was back out of the rooms set aside for him and his ladies and was at Valeria's door. After a few strong but patient knocks, Valeria opened the door.

"Hey!" she said in a cheery voice that wavered just enough for Leon to suspect its authenticity. "What brings you here? I'd have thought that the three of you would be immersed in each other right now..."

Leon smiled bitterly and replied, "Don't make me think about that. We need to have a few words, and if you remind me of what they're doing while I'm gone, I might not have the patience to stay as long as this might require."

"OK..." Valeria replied as she opened the door wider and stepped aside. "Come on in."

Leon thanked her and walked into the central lounge area of Valeria's suite. Valeria closed the door behind him as he entered and took a seat in a nearby armchair.

"So, what's this you need to talk to me about?" she asked, crossing her legs and staring at him with slightly anxious curiosity.

Leon took a deep breath, steadying himself so that he could think about what to say before jumping right in. He didn't want to sound too accusatory, he wanted her to know that he still trusted her.

"I wanted to talk to you about the incident last night with Ajax and that shadow mage," Leon said, and immediately he saw her relatively cheery attitude disappear. "I don't want to make any assumptions, but I thought that you might have some insight to offer into the matter. Insight that you might not want to talk about in front of everyone else."

"What kind of insight are you looking for?" Valeria asked, her body language growing a little more defensive as her legs uncrossed and she folded her arms across her chest.

"I don't really know," Leon replied. "All I know is that you reacted a little strangely in that meeting, and I just want to know why. You know that I'm committed to our agreement, and I want to make sure that everything is going all right. That there's nothing that might threaten that arrangement."

Valeria seemed for a moment like she was going to argue with him, but after a brief glare, she relaxed.

"You know, for someone so quiet and supposedly introverted, you notice more than I think most people might expect," Valeria said.

Leon offered no more than a smile as a response.

After a moment, Valeria continued. "I don't know anything for sure, that's why I didn't speak up back then. It's mostly just a suspicion in the back of my mind, something that occurred to me that I can't shake..."

"Go on..."

"I think that the man that broke into Emilie's palace and the woman who broke into the Tower were both my father's agents..." Leon leaned forward as she confirmed what he was starting to himself suspect. "... but I can't say for certain. I've told you before that my father always kept me far away from his day-to-day business, even if he occasionally saw fit to update me on the mission as a whole."

"I remember you saying that much, yes. What else can you tell me?" Leon kept his tone soft and questioning, implicitly leaving her the option to refuse if she wanted.

He was gratified to see that she did not.

"It didn't really strike me when Lord Ajax was talking, but when Naiad told us about that man who attacked Emilie's palace, things started to click in my head."

"If you've got things clicking up there, you might want to get that checked out," Leon muttered with a quiet chuckle, hoping to keep the mood light. He wanted this to be more of a chat between friends and allies, not an interrogation between enemies.

Valeria blessed him with a sarcastic smile before she continued.

"I wasn't too close with my father's agents, with the exception to Adrianos and Timotheos. They were close enough to us that my father adopted them. The rest... I only saw on occasion and had no formal introductions. However, the man Naiad killed sounded like Loukas, since he vanished around the same time as Naiad appeared in the capital. From the description of her appearance and her powers, I would guess that the woman last night was Rhea, another of my father's seventh-tier mages."

"Remind me, how many seventh-tier mages does your father have?"

"At this point, two: Rhea and Alexandros. Alexandros is a shorter, stockier man, with pale skin and dark hair."

Leon nodded despite knowing that that description didn't help all that much at this point.

"Do you have any idea what Rhea might've been doing?" Leon asked.

"My guess is as good as yours," she replied.

Leon nodded as he considered the situation. "She found a blood sample from somewhere," he thought out loud. "She obviously thought it was related to me, so she brought it here to Teira where it could be tested against the stored blood of the rest of my family..."

"I don't think my father has any blood magic specialists in his service," Valeria said. "I don't think she realized that blood that old wasn't useful if it hadn't been magically preserved. If she did, she never would've risked such a thing. Or at least, I don't *think* she would've. As a matter of fact, now that I'm thinking about it, I can't help but wonder why she targeted Heaven's Eye, of all places. Surely Lineage Hall would've been a less well-defended place to target? Wouldn't they also store the blood of your forebears?"

"That's a *very* good point..." Leon said as he leaned back in his chair. "Maybe we ought to ask Ajax to look into any potential security breaches in the local Ancestral Temples?"

"That would probably be a good idea..."

"We'll get that done first thing in the morning. So, she found some blood and brought it here to be tested. That might mean several things. First, it probably means that Teira was closer to wherever she found that blood sample than the Tower in the capital... or any other Ancestral Temple where my family's blood might've been stored. If she targeted the Tower, then she had some reason to do so, and she also needed to kidnap a Heaven's Eye blood mage to assist her."

"That blood mage was probably right, then; she must be desperate," Valeria whispered as a look of concern fell across her face. "My father's people don't just do all these things because it's convenient. They use bribery and coercion wherever possible. I can't imagine that she couldn't just come into the Tower and ask to have the sample tested..."

"Maybe that would've taken too long? If she's as desperate as you think, then maybe she didn't think she could afford to go through legal channels?"

Valeria began to frown as a new thought occurred to her. "Neither my father nor Alexandros were with her, at least as far as Lord Ajax was aware..."

"So where were they?" Leon finished her thought.

She gave him a deadly serious and fearful nod. "Rhea's desperate and my father and Alexandros must've been... taken out of the picture somehow... That's the only reason she would've done all of this without support and in the manner she chose."

*'She thinks her father is dead...'* Leon thought as Valeria's expression began to turn more and more towards fear than anything else.

"We can't say for certain," Leon quickly said, hoping to cut off whatever dark thoughts were brewing in her head. "Lord Justin is an eighth-tier mage by all accounts, I can't imagine there's much outside of the Central Empires on this plane that can harm him. We don't know Rhea's circumstances, or if this is even her."

"But my father's been missing for so long..." Valeria quietly replied. "I would've thought he'd have come back by now, but if he's been..."

Leon rose from his seat across from her and slid into a seat on a sofa that was closer to her. He almost laid a hand on her forearm, but he thought that might've been a bit too much, so he stuck with a serious tone and an earnest gaze.

"Let's not go making assumptions absent more conclusive evidence," he said. "We don't even know that was really Rhea. Lord Justin's power is no minor thing, and if we should be making any assumptions, it's that he's still around and simply hasn't shown himself for whatever reason."

Valeria didn't look too reassured, but she took a few moments to compose herself anyway. It was long enough for Leon to regret his choice of reassurances, for he essentially told her that Justin had willingly abandoned her rather than simply being unable to come back, and he was too embarrassed to try and correct himself. He knew he'd just dig himself deeper into that hole.

All he said was, "We'll find him. We'll find him."

"I hope so..." Valeria replied as she slumped down into her chair, looking a little lost.

"Until then," Leon said, not sure how to comfort her without seeming too familiar, yet still wanting to help get her mind off this, "what do you think we should do regarding Argent Palace?"

Valeria took a deep breath and didn't immediately answer. After a moment, she pushed herself back up into a more attentive position and asked, "You said you have more private ways of getting into the estate, right?"

"That I did," Leon replied.

"Then that's what we should use. If Rhea is here and looking for you, then the best thing we can do is avoid her at all costs. Entering Argent Palace through the front gates would be like sending up a flare of your exact position."

Leon hummed in agreement. "The problem there, though, is that the last time I got into Argent Palace, I must've tripped an alarm somewhere, because the guards protecting the place were alerted to my presence. So we're going to have to inform them that we're there, regardless."

"When were you last at Argent Palace?" Valeria suddenly asked, a smile of intrigue blooming on her face.

"When I was coming south from the Vales," Leon replied. "I almost got caught, but I got a few minutes to myself in my family's archives before I had to bail."

"Why am I not surprised?" Valeria said with a gentle laugh.

Leon almost joined her until a possibility suddenly entered his mind. Teira had the closest Tower to the Northern Vales. The bandage Rhea had had been burned, and he'd burned his home down as he left.

*'If they went north looking for their missing people...' he thought, his face starting to twist in worry and dread. 'Maybe... maybe they found my old home...'*

He thought about the Forest of Black and White, how dangerous it was at night, the secrets it held. The map he'd found at the Cradle certainly revealed that there was *something* there that Leon had never seen even in all the years that he'd lived there with Artorias.

*'Could Justin have gone north looking for Adrianos and this 'Timotheos', then gotten into trouble up there? Is that why he's been missing?'*

"What is it?" Valeria asked, worry etched into her face as Leon went silent and a grave look began spreading across his features.

"Nothing good..." Leon murmured, momentarily contemplating not telling Valeria his suspicion. But the moment passed and he wasted not another filling her in on the possibility that just entered his mind.

"You mean..." Valeria whispered in dread.

"... I think your father may be up in the Northern Vales..." Leon replied. "And if Rhea's as desperate as has been suggested, then he's probably in some kind of danger."