

Storm King 521

Chapter 521: A Second Departure

All too soon, Leon and his group's time in the Heartwood grove came to an end. Leon didn't want them to stay too long, even though the grove itself seemed to revel in his presence as much as he reveled in its. The golden leaves of the trees seemed to sparkle and glimmer more the second morning than they did the first, and Leon momentarily wondered what Nestor's thoughts about the place would be.

However, he quickly put that out of his mind. He didn't want to hear from that man right now, despite the peaceful aura that the trees filled him with.

The night before the group left, Leon and Valeria took some time to fix up Justin's litter. They managed to rig up something that was a little more stable and didn't require magical ice to remain together, while the two put their heads together and came up with an air enchantment that would keep the litter more stable than their first attempt.

So, when the second morning rolled around, everyone was rested and ready to leave the Forest of Black and White. Their magics were recharged—if they could be, at least, Justin's magical base was still thoroughly destroyed—and their bodies were healed of any lingering wounds. There was just one last thing Leon had to do before leaving.

To that end, when they departed from the grove, instead of leading them east toward the pass back to the Brown Bear's vale, he led them south toward the purple grass clearing and his old home.

Their pace was a little more leisurely than it was two days before, but they still proceeded at a good clip, arriving at the destroyed compound before noon. Once there, everyone took a few minutes to catch their breath and take stock of the place.

Nothing much had changed in the few days since they'd last been there. There were no animals living in the ruins, and neither did it seem any ice wraiths had stopped by. The Heartwood sapling in the center of the compound was still there, and as soon as he arrived, Leon's attention was captivated by it.

He almost felt a little dirty bringing Justin here, of all places. This was his father's resting place, and he'd brought one of the men most responsible for Artorias' death to visit. However, he'd spoken to Justin beforehand, informing the man that there was something that Leon expected of him if there was to be any peace at all between them.

Leon set the litter down a few feet in front of Artorias' cairn, where the Heartwood tree was sprouting, then took a few respectful steps back. Justin struggled to push himself up into a more dignified position, but for all the recovery that he'd had, he still wasn't yet strong enough to rise into a seated position. Instead, he twisted himself until he was practically lying prostrate before the cairn.

For a moment, Valeria seemed like she was going to move forward and aid her father, but Leon took her hand and gently held her back. She looked back at him in confusion, but he'd simply shook his head and said, "I want him to do this himself. It has to have meaning behind it."

Valeria frowned, but she nodded and stood back to watch with Maia and Leon.

Justin stayed there for a while, silent as the grave he lay before. After about ten minutes, however, he whispered a sorrowful, "I'm sorry, for everything," before rolling back, his eyes filled with tears.

How serious he was, Leon couldn't say. He already knew that Justin was likely a talented liar just from how he'd conducted himself over the past couple of decades, so while he seemed genuine, Leon hadn't any confidence that he'd be able to tell if Justin's apology to Artorias was legitimate.

But as these thoughts crossed his mind, he thought he saw the golden leaves of the Heartwood sapling glimmer in the sun. It could've just been a trick of the light or wishful thinking, but Leon was given a strange feeling that the Heartwood sapling approved of Justin's act of contrition, and so he challenged it none.

Instead, he helped Valeria get Justin back onto the litter, and then he took shovel out of his soul realm. The remains of his childhood hut was essentially nothing but a mass of burned splinters and blackened timber beams on a ruined and half-rotted timber foundation, so he had little trouble clearing away everything to expose the old hole in his floor that he'd made to bury the possessions he hadn't been able to bring with him to the Bull Kingdom.

After only fifteen minutes, Leon—with a little bit of help from Maia and Valeria—had unearthed the box he'd left behind and hauled it out into the compound's overgrown courtyard. Leon then cracked the box open, his heart thumping in his chest as he hoped that the box's locking enchantment had worked and preserved the paper and fur within.

He was consequently quite relieved to see that the remainder of the fur from the snow lion he'd killed all those years ago was still there in exactly the same condition as it had been when he'd buried it. Along with it, the maps of the regions which his House had influence over were still there, along with the books he'd stored away.

Aside from the snow lion's fur and a couple of the books on enchanting, most of what Leon had buried was now useless to him. He didn't need the maps of the Northern Vales or of the Great Plateau anymore, and neither were most of the books particularly needed with the Argent Palace archives open to him. However, the book on ancient runes that Leon remembered giving a few cursory look-throughs was there, and that he paid extra attention to, given how easily Nestor had defeated him with his mastery of the bygone art.

Still, into his soul realm went the box and everything in it.

With that, there was only one thing he had left to do before he departed from this place for who knew how long. It could be years, decades, perhaps even centuries before he found the time to come back.

Leon asked the other three for a few minutes, and they gave it to him, with Valeria leading them out of the compound and toward the tree line. Maia hesitated for a moment, but Leon reassured her through their connection, and she agreed to go with.

Now alone, Leon took a deep breath and surveyed his surroundings. He'd not gotten much of a chance to really take the place in when they'd first come through thanks to the discovery of Rhea's corpse and the additional information it provided, so Leon wanted to look around and really take everything in before leaving.

His childhood home was the last place he'd ever truly felt safe and secure. Everywhere else he'd gone had either not been his, or had been attacked almost immediately after his arrival, leaving him perpetually worried about being attacked again.

When he lived here with his father, he'd not once felt in danger when safely ensconced behind the compound's palisade. Not even the ice wraiths and their banshees could harm him here.

But all that changed when Justin's team of assassins broke in and fatally wounded his father. Feelings of safety and security and comfort had been few and far between since then, for the most part only coming to him in the form of his lovers—Elise and her boldness, confidence, and connections with Heaven's eye, Maia with her power and carefree attitude. Now, perhaps, he might find some with Valeria and her skill with the blade and dedication to the magical arts.

Before he could feel completely certain in entertaining that thought, however, Leon's attention finally turned to his father's cairn and the small Heartwood sapling pushing its way out of it. Its aura was peaceful and serene, as all the other Heartwood trees he'd seen had been, but it also felt... *happy*.

Or at least, that's how Leon interpreted it. He liked to think that some part of his father had been reborn into the tree as it grew, despite Artorias having been completely, thoroughly dead when Leon had buried him, rather than the kind-of-but-not-really-dead of Nestor. Leon held onto that feeling, hoping that if Artorias was in a better place, looking down upon him either from the depths of the sapling or from wherever his Ancestors may be, then he was looking upon him with pride and joy.

He hoped that was the case, but even with the aura of the Heartwood sapling, Leon wasn't too sure. He had spared Justin and was fairly sanguine about his future with Valeria, but that also meant that Artorias' killing was yet unavenged. The Raime family was yet unavenged.

Leon took a deep breath and fell to his knees in front of the cairn. His gaze went low in shame, and he knelt there for a few quiet minutes as he thought about what to say. In the end, he decided that a straight-forward apology was for the best, given the ideals that Artorias had tried to instill in him.

"Dad," he whispered, his eyes still locked on the ground despite addressing the cairn and Heartwood sapling, "I miss you. I've done well enough in the south, and have found happiness with a few women that I love, but even with that, I don't think I've ever been as happy and content as I was when I lived here with you. Maybe that's a bit sad, I'm a bit too close to this to make that judgment.

"I have to apologize to you. One of those women is the daughter of the man who was sent here to kill us, and for her, I made peace with him. I've set aside the role he played in your death for the sake of the future, so that I can strike at our more powerful enemies and maybe even find... Mother. For this, I don't think I have the words to express my sorrow at leaving you without vengeance..."

As he spoke, Leon felt the wind pick up. It gently broke upon his face and played with his hair. Leon felt no anger or disappointment, though he also had to question why he was scared of feeling such things from a young tree.

"I... suppose I also have to apologize for other things," he continued, his tone growing a little heavier. In truth, he wasn't too worried that Artorias would be disappointed in his decision to spare Justin, but rather in his actions in the Bull Kingdom. He'd hardly been the noble man that Artorias had tried to teach him to be, and Leon quickly explained all of that on the off-chance that his voice might carry all

the way to Artorias and his Ancestors. He didn't get too bogged down in the details, but he did his best not to leave anything out.

When he was finished, the aura from the Heartwood sapling remained unchanged. It was just as peaceful and non-judgmental as it had been before he'd started, and Leon suddenly felt more than a little silly. He wasn't talking to anyone, no one could hear him. Artorias had been gone for years, and the Heartwood tree, for all its magical properties, was not sentient in the way that humans were. There wasn't much point in him continuing to pour out his heart like this, though Leon found that he didn't regret having done so. It helped him feel like he was on the cusp of something new, of growing beyond the Bull Kingdom and its politics, of moving on to the next stage in his life, whatever that might be.

After a few silent minutes, Leon finished by saying, "I am sorry that I'm not the man you'd hoped I could be. But there's still time. I can still be better than I am, and I intend to strive to be someone that I can take pride in being.

"Hopefully, when next I come back, I can be that person. And hopefully, when I return, I'll have more information on Mother. I love you Dad. I hope I can live up to your example of what a man should be. Until then, farewell."

Leon had said his piece, but before he could rise, he felt that breeze again, and once more, he thought he saw the leaves of the sapling shimmer with golden light. By now, he was just about convinced that he was only seeing what he wanted to see and feeling what he wanted to feel, but the approval and acceptance that he felt from the sapling still had a smile blooming across his face.

A few seconds later, Leon pushed himself back to his feet and made to link up with the rest of his party. As much as he might want to stay a little bit longer, they had to get the hells out of the vale before it became dark. As much as he missed his old home, it was once again time to leave it behind and move on. It was time to face whatever might come next.

Chapter 522: Back in Vale Town

Leon stared back at the Forest of Black and White from the mountain pass that lead back to the Brown Bear's vale. Everything had worked out in the end, but he couldn't say that his time being back home had been particularly pleasant. The ice wraiths, the Gorgon, Nestor, Justin, all of it ran through his mind as he took some time to reflect on everything that had happened over the past week.

His power was considerable, especially considering where he'd been when he'd left the Forest of Black and White four years ago, but he couldn't let it go to his head. He wasn't invincible, and his power wasn't unlimited, two things he had to keep in mind.

Perhaps more importantly, he thought about Nestor and his reaction to learning that a member of his Clan was still alive. He'd been hopeful and excited, both of which had clouded his judgment and caused his defenses to be lowered. He'd tried to stay vigilant, but he'd wanted so badly for someone else to help him in rebuilding the Clan.

Maybe he was even hoping in some strange way that someone else could take a more leading role in that rebuilding process and leave him to those things that inspired more passion in him, like fighting, training, studying the runic arts, and Elise and Maia. He knew he wasn't much of a leader, so having

someone else to lean on as he grew in power and influence was something he wanted, even if he was never consciously aware of it.

Now, however, after Nestor's betrayal of his trust and excitement, Leon knew that he would never find that kind of help. As the Thunderbird had told him, there were no others around who bore her power, he had no family hiding in the woodwork just waiting for him to find them and enlist their aid. Even if there were any enclaves of people left from the Thunderbird Clan, any hopes he had for them were dead.

If he wanted a family to help him, then the only place he could look was to his lovers. Elise, Maia, maybe Valeria. This was his family. Not Nestor, not any of House Raime's insignificant branch families who were so far removed from him as to be no different from anyone else in terms of familial connection. He didn't know these people, and if they were in any way similar to Nestor, then he wanted nothing but the worst for them.

If he wanted a family, then it would have to be one of his own making. He couldn't leave openings for anyone else as he did for Nestor. Even now, with his ancient kinsman trapped in his soul realm, Leon couldn't help but shiver as he remembered the feeling of overwhelming powerlessness, vulnerability, and violation that came with Nestor stealing his body.

But he pushed those feelings out of his mind as best as he could. Dwelling on them even for just a few seconds already had a strong acidic taste building up in the back of his throat, threatening to have him lose his breakfast.

At the very least, though, he was leaving the Forest of Black and White having made some great gains. He had Justin and Valeria with him, and Nestor had given him a brief glance at what a master of the runic arts could do. Leon already had ideas about how far he might be able to take that knowledge, and how far it might be able to take him, in turn, if he was willing to push himself.

But thinking about those implications would have to wait. Already he had enough to think about when he got home that he felt like he'd have to take a few months off, doing nothing but training and thinking until he got his head back on straight.

As his eyes drifted across the sea of rainbow colors that made up the forest, Leon's gaze eventually drifted past the Divine Scar. His father had once told him of a legend that an immensely powerful mage had carved the thing with a terribly powerful attack, but the truth of the matter was impossible to guess. Leon had long ago resigned himself to never really knowing why or how the Scar had come to be.

An aura of great power emanated from its abyssal depths, though, so Leon figured that there had to be *something* down there. He even remembered on their way west it had even piqued the interest of the Thunderbird, though she hadn't seemingly found it interesting enough to tell him anything about it. Regardless, after the week they'd had, Leon wasn't about to give it a closer look. He considered himself lucky enough to be leaving as victorious as he was.

With that, Leon turned his eyes away from the Forest of Black and White. It was the resting place of his father, so he knew he'd be back at some point, but for now, it was time to look ahead.

His attention fell upon Maia, Valeria, and Justin all looking at him, watching as he took the short break to look back. Leon couldn't help but smile at them. On their way west in pursuit of Justin, he hadn't

seriously thought that this was going to be the outcome, but he was happy that the deal between himself and Valeria still stood.

He was looking forward to seeing what the result of it would be, and when Valeria gave him a glowing smile in turn, his anticipation grew.

“All right,” he said as he took the lead heading east, “I think we’re done here. Let’s go home.”

—

Leon’s group arrived back in Vale Town almost exactly seven days after they’d left it. Things were blissfully unchanged about the city, even if much had changed for Leon. Justin still couldn’t walk, though, so he and Valeria had been taking turns pulling him since they’d left his old home in the Forest of Black and White.

Justin seemed increasingly uncomfortable as they progressed through the territory of the Brown Bears, for they were walking through increasingly populated areas. The past couple decades had him getting used to being one of the strongest people around for hundreds of miles, and being reduced to the level of having to be practically carried around by his daughter wasn’t one that sat well with him, to say the least.

He wasn’t particularly talkative to begin with, and Leon saw him trying to hide his face even as they passed through the various farming communities in the vale. Once they entered the outskirts of Vale Town, Justin seemed to lose patience and tried to struggle off the litter and back to his feet—he’d insisted that hobbling around with help was better than being dragged like a corpse, but all he managed to accomplish was to fall off the litter when he managed to disentangle himself from the straps tying him down.

When he hit the dirt, Leon had been tempted to let him lay there in pain and unable to rise no matter how hard he tried, but so close to Vale Town and with Torfinn’s longhouse visible on its hill in the distance, he didn’t have the patience for that. Besides, Valeria had rushed over, holding nothing back as she scolded her father for his foolish pride.

Leon could understand both sides, though—he didn’t think he’d handle being in Justin’s position any better, while he agreed with Valeria’s demand for Justin to set aside his pride and ignore anyone who stared at him—and so didn’t say a word, merely giving Valeria a hand as she got Justin back onto the litter.

They attracted many stares as they made their way back to Torfinn’s longhouse, but that was hardly new for Leon, and he ignored it, only paying it enough attention to delight in how uncomfortable it made Justin.

When they reached the summit of the hill and the entrance of the longhouse, they were greeted by the sight of Torfinn sitting alone just outside, a wooden pipe in hand with something burning within. This in and of itself wasn’t so unusual—Leon knew that the Valem were fond of smoking several of the herbs that grew in the vale—but what struck him nearly speechless was the fact that Torfinn looked more tired and haggard than they did, almost as if he’d been the man who left for a week rather than them. In fact, if Vale Town hadn’t been so peaceful, Leon would’ve been worried that they’d been attacked or something.

“Torfinn!” Leon exclaimed as he drew close. “Dare I ask how you’ve been since I left?”

Torfinn gave Leon a quick nod as he took a breath of whatever he had in his pipe. After exhaling a cloud of light red smoke, he replied, “That lady of yours, Little Lion... she’s a real predator... One hint of blood and she goes for the throat...”

Leon chuckled as he glanced at the slightly-ajar doors of the longhouse. He could hear a minor commotion inside, like a couple dozen people were having an early dinner.

“So, you and Elise have reached an agreement?” Leon asked, a smile of schadenfreude at Torfinn’s appearance spreading across his face.

“Wipe that damn look off your face boy and get inside!” Torfinn replied with as jovial a smile as it seemed he could manage. He clapped Leon on the shoulder, took a quick look at Leon’s companions, and said, “Let’s get some food and we can make whatever arrangements you need.” As he spoke, he cast a meaningful look at Justin, one tinged with both pity and suspicion. Leon had told him before heading west that he was after his father’s killer, and here he was, returning with a horrifically injured person in tow.

“Everything’s all right,” Leon replied as he let Torfinn steer him inside. “We had an eventful week, and I think we’re all looking forward to a few days of rest and recovery. Some of us more than others, I think...”

“Very well...” Torfinn replied with some uncertainty.

As they entered, Leon found that the longhouse was filled with many of Torfinn’s warriors, most of whom had gathered around Elise and her Heaven’s Eye escort. Whatever they were doing was utterly lost on Leon, however, for as soon as he saw her sitting at a bench, politely smiling with a look of rapt attention as a third-tier warrior told her of some fight he’d won or something of the sort, her gorgeous red hair cascading down her back, looking to Leon’s eyes like a goddess of beauty incarnate, everything else practically faded into the background. She was all he could see.

He didn’t call out to her; given how the longhouse swiftly went silent as he and Torfinn entered, he didn’t feel like he had to. He walked over, ignoring everyone else in the room, and wrapped his arms around Elise from behind just as she started turning around to see what the fuss was about. He felt her stiffen in surprise for a moment, but as she recognized him, she practically melted back into his embrace as her hands came up to intertwine with his.

The two stayed like that for what seemed like an eternity, but was actually only a second or two. They hardly needed to even say anything, as their joy at their reunion was conveyed almost entirely through their bodies. It was only when the loud cheering from the watching warriors started to ring in his ears that Leon stepped back.

Elise then rose from her seat to pull Maia and Valeria into a hug, whispering words of greeting to both that had Maia’s face turning a few shades redder and Valeria’s normally stoic face breaking into a brief but wide smile. Elise spared few such words with Justin, but greeted him, regardless.

When she turned back to Leon, she said, “It’s good to see you back, and victorious, too, by the looks of it.”

“It’s good to be back, especially with our objective completed,” Leon replied, having eyes and ears for Elise and his other companions only, the celebratory cheers and congratulations of the watching and listening warriors barely even registering.

“I’d love to hear all about it,” Elise said but as she smiled invitingly at Leon, she continued with only a hint of regret, “but there’s someone else, I think, that you ought to present yourself to...”

She cast a meaningful glance to a corner of the longhouse where Leon saw a great mass of snow-white feathers and fur, curled up into a sizeable ball and gently rising and falling to the beat of a sleeping griffin.

Leon grinned and practically skipped over to his sleeping buddy, greeting Anzu by running his fingers through the griffin’s feathers.

Anzu gave a low squawk of warning as his rest was interrupted, but as he unfurled his feathers and laid eyes on Leon, he sprang to his feet with enough force that he almost sent the nearby furniture flying, to the entire longhouse’s amusement. The griffin then barreled into Leon, knocking the young man down with his head and enveloping him with his great wings, all while making little squeaks and chirps of delight.

For his part, Leon didn’t once stop petting the griffin as he laughed and hugged his griffin as best as he could. It took a while for Anzu to let him up, and when he did, he stayed with Leon as if the two were joined at the hip.

“He’s been kind of depressed ever since you left him here,” Elise said with amusement as Leon finally got back on his feet.

“I’m sorry, little buddy,” Leon cooed as he pulled Anzu’s decidedly not-so-little head into a tight, brotherly hug. “I needed you to stay here with Elise. Did you do your duty and keep her safe?”

Answering as if he understood completely—and at the fifth-tier, Leon was starting to think that there weren’t many reasons why Anzu *couldn’t* understand him—Anzu happily chirped again and beat his wings, as if saying that he’d done his job well and expected some praise, which Leon was all too willing to give.

“Don’t go too overboard, he did little more than sleep and stare out of the windows wistfully in your direction,” Elise said as she stepped closer and ran her fingers through the feathers on Anzu’s head.

The griffin playfully glared at her, but with Leon still playing with him, he didn’t do anything more than that.

“Now,” Elise continued, “as much as we need to catch up, I think all of you need some baths. You’ve been gone too long from civilization...”

Leon frowned slightly. Maia and Valeria’s proficiency with water magic didn’t need to be said, and he was good enough with that element to bathe himself. They might not have been as diligent as they would’ve been at home, but none of them were particularly dirty.

“Come, all you can tell me about the adventures you had without me while we wash up.” Elise then gave Leon a loaded look, one that promised more than a little bit of passion, and anything he might have

been about to say about their hygiene was forgotten as Elise led all of them further into the longhouse while Torfinn and his warriors could only laugh and cheer, as they'd been doing since Leon's arrival.

Chapter 523: A Few Days of Rest

When Elise dragged Leon and Maia off to bathe, Leon didn't even question it. He was looking forward to being with his fire-haired lover again even though neither he nor Maia were in moods to physically express that. The three simply enjoyed the time they had together, with Leon and Maia crammed together in a small wooden tub and Elise quietly rubbing their shoulders in turn, listening to them tell the story of their time in the Forest of Black and White.

For her part, Valeria went to another room to wait her turn to use the tub. For all that Leon and Maia had come around to the idea of including her into their family, having her join them in this was a little too much too soon.

It took a while to finish up, during which time Elise said hardly anything, simply listening to all that had happened to them. When they were done, though, she spared no words in expressing just how grateful she was that they had returned and how foolish they'd both been not to turn around after the first fight with the ice wraiths. She laid it on thick, too, asking them what they thought would happen to her if neither of them—or even if only one of them—had returned.

The two were appropriately chastened, but after they had finished cleaning up, Elise pulled them both into a tight hug and told them how glad she was that they were back.

As they returned to Torfinn's hall and Valeria took her turn to bathe, Elise told Leon and Maia about how she'd spent the last week. By the end of her and Torfinn's negotiations, she had committed Heaven's Eye to making at least five trips into the Northern Vales to purchase silkgrass from the Brown Bear Tribe per year, moving much of the dangerous responsibility of crossing the Frozen Mountains from the Valemén's shoulders.

However, the exact method by which Heaven's Eye would buy that silkgrass wound up being a sore point for Torfinn. He wanted them to purchase exclusively through him so that he could keep the price of silkgrass high. Elise, however, wasn't going to just allow that to happen without resistance, and so she fought tooth and nail to keep Torfinn from having that monopoly.

As Leon heard about this, he felt like he could understand why Torfinn was so mentally exhausted that he'd been smoking when Leon had returned a couple hours ago; when Elise got it in her mind to do something, it would take nothing short of a miracle to get her to change her mind.

In the end, Elise had managed to negotiate Torfinn down some: two of the trips north, Heaven's Eye would be allowed to purchase silkgrass directly from the Valemén, while the remaining three trips they would deal with Torfinn exclusively. Still, this meant an enormous amount of silver was going to pour into the Vales, for Heaven's Eye could move quite a bit more silkgrass than the Valemén could when they organized their trading missions to the south. Even a single fifth-tier mage from the south could pack quite a bit of silkgrass into their soul realm, while the Valemén had only Torfinn at that level of power, so they had to carry all of their silkgrass on their person as they moved through the Frozen Mountains.

Even with those concessions, though, both the Brown Bear Tribe and Heaven's Eye stood to make a tremendous amount of money. Leon had only ever seen rich nobles in the Bull Kingdom wearing silkgrass, and from the few times he'd seen the price of a single bolt of the material, he couldn't envision a scenario where this endeavor wouldn't be immensely lucrative for everyone involved.

When they arrived back at Torfinn's hall, the Brown Bear Chief wasted no time ensuring that Leon, Maia, and Valeria all had places to rest for however long they wished to stay. Leon didn't want to immediately leave, but he still wasn't planning on staying for a long time. He could tell that Elise had grown somewhat bored of the rustic Vale Town, the week she'd spent here having been more than enough to take in what few sights there were to see, while he, Maia, and Valeria were coming off a stressful week in the east. More importantly, Justin, while stable and not in any danger of having his condition worsen, still needed some more attentive medical care than any of them could provide. The only thing that had Leon and Valeria not insisting that they leave immediately or have Leon fly Justin south on the back of Anzu was that they wanted to give him at least another day or two of rest before they made the trek south.

So, after Leon told this to Torfinn, the Valeman Chief practically shouted in celebration as he joined Leon at one of the tables, loudly declaring that there would be a feast that night not only to celebrate Leon's return, but also to mark the end of negotiations with Heaven's Eye.

Leon didn't say it out loud, but he took that second reason to be more the end of negotiations with Elise, rather than Heaven's Eye. He hoped that he'd remember to ask Torfinn about those negotiations, for Elise hadn't made them seem all that onerous when she'd told him and Maia about her week.

And so, while the party atmosphere wasn't much to Leon's tastes, he and his companions spent some time relaxing in Torfinn's hall regaling the Brown Bears with a few edited tales of their adventures in the Forest of Black and White, telling them all about the banshees and ice wraiths that they'd killed, and how they'd survived an attack by a Gorgon, and that those they'd been sent to find had all been dead when they'd arrived. Most notably, however, Leon didn't tell Torfinn or anyone else in the hall that Justin was responsible for Artorias' death; neither did he tell them that Justin *wasn't* responsible, however. Instead, he simply implied that they'd found Justin injured in the east and decided to help him.

Torfinn, of course, asked a few pointed questions about the man, but Leon side-stepped them as much as he could. After a little while, Torfinn got the message and dropped the subject.

The rest of the night proceeded fairly well, with Torfinn giving Leon a more accurate picture of the state of the vale. There weren't any major problems, though his thanes were earning their keep ensuring that the refugees who'd fled Hakon Fire-Beard and decided to stay with the Brown Bears despite Hakon's defeat weren't making trouble, and that the rest of the Brown Bears and their subordinate tribes in turn weren't making trouble for these refugees.

After a while, as the weaker of the Valemen in the hall began to succumb to drink, they began to tell war-stories and various other glorious deeds, though to Leon's completely sober mind, few of these stories even approached anything that might resemble reality. However, being honest and truthful wasn't really the point; these Valemen were drunk and bored, and telling these kinds of highly exaggerated or even outright fictitious stories were their favorite pastime.

Leon even got into the groove a little, telling a few stories of how he'd defeated Hakon Fire-Beard, won the allegiance of a tribe of stone giants, fought valiantly against the endless hordes from the Talfar plains, slayed vampires and werewolves, and ensured the victory of Prince August in the civil war. He never outright lied as he told these stories—he struggled enough with hyping himself up as more than he was—but he very much focused on his own deeds, letting those of others go unsaid.

After a while, Leon and his companions tired of the feasting even though Torfinn and his Valemen seemed like they were just getting started. They left for bed, with Leon, Elise, and Maia all making for their room, while Valeria separated to go make sure her father was resting well in his guest room. She indicated that she'd be sleeping in Justin's room, so there was no need to wait for her. Leon wasn't entirely sure what she'd meant by that, but he was happy getting some alone time with Maia and Elise, even though they all went to bed without doing much more than kiss and snuggle.

The next morning, they were rather rudely awoken by the sound of one of Torfinn's thanes returning to the hall. The longhouse as a whole wasn't in any way enchanted, and while its construction was sturdy, sound still carried quite far within. As a result, Leon, after blinking awake, knew that Freyja had come back.

Out of Torfinn's handful of thanes, Leon would've said that he had the most complicated relationship with Freyja. She'd hit on him quite a bit when he was younger, though he'd never taken it too seriously. Consequently, though, she was both the friendliest and the most dreaded of the thanes to Leon. He just *knew* that she'd get quite a kick out of seeing him with both Elise and Maia, and probably from Valeria, too. As he slowly dressed, he had a strong feeling that he was about to be exasperated, frustrated, and embarrassed all at once as soon as he walked back out into the hall.

Fortunately, while it wasn't too early, Elise and Maia were still asleep in bed, despite having been curled up on both of his sides only a few minutes before. This gave him some time alone to deal with Freyja, though how he was going to do that, he didn't know. All he knew was that he was both excited and more than a little apprehensive about seeing this person from his childhood once more.

As he strode out into the hall, Leon saw her. She was much the same, with long blond hair, classically attractive features, and a prominent, though not disfiguring scar on her face. Her aura was still that of a fourth-tier mage, though he hadn't expected otherwise. The Valemen rarely asked for help when it came to advancing through the tiers of magic, even though with the promise of silkgrass, they probably could've enticed a few fairly high-level mages to come north and teach them.

However, the Valemen as a whole were too insular and independent for that. They generally didn't want southern influence in their vales, even if getting some southern help to advance their magical power might aid in that—such help would never come without strings attached, after all.

Leon and Freyja's reunion went about as well as he could've expected it to. She, of course, made a big deal over how much he'd grown, and she teased him quite a bit. That teasing only grew in intensity when Maia and Elise finally came out into the hall for breakfast, but it soon died down when Elise and Maia started to get defensive.

Once that was over with, Leon and Freyja caught up as much as they could. Freyja told him about how bored she'd been herding refugees and keeping the peace, while Leon told her about his life in the south. She was suitably impressed, though Leon could tell that she wasn't too enthusiastic about

listening to stories of the Bull Kingdom. She was a Valewoman through and through, with little care for the south or its conflicts outside of story fodder.

After a while, Valeria joined them in the hall, and soon after that, Leon and his three companions bid Freyja and Torfinn goodbye for the day while they went out into Vale Town. There wasn't much to see or do, but by the time they returned to the longhouse in the early afternoon, they had had some fun and gotten a better feel for the small city than Elise had gotten when she'd seen it with no one but her Heaven's Eye escort.

They also returned with more than a few bolts of silkgrass, which Elise fully intended to design into clothes suitable for all of them. Apparently, Leon's decidedly spartan tastes was starting to rub her the wrong way, and Maia was no better. She didn't mind them dressing how they pleased most of the time, but she couldn't stand that Leon only had formal outfit, while Maia had none despite having been with them for so long.

At that point, Leon told her of the remaining snow lion's fur he'd picked up at his old home. The snow lion he'd killed had been large enough that even after a significant portion of its hide had been turned into his treasured coat, there was still enough left to make something fashionable for Elise, Maia, and maybe even Valeria. What that would be Leon left up to Elise to decide; he was many things, but clothing design was far beyond his capabilities.

The remainder of their time in Vale Town came and went quickly. Torfinn made their stay comfortable and made them feel more than welcome to stay longer, but as Justin healed, Leon and Valeria wanted to get him south. To that end, after staying with Torfinn for three days, Leon led his small group of companions and the Heaven's Eye escort out of Vale Town and back south.

They would not, however, be returning the way they came. Instead of making for one of the more well-trodden routes, Leon led them towards the prison that Xaphan had languished in for so long. The demon was hardly happy, but Leon wanted to get another look at the enchantments that filled the place. He also wanted the power crystal there, but he'd been thinking about it and was starting to second-guess that desire. He'd learned a lot about the Thunderbird Clan from his voyage back into the Forest of Black and White, and the more time he took to process that information, the more he was starting to wonder if this was the route he wanted to take, or if he wanted to be more self-reliant and eschew the Clan.

It was starting to look less and less like something he wanted to revive. More personally, he was starting to think about himself and his power, and how much of what he'd managed to accomplish was due to himself or to the accident of his birth.

Leon wasn't able to come to any conclusions, though, especially with Valeria and Justin and their unresolved relationship still so close at hand, and so trudged onward, leading his small band into the mountains to where he knew the prison to be.

Chapter 524: The Future I

"What in the name of the Ancestors *is* this place?" the Heaven's Eye diplomat asked in wonder as Leon led them through the halls of Xaphan's prison. He was asking the question on everyone's mind, as Elise and the rest of the Heaven's Eye escort stared at everything around them.

It had been surprisingly easy for Leon to convince all of them to take a different way home than the route they'd taken north, though he supposed that the discomfort of the Frozen Mountains had been enough to make them ready to take any other way back to the Bull Kingdom. They'd had to haul Justin up cliffs and follow Leon into a strange dark cave, but they'd have had to do that anyway on the journey back south.

When convincing them to follow him this way, Leon hadn't told them much about the place, merely that there were some ruins they could move through to have a much more comfortable journey south if they so wished—assuming that the place still existed, of course. But Leon had confidence that the prison was still reasonably intact; it had survived for tens of thousands of years without maintenance, he didn't think the intervening four years since he'd last passed through would've been enough to fell the place.

He was gratified to see that he was proven right. Even in the dark of the caves—Justin, in an ironic twist from what Leon would've expected a month ago, was the only person too weak to see in the dark—it was obvious that the place was still just as intact as it had been four years ago.

“Some old place built by a long-forgotten civilization to contain dangerous monsters,” Leon said, giving the Heaven's Eye representative the same story he had a couple times, by now. The Heaven's Eye escort aside, the entire rest of his party knew that this facility was connected to the Thunderbird Clan, but the exact extent of what Leon knew about it he kept to himself. He had no issues with telling Elise, Maia, Valeria, and Justin that this place was built by his Clan before its fall, but he wasn't going to tell them about the demons they'd kept here.

For his part, Xaphan was incredibly quiet. Leon had teased the demon a little bit about returning, but the fire demon had only responded by repeating, “No!” Leon honestly couldn't blame him, so he didn't press the demon too much in that vein. In fact, from what he'd seen in Nestor's lab, his opinion of his Clan was falling practically every second, and what the prison represented was the clearest indication why: it was a place designed to imprison and torture creatures into slavery. The more Leon thought about it, the more he was repulsed by what happened in the prison, but at least for the time being, he put it out of his mind to focus on their immediate goals.

Fortunately for all of them, Leon remembered the general layout of the labyrinthine prison. Xaphan had given him most of the map last time, but the spatial enchantments that wound through the place made getting an exact idea of its layout difficult without spending some significant time exploring the place. But Leon could remember where the Prison Lord's chambers were, and he planned on leading his group directly there so that they could rest and drop Justin off with the Heavens Eye escort. It didn't matter that they'd made peace, Leon wasn't too keen on hauling Justin through the halls of this place, and he was just as reluctant to leave Valeria or either of his lovers behind. But if anyone in their party could identify any residual demonic energies in the prison, Leon guessed that it would be Justin, even in his horrifically weakened state.

And, of course, he just wanted to get some alone time with the other three without Justin present. Justin's attempt to get him to leave Valeria alone still rang through Leon's mind and raised his heart rate in anger every time he thought about it. Fortunately for Leon's blood pressure, he and Justin basically hadn't interacted at all since then, barring a few polite statements to each other during their departure from Vale Town, but that was hardly the only thing on his mind. His thoughts were filled with

complicated things about Nestor and the Thunderbird Clan, things that he had yet to work through, things that were getting harder to ignore with every step he took in the prison.

“What sort of creatures were kept here?” the diplomat asked as they came to mangled inner door. Just as it had been when Leon had first passed through, the inner door had been rent and torn as if something had forced its way out through brute force. Knowing what he did now, Leon knew that it was undoubtedly some kind of massive, powerful demon that had done so. It might’ve even been the ice demon that Nestor had captured, though given the door on the other side of the mountains had been similarly breached, it wasn’t guaranteed.

But as they approached it, Leon realized that there could very well be another demon lurking on Aeterna somewhere. The ice demon had escaped the prison but had stuck around on the plane, so Leon figured it wasn’t outside of the realm of possibility that the third demon had done likewise. His more cynical side told him that he wouldn’t find it imprisoned in the bowels of some long-lost Thunderbird Clan facility, but probably ruling a tremendously powerful Kingdom that was hostile to him, or something of the sort, assuming he ever found it at all.

“I have no clue,” Leon answered the diplomat, his voice steady and giving away no sign that he was lying. “The last time I came through here, I couldn’t find a single living thing, though I wasn’t exactly thorough in my explorations...”

The diplomat paled a little and replied in a voice that shook far too much for his sixth-tier power, “I’ll... keep my eyes open...”

Leon nodded sagely. “You do that,” he said.

They made their way past the inner doors and into the facility proper, where Leon began to lead the group on toward the Prison Lord’s chambers. As far as he could tell, there was still a significant amount of magic left in the structure, quieting a few small fears he had that this was going to be a waste of time.

“This place is amazing...” he heard Elise murmur as she walked at his side. “I had no idea that there was something like this hidden in the mountains! We should send an expedition out here to examine this place further!”

“That... might not be that great of an idea...” Leon replied as he entangled his fingers with hers. “We’re going to be taking the crystal that holds all of this place’s magic power, leaving it dead and possibly even structurally unstable. We don’t know how well this place’ll hold up without powered enchantments. Even just the one night we’re planning on staying might be pushing it...”

None of that was true, exactly. Leon had made sure to exchange a few terse words with Nestor—about as long as he was able to stand being in the presence of someone who had so wronged him without the incentive of learning the runic arts—about the building practices of the ancient Thunderbird Clan, and about the design of the prison, in particular. He’d focused much of his questioning on the spatial enchantments that had the hallways bending and twisting back on each other since he’d never seen anything like that ever since, but he’d extracted enough information from his dead kinsman to understand that there was little to no danger of staying in the prison for a while after the power crystal had been taken. The place had been built to confine some of the most powerful demons in the universe,

and as such had been reinforced with more than just magic. Even without the power to maintain its enchantments, the prison would likely stay intact for centuries, possibly even millennia more.

“There might still be some merit in sending someone to check this place out...” Elise protested, and she gave Leon a heart-rending look that he found he couldn’t resist. It was like her slight pouting frown and sparkling green eyes pierced right through him, and he immediately began to question the merits of not letting Heaven’s Eye check the place out. After all, he understood that as much as he enjoyed his freedoms, he’d probably end up associated with them at some point.

He was just leery of letting them examine this place and figure out that it once housed demons, though the more he thought about it, the less he thought it likely that they would take that to mean he had a demon in his soul realm. Hells, he didn’t even know what the attitude of those in the Central Empires was in regard to using demonic powers, though given that it was quite hostile here in the north, he still decided that assuming it would be very hostile was for the best. He began to swiftly think over ways to destroy those particular enchantments before he left; even if the place was going to be depowered, those imprisonment enchantments that had maimed Xaphan and Justin were not things that Leon wanted falling into anyone else’s hands. As far as he was concerned, their very existence was a black mark on the Thunderbird Clan’s record, and he wanted them gone.

In response to Elise, Leon shrugged and smiled. “I’ve said what I’m going to say on the matter, given my warnings and all that, so whatever happens next will be none of my responsibility.”

As they pushed deeper into the prison, some of the others made admiring noises at the sheer scale of the structure, which only grew more intense when they took five right turns and didn’t wind up where they’d begun—they’d passed some kind of spatial gate without even realizing. Even Leon, who knew it was there, hadn’t been able to perceive where the exact spatial distortion was.

Such enchantments were one of the reasons why he’d returned. Nestor had told him that such things were rare outside of heavily fortified locations in the Thunderbird Clan. They were difficult to set up, but useful for confusing any attackers—or demons trying to break out of a prison—and preventing anyone from learning the layout of the facility, but generally used too much magic power to justify setting up in less important locations. As a result, while this kind of spatial distortion might’ve otherwise rendered them moot, magic lifts and even mundane stairs were still the main method of traversing between floors in most Thunderbird Clan facilities, despite the Clan’s power at its peak.

Unfortunately, without being able to sense the enchantment itself and with his eyes failing to notice anything as well, Leon didn’t have much of a way to study those enchantments. He could only suppress a scowl and lead everyone on.

The Prison Lord’s chambers were just as opulent as they were when he’d last visited. The same light-projections on the walls, thick carpets, and rich furniture. Everything was right where Leon had left it, including the Prison Lord’s skeletal corpse, which had his companions scrunching up their faces in distaste.

But beyond that, everyone got situated well enough, and Leon soon led Elise, Maia, and Valeria back out into the prison heading directly for the old control room that Xaphan had once pointed Leon toward before Leon had freed him.

No one spoke much as they walked through the halls. Without the Heaven's Eye escort bolstering their numbers, the empty and somber atmosphere of the otherwise fairly dimly lit prison more apparent and harder to break. The enchantments that dampened the sound of their footsteps on the metallic floors wasn't helping, either.

Soon enough, however, Leon led the other three into the control room, and all four of them had to stop and admire the immense scale of what was in front of them. Even Leon, who'd been there before, halted so that he could admire the place.

The control platform hadn't changed, with it thrust out into the center of a massive spherical chamber that seemed far too large to be structurally sound. In the center of that platform, surrounded by consoles covered in runic glyphs, was the huge power crystal that provided the myriad enchantments throughout the prison with magic power. It was still glowing the same dull orange color, meaning that while it wasn't chock-full of power, it still hadn't lost a meaningful amount since Leon had last passed through.

Much like Nestor's lab that housed the moon stone, the walls of the spherical chamber were covered in glowing white runes that flowed across the nearly pitch-black surface like stars in the sky, constantly forming new enchantments and breaking them as the prison needed. Here was the most notable change from what Leon remembered: the runes were moving with much less alacrity than he remembered, though he wasn't sure if that was because the faster-moving runes in Nestor's lab were coloring his memory. Regardless, after a moment of thought, he guessed that that made a degree of sense since the prison no longer had any demons to keep imprisoned, so the enchantments keeping the place up and running didn't necessarily have to work as hard as they used to.

"... Wow..." he heard Valeria whisper in wonder from just behind him. "I... don't even know what to look at, or where to begin!"

Leon could sympathize. There were millions of runes running along the surface of the curved walls, and it was impossible to know where they might begin and end. There were precious few enchantments that he saw that lasted longer than a few minutes.

He stared long and hard at those particular enchantments. If they were static on that dynamic surface, then he felt like there was a good chance they might be related to the spatial enchantments in the rest of the facility.

"How much power did it take to build this place...?" Elise wondered aloud. "I mean, I know you said that your Clan built this thing and that they were powerful enough to conquer this plane, but I guess... I never really understood just how powerful that was until now..."

Leon couldn't but smile even though he had nothing to do with the power of his Clan. If anything, he was their greatest indicator of just how far they'd fallen. Staring up at that dome that sparkled with the light of countless enchantments, he couldn't but feel inadequate, with many uncomfortable questions that had been bouncing around in his head ever since Nestor's brief possession rearing their ugly heads. He felt inadequate because he *was* inadequate.

"It's not just a sign of how powerful they were," he whispered, his voice tinged with both excitement and depressed realization at who and what he was, how far he had yet to go, and how insignificant his

accomplishments were compared to his ancient Clan. “It’s a goal that I want to achieve. My Ancestors built this place with ease and left a great many other tremendous works around this plane. They likely left even greater works in places that they ruled for millennia. What I want to build, the family that I want to create with all of you, will not only match those accomplishments, but surpass them. What I want is for our sons and daughters to look back upon places like what we see now and find them wanting. I want us to build a family so powerful that a place like this is nothing.”

As he spoke, Leon took one of Elise’s hands and one of Maia’s. He then made eye contact with Valeria, ensuring that she wasn’t left out. All of them needed to talk about what their future was going to look like, and this was as good a time as any.

“Valeria,” Leon whispered, Valeria’s sapphire-blue eyes finding his. She looked a little lost and left out, and had seemingly unconsciously put a few feet of distance between herself and the other three. Maia and Elise were both leaning into him, and as he said her name, they both looked to her without any traces of rejection.

Leon was a little surprised. He knew that Elise and Maia were both accepting of Valeria, but to see it in such a spur-of-the-moment situation was greatly relieving.

“Valeria,” Leon repeated, “if possible, I want you to be a part of that future.”

Chapter 525: The Future II

Asking Valeria to be a part of his future was a spur of the moment decision, but it wasn’t one that Leon took lightly. Neither Elise nor Maia seemed to be too surprised or perturbed by his statement, though he could feel their grips on his arms tighten so he knew there would have to be a discussion later. Given that both had expressed their support for his pursuing a romantic relationship with Valeria—to varying degrees of enthusiasm, to be sure—he felt confident that this wasn’t too big of a step.

For her part, Valeria had frozen in shock as Leon, Elise, and Maia all stared at her.

“You don’t have to say anything,” Leon said in an attempt to lessen the pressure upon her. Trying to put social pressure on Valeria wasn’t how he wanted any relationship between them to start, but he wanted everyone present to know exactly what was on his mind. “I just have to say something right now while we’re all here and in private.”

Leon glanced to Elise and Maia, and while he saw some confusion in their returned looks, neither stopped him from continuing.

Turning back to Valeria, Leon proceeded, “I like you. A lot. Ever since I first saw you fight and found myself entranced by your skill with a weapon, I liked you. However, after learning your name and your...” Leon paused, almost bringing up her family’s role in his family’s downfall. But he felt like doing so right now would be a little manipulative, though he didn’t see much of a way to get past it. It would have to be addressed, even if only indirectly. “I suppressed those feelings after learning your name,” he said, hoping that would be enough. “Things have always been a little complicated for me when it came to you, and my indecision in these matters have led me to making great mistakes and causing you pain. I would like to... If you’re willing, I would like to see where we might take our relationship. But if you don’t think that we could ever be anything more to each other than we are, then I’ll accept that. But I, uh, also...”

Leon scowled as he trailed off on that decidedly less-than-inspiring note, his regret at doing this in a spur-of-the-moment decision growing exponentially. He greatly wished that he'd planned this out a little more instead of just rambling on with little idea of what to say to get across what he wanted.

Fortunately for him, Valeria didn't seem all that put off, and even seemed to be smiling a bit as he floundered. At the very least, she seemed to take some small pleasure in seeing him at a loss for words.

Elise, however, was significantly less entertained, and she soon sighed and pulled away from Leon.

"I think that staying quiet for a moment would do you wonders, love," she said teasingly, and Leon couldn't help but agree as he stared at his fire-haired lover with confusion and interest as she approached Valeria. "Val," Elise whispered as she reached out and took the silver-haired woman's hand, "I don't think it's any great secret that you like Leon."

Valeria's cheeks went scarlet and she averted her gaze in embarrassment, though a moment later, she cleared her throat, straightened herself up, and looked at Elise in the eye. She was clearly caught off-guard and unprepared, but she'd summoned the inner strength that Leon found himself equally attracted to and didn't run from whatever this was turning out to be.

Elise continued as she slid a little bit closer to Valeria and dropped her voice to a more conspiratorial whisper—though both Leon and Maia could still hear her just fine, "Maybe it's a little more of a secret, but Leon likes you back; he wasn't joking when he admitted as such a moment ago. He likes you, and it seems that he wants to start something with you. I don't think any of us expect you to answer right away, though, so let's drop things for now. But know this, while I can't speak for Naiad, I support the two of you getting together whole-heartedly, just so long as you don't mind sharing him with the two of us..."

Valeria's eyes drifted in Maia's direction as they widened in shock, and Maia subtly nodded her agreement with Elise's sentiment, though her face remained relatively impassive. Then, Valeria looked to Elise once more.

"Thank you, Elise," Valeria said as she squeezed her friend's hand. "I think I might take you up on that offer of time. I don't think my eventual answer will change, but I'll need some preparation before I can give it." Her sapphire-blue eyes drifted in Leon's direction once more, then flitted between him, Maia, and Elise in turn. "Things seem a little crowded, and I never thought I'd be a part of that kind of relationship. My father and I come from a place of monogamy, and while I don't look down on relationships like yours, I still never *really* thought that I'd be in one myself. If I say yes, then I'd have to get used to things between all of us being this crowded..."

Leon gave her a strange look. He felt like she *must've* contemplated it at some point given how much their relationship had changed over the past few years—and especially over the past few months—but if she needed time, he wasn't going to press on that issue. With the look that Elise gave him as she looked over her shoulder, he felt like *he* was going to need some time, too, before hearing her answer.

"I think that's more than fair," Elise replied as she let Valeria's hand drop and turned back to Leon. "Now, I believe we were here for a crystal?"

Leon nodded, sharing one last lingering look with Valeria before moving on.

“That orange crystal in the center of the platform is what I want,” he said. “But before taking it, I would like to take a few minutes to examine this place. I’d hate to destroy all of it without even a cursory look.”

Elise nodded as she took Leon’s arm again.

“Lead on,” she said.

Leon smiled and obliged. He led the other three across the bridge over the massive multi-story drop to the bottom of the sphere, his eyes constantly locked above them on the flowing runes.

He could feel his heart race—or rather, continue to race after the brief exchange with Valeria—as he contemplated the power that would’ve been required to construct such a place above ground, let alone so deep beneath a mountain. It was such an enticing display of power that Leon felt himself begin to salivate at the idea of reaching a point in his life where he could duplicate, or even exceed this.

He wanted to know everything about how this place was constructed, about the enchantments that filled it, about the intricate and no doubt absurdly and mind-bendingly complex ways that magic was manipulated to let this place function.

‘No...’ he thought to himself as his thoughts turned to the future, *‘I need to know everything about this place...’*

To match and exceed such a feat of magical engineering, that was something he needed to do, he could feel that in his bones more than just about anything else he could think of. He wanted to see his mother, of course, and Kamran was a force that he needed to deal with, but without faces to go by, without knowing them personally, it was difficult for him to muster the passion that he felt for the runic arts as he stood in the center of the prison’s control room with the women he loved more than anything sharing the moment with him.

Above him, he could see a ‘constellation’ of light, lightning, and darkness runes spiraling around each other, a host of other runes linking and modifying them to create some kind of effect that he was too illiterate to understand. Not too far away, he saw one of the few runes on the spherical wall that wasn’t moving, an ancient rune that he couldn’t recognize. Below and around that spiraled out thousands upon thousands of other runes, each one filled with power and purpose.

It was a humbling thing. He felt like exactly the person that so many in the Bull Kingdom had decried him as: a barbarian pillaging the works of his betters, hoping to leech off their success and ape their works.

His ancestors had built a place that could imprison and drain the power of beings like Xaphan, individuals of cosmic power, creatures that could cross the great empty expanse of the Void with seemingly little trouble.

He’d figured out a crude and inefficient way to fly and a few good ways to kill people—and even then, he’d had a great deal of help from Xaphan and the Thunderbird herself.

Leon felt his jaw clench so hard that he half-worried he’d crack a tooth.

‘Those people were right,’ he thought as his heart began to sink, many of the thoughts he’d been trying to suppress since Nestor’s lab roaring back to the fore of his mind, *‘I’m just a barbarian with no idea what he’s doing, playing with the remains of men greater than I could ever hope to be...’*

It was a depressing and sobering thought, a terrible realization that he'd always known but had never truly *felt* before; he'd done so little except kill, he'd created nothing of value, nothing that he could point to with great pride and declare was his. As his eyes drifted lower in shame and swept across his lovers, he realized that, while they might love him *now*, he never would've had a chance in the endless hells of being with any of them without his name, without his blood, and without the Heaven's Eye vault that his family left behind.

He'd done so little with his life. He was a child playing in the ruins of long-dead people who pissed away more value every morning of their lives than he'd ever brought into the world with even the greatest of his labors.

Worse, those who built this place weren't even that great, now that Leon was thinking about it, yet they were still better than him. Justin's words about the Thunderbird Clan not being missed and why rang in his ears, and his mind brought forth images of Xaphan and Justin in their prisons. They were tyrants and slavers, and he wasn't even worthy of cleaning their boots.

His heart slowed as a scowl spread across his face. Suddenly, he wanted nothing more than to leave this place as quickly as he could as if he could hide from these realizations. He didn't want to take the power crystal. It wasn't his, he'd never earned it. In that moment of realization, he didn't even want the power crystal he'd taken from Nestor's lab. He'd picked it off the corpse of his Clan like carrion picking at dry bone.

And just a few days ago he'd been so excited to see what he could do with it, but now he didn't even want to think about it. He wanted to summon Nestor's power crystal out of his soul realm and hurl it into the great pit of the spherical chamber. It was much smaller than the power crystal of the prison, so it wouldn't have quite the cathartic release he hoped it would, but such a thought did little to help.

"I..." Leon began, his voice cracking as he faced Valeria and his two lovers, unsure of what to say now. All three were already looking at him in various combinations of worry and expectation, and he realized that he'd been standing there for several long minutes, his emotions not concealed by his stoic exterior as well as he'd thought they were.

"Is everything all right, Leon?" Elise asked as she stepped forward and filled his vision with the most vibrant green eyes he'd ever seen and hair as bright red as fire. There was no judgment within her eyes, only concern.

Concern and acceptance.

No matter how their relationship started, she loved him, Leon could see that in her eyes as plain as day. Same thing with Maia, her clear lake-blue eyes staring him down in an almost challenging way. She could feel what he was going through, and even though she wasn't saying it, she seemed to be challenging him to be better than he was, to pull himself back together and actually *do* what he needed to do.

Valeria was the most difficult for him to read. She was still quite stoic, but from having been with her almost constantly for months and knowing her for years, Leon could tell that she was far more concerned about him than just a friend would be.

“Yeah...” Leon replied as he pulled Elise into a loose embrace. “With all of you here with me, everything’s fine...”

“You don’t seem fine,” Elise insisted as she took his face in her hands and forced his eyes back to her. “What’s going on in that handsome head of yours?”

Leon paused a moment as he weighed his words. He didn’t want to reveal everything that was going through his head, especially since he hadn’t yet devoted much time to working through it. But he trusted Elise with his life, so he wanted to at least say *something*.

“I’m... just... The scale of what I need to do has never seemed quite so real before now... I guess it’s just really hitting me that this place, as important as it may have been to my Clan, was nothing special, and yet to me it’s so amazing. The road ahead is going to be long, and I’ve never really thought about how long it was. Or how little distance I’ve covered on it.”

Leon’s cadence was slow and his tone was depressing, but as he closed his eyes, brought up a hand to cover one of Elise’s on his face, and took a long, deep breath, he forced himself to cheer up.

It wasn’t so bad being humbled in this way, by seeing the works of his Ancestors. It was a far less dangerous and maddening thing than having someone like Nestor humble him. It didn’t even come with a dead man violating his body and imprisoning him within his own soul realm. What was harder for him to work his mind through was what all of that ingenuity and power was devoted to: a prison built to suck out the power of sentient beings, leaving them husks of their former selves.

Leon turned his gaze back to the power crystal. If he ever wanted to create great things, he couldn’t rely on such boons. He couldn’t count on Thunderbird facilities handing out knowledge and power like candy. He’d need to do this himself and rely upon his own power first and foremost.

Strength and knowledge. Once he acquired these two things, the rest would follow. But if he was anything, these past few days had taught him that he was weak and stupid.

Naïve.

Young.

Inexperienced.

As he stared into the orange of the power crystal, he knew in his heart of hearts that if he took it, he might gain a great resource, but it would be at the cost of what little confidence he yet held onto. But this thing was once built, which meant that he could replicate it, given enough time. More difficult than that would be to redeem the Thunderbird name, assuming he felt like it was even a name worth redeeming.

Leon stared into the crystal and quietly murmured, “We have a lot of work do...”

Chapter 526: Introspection

Leon’s heart was conflicted as his group returned to Teira. The weight on his mind from the thoughts he’d had in the control room of Xaphan’s prison had eased a little, but the problem persisted. In the end, he hadn’t taken the power crystal from the prison. He didn’t feel like he needed it, and that he’d go further without it.

Just setting aside the moral quandaries that the events of Nestor's lab had left him with, he was still left with the realization that he needed to do things on his own. He couldn't allow himself to rely upon the scattered remains of his Clan, the detritus that hadn't yet been picked clean by the rest of the plane's inhabitants after the death of Jason Keraunos and the rest of the higher-ups of the Thunderbird Clan.

Of course, this now left him in a peculiar position. What could he do about his family's archives? What was to be done about the remainder of the marked points on the Cradle's map? He'd been told that there was a possibility that at least three of those points hadn't yet been found, though that was hardly guaranteed. He felt like it was best to assume that none of the facilities at those places had been plundered and that dangerous magical knowledge like the enchanted vines that imprisoned and drained people were still out there in the world. Perhaps even other prisons with trapped monsters just waiting to be unleashed, or other such calamitous facilities. Nestor's lab had held a fragment of the damned moon that had been inundated in the power of a Primal God for so long that it now emanated that power in quantities large enough to poison Nestor, a powerful and skilled mage. Leon couldn't even begin to guess what the Thunderbird Clan might've hidden around Aeterna.

Putting things into perspective, Leon wasn't sure what the right call to make was. He could take the books and knowledge there, but how was that different from not taking the power crystal? Even his new realizations that had killed his desire for the power crystal hadn't damped his desire for the knowledge entombed beneath Argent Palace.

He justified it in his head that knowledge was pure, it didn't matter where it came from or how it was acquired, and that taking what was beneath Argent Palace would be fine.

But that wasn't to say that he liked it. Learning about his family was something that he was interested in, and he didn't mind standing on their shoulders; rather, it was being lifted up by them that he was having trouble with, even if people like Nestor and the Thunderbird were perfectly willing to pick him up and lift him as high as they could. He wanted to learn and grow by his own means, he wanted to stand on his own as his own man. There had to be a middle ground in there, but the best he could come up with was to eschew most of the material benefits of his Clan while learning as much as he could from them.

It wasn't an easy decision; he'd already accepted so much, and so much was just a physical part of him that he couldn't control. He couldn't imagine relinquishing his family's sword even though accepting it while giving up on the power crystals was a hard thing to reconcile with his new wants and needs.

At the very least, he wasn't going to use the power crystals, and he no longer had any desire to take anything physical from any of the remaining Thunderbird sites that he might find. As beneficial as anything he might find could be, he needed his future family to have better foundations than the bones of a fallen Clan, especially one that could be capable of the crimes Justin had accused them of. He didn't want the baggage that would come with the Thunderbird Clan's revival.

He didn't say much about his concerns to Elise, Valeria, or Maia. He trusted them completely, but he barely felt like he'd sorted out his thoughts and feelings on the subject, yet. He had to work through some of this on his own, first, so that he could at least properly articulate what this new problem was. He'd get their opinions when he was ready to talk, but for now, it was his problem and his problem alone.

So, he hadn't taken the prison's power crystal. He'd made up some excuse about not being able to remove something so large—he was fortunate that none of the others could move it, either—so he and his group had just left it there. He'd assented when Elise said they ought to send a Heaven's Eye expedition out to secure the place, but before they'd left the prison, Leon had done his best to shut the entire place down and destroy any enchantments that he found personally objectionable. He'd had to stoop down and ask Nestor for help identifying what he needed to do, but if it kept the worst parts of his Clan's enchantments from falling into anyone else's hands, even people as trustworthy as Heaven's Eye, then it was worth it.

He was loath to see the same enchantments that had imprisoned Justin and Xaphan spread throughout the plane.

Valeria also hadn't given him an answer yet, and he wasn't really expecting one anytime soon. They hadn't had much of a chance to talk in private, and he figured that she needed more time to think over all that had happened during the past few months. He could still remember that moment they'd shared in Calabria when she'd kissed him, but a single kiss hardly meant much.

Regardless, if it was time she needed, Leon had no problems giving her all that she needed.

When they rolled into Teira with their horses and carriages—for which they'd had to make a detour to Clear Ice Fortress to pick up given their alternate route south—everyone was quite exhausted. It had been a long couple of weeks, and at least in Leon's case, he wanted nothing more than to find the most comfortable bed he could and collapse into it, preferably with Elise and Maia beside him. From what he could tell, everyone else, including the members of their Heaven's Eye escort, wanted something similar.

Fortunately for Leon and those accompanying him, Ajax was more than willing to assist. When they arrived, the Tower Lord was incredibly accommodating with getting Anzu set up in the stables, Justin settled in his private medical quarters, and giving Elise, Maia, and Leon the same wing of his palace that they'd stayed in when they'd last been in the city. Valeria, too, had been given the same rooms, but she'd opted to stay with her father, at least until she could get a preliminary report from the healers about his condition.

So, it was a quiet night for Leon, Elise, and Maia. Their fatigue kept them from being too physically intimate, but they celebrated their return to civilization in their own way. When the morning came around, they were all about as rested and ready for the day as they could be.

Ajax was nowhere to be seen when they finally hauled themselves out of bed. The palace servants told them that apparently something had happened in the south that forced him to go to work early, but given how unhurried and unconcerned everyone was, Leon and Elise brushed it off. Ajax would let them know if it were something that would concern them. Instead of worrying about that, they instead got in a late breakfast and set off with Maia to Argent Palace.

They didn't send word ahead, but Leon didn't feel it was necessary. The writ he'd received from the King gave him unfettered access to his family's old palace, and he intended to use it regardless of what the guards protecting the ruins thought.

Naturally, the guards disagreed. Leon and his two companions were forced to wait more than an hour before they were finally allowed access to the site, though the guards insisted on sending an escort with

them. Leon then insisted that they be left alone, and things got a little bit tense. It wasn't until he let a few stray arcs of silver-blue lightning dance across one of his hands that the guards finally realized who they were dealing with and stood down. The guard commander, in particular, had something of a starry-eyed look as he stepped aside and let them pass, though the entire encounter put Leon in no mood to stay and talk.

He knew that there'd probably be quite a few rumors spread about him as a result of these actions, though he didn't much care; while he was about ready to set aside his identity as Leon Ursus and reclaim that of Leon Raime, he wasn't about to shout it from the rooftops.

Argent Palace had been surrounded by a private forest when it was intact, and in the almost two decades since its destruction, the forest had started to get a little overgrown. This, however, led to a pleasant sense of isolation as Teira almost completely disappeared behind them, with even the intense and otherwise omnipresent ambient sounds of the second-largest city in the Bull Kingdom being eaten up by the dense flora surrounding the ruins.

Leon's small group walked silently, for the most part simply basking in the sudden private and wild surroundings they found themselves in. It was almost completely silent around them, with even the usual sounds they might hear in a forest being strangely muted. It was relaxing, like an unexpected but much appreciated nature hike through a reserve located in the middle of a dense city.

But then Argent Palace itself came into view, and Leon started to feel a little regretful that he hadn't brought either Valeria or Justin. He would've loved to discuss with the two of them what had happened the night that Justin's battle with Kyros ruined the palace, but he supposed that he could always return another day for that conversation. Today was not going to be the day to reminisce about his family's downfall, but rather to learn about the height of its glories.

Leon slowly guided his lovers through the maze-like remnants of Argent Palace; past the grand entrance of white stone—now shattered—and immense atrium of stark white marble—utterly ruined as it was—that even now shone in the late-morning sun; past the more public areas of the palace that were filled with the remnants of both tight corridors and small offices of the lower administrators, and the grander halls, meeting rooms, and courtyards designed to show off the splendor of House Raime. Nearly all of it had been reduced to barely chest-high walls and piles of rubble, but there was enough of a skeleton left to be able to appreciate some of the majesty the palace once had. Finally, Leon led them to the private areas of the palace, the areas that he had passed through when he'd infiltrated the palace four years ago.

Little had changed since then. The palace was still magically dead, with absolutely none of the grand enchantments that had once filled the place still functional. Still, they walked with very little talking between them. The palace grounds had a tremendously somber and muted ambience to it that encouraged silence, even in the middle of a bright a sunny day, and it was a difficult thing to break.

When viewed from certain angles, the palace seemed almost intact, with Alexander's—Leon's uncle and the older brother of Artorias—private apartments in particular seeming almost ready for someone to move in. However, the great rents in the earth, broken stone and gutted buildings that were revealed when their angle changed ruined that illusion. Many of the smaller, presumably less magically fortified buildings were little more than piles of rubble almost hidden beyond overgrown gardens. Somehow, the

battle between Justin, Kyros, and Alexander had obliterated the entire palace complex without exception.

Now that he was older and had more time to look around, Leon wondered what it would've been like to grow up here. He wondered if he would've met Elise when she came north, if they would've walked through the extensive gardens or spent time together in the gorgeous pavilions scattered throughout the complex. He imagined learning to fight and to ride in the yards, studying magic, history, philosophy, and all the other things that would've been expected of him in the outlying buildings. He thought about waking each day to these surroundings and how his life would've been different.

Perhaps most of all, Leon thought about his father, and the mother, uncle, and grandfather that he'd never met. He at least had a vague idea of what the latter two looked like if only by looking in the mirror or seeing some of the fragments of statuary laying around the palace, but he wondered what it would've been like to grow up here with an intact family.

Not for the first time, Leon momentarily had the thought of returning to Ajax's palace and driving his family's sword into Justin's throat for depriving him of this, but he resisted the temptation. It was easy to blame the man, and Leon certainly did for a great deal of what had happened here, but he knew that the greater threat was Kamran.

Pulling him out of his reverie, Elise slid her hand into his and squeezed. She didn't say anything, but when Leon glanced at her, she flashed him a dazzling smile of support. It was more than enough to bring Leon back to reality and to continue leading her and Maia through the ruins toward the old private residence of the Raime Archdukes and the Thunder Kings before them.

The building was utterly ruined, with almost no trace of what it once was visible from the pile of shattered marble and red ceramic roof tiles that it was now. But the private training yard behind it still looked pretty good with a mosaic of House Raime's old crest in the center. Leon simply had to kneel in the center and channel his magic into the right place and the crest—a stylized eagle-like bird with talons extended and wings outstretched—began to sink into the earth and slid to the side, revealing the marble staircase below that led down to the archives.

"We're almost there," Leon said with some trepidation. He could remember that there were a few intact defensive measures down there, but he didn't think they were all that robust. Rather, he was more worried about what he was going to do with everything in the archives than he was about Elise and Maia following him down there, especially with Maia's power supporting them.

"Let's see what's down there!" Elise cried, her voice thick with adventuring spirit.

Maia was a little more subdued, but she smiled at the two of them and said out loud, "I'm quite curious to see what's down there..."

"Then let's go see it," Leon said as he led the two down the stairs to his family's archives.

Chapter 527: Regaining Some Pride

Leon found the bottom of the stairway just as he'd left it: a collapsed escape tunnel on the left, while to the right were a pair of enormous doors that looked sturdy enough to withstand any attempt to force

them open. A few feet in front of those doors was a glowing runic circle, the button that would open those doors.

When Leon approached the circle, he held his hand out, but he knew that he didn't need to channel his magic into this runic circle to get the doors open. Instead, a small lightning bolt conjured by the runic circle connected his outstretched fingers to the circle, letting it examine his body in its entirety and verify his lineage. Once the power of the Thunderbird was confirmed to reside within him, the runic circle flashed with golden light and the doors began to slide open.

"It should be all right, now, but be careful!" Leon called out to his lovers still waiting further up the stairs. He couldn't be sure that any defenses on the archives were now lowered, but he was at least confident enough that any danger that Elise and Maia might face was now passed with the runic circle verifying his identity. There were plenty of people who married into the Clan, after all, who might need access to the archives.

Thankfully, while Elise and Maia slowly came down the stairs with all due caution, nothing happened that would've indicated to Leon that they were in any danger. The magic in the air and the walls that he could sense remained about as energetic as it was only a few moments before, indicating that at the very least there weren't any magical defenses that were activating themselves.

"This place..." Elise murmured in wonder as she stared at the massive doors, her awe growing as they passed through the subsequent marble corridor and into the great chamber beyond. They were quite far underground, farther than she'd imagined when Leon had told her of this place, but still, the enormity of the chamber beyond the doors wasn't something she was entirely prepared for.

Maia's eyes were wide with wonder, though her reaction was a little more muted compared to Elise's, which Leon found understandable given she had the experience of Nestor's lab to set her expectations. Elise had seen the prison, of course, but its beauty was of a far more technical kind, rather than the comforts put on display when the Thunderbird Clan wanted to show off.

But even with those expectations, the archives of House Raime were marvelous.

Leon was a little nervous when he saw that the inner door was open, but one they stepped out into the chamber itself and found it exactly as he'd left it, he relaxed. He still saw the countless bookshelves filled with seemingly endless tomes, the enormous domed ceiling both painted and enchanted to look like the sky outside and set with a large diamond in the center that acted like an artificial sun. This light shone down upon the many trees that stood at the ends of every bookshelf, their gorgeous green leaves giving the room a delightful burst of natural color. The entire room was ringed with gold, like an enchanted wall put into place to prevent anyone from being fooled by the light projections on the domed ceiling and trying to walk 'outside' of the archives.

"Let's go see what we can find," Leon said with a smile as he started walking down the hallway, the reactions of his lovers banishing his darker thoughts about how much of this place he ought to consider 'his' for a quick moment, only for them to come roaring back when he wondered why he was feeling so proud to show this place off.

He kept his smile on his face as best he could, but he could tell from the way Elise and Maia glanced at him that he didn't have the best poker face. So, he tried to cover his current mental state up by moving on without giving them a chance to ask him about it.

"I think there were some golems here, but they shouldn't be hostile..."

"I remember you saying something about that," Elise replied, still giving Leon a curious and slightly worried look.

Maia, meanwhile, summoned a fraction of her power and proceeded with caution. Leon could feel from the killing intent in her aura that she was ready to respond with extreme violence at the slightest provocation.

"Let's relax and not do anything too hasty," he said, pausing just as they were about to enter the archives themselves. It was still close enough, however, to see some movement within the bookshelves, a few shifting bodies of bronze moving amongst the shelves, keeping the place clean and the books maintained for whenever a descendant of the Thunderbird arrived who might need them. Unlike the more human-like golems built by Nestor for his laboratory's labor needs, these golems were clearly mass-produced and lacked the adornment of more bespoke automatons—utterly featureless faces; runic inscriptions only along the joints; everything else smooth bronze plate and a few gaps where brief glimpses of flashing lightning could be seen.

As before, one of these bronze golems revealed itself and began walking toward them with purpose, though not quite enough to appear hostile. It was a little more ornate than its fellows, but not by much.

"That should be the Librarian," Leon said as this golem approached, then bowed to all three of them, dispelling the remainder of the worry Leon had in bringing Elise and Maia down here.

"Young Lord, you have returned," the golem said in its deep, pleasantly resonant voice.

"I have," Leon replied with a note of bitterness in his voice. "However, I think I would appreciate being called by name more than 'Young Lord'..."

The golem, probably remembering Leon's similar request the last time he was here, took his statement completely in stride. "Of course, Leon. Is there any specific reason you came here today that I might help you and your companions with?"

"Nothing too specific," Leon said as he cast his gaze around the room. "We're just going to look around a bit before we do anything else. We're probably going to be coming and going over the next few days, but when we're done, I would like to take everything portable here with me, leaving nothing behind."

That finally got a reaction out of the golem, though it was slight and barely perceptible. It cocked its head to the side a few degrees and asked, "Is that wise?"

Leon raised an eyebrow in surprise. It was a strangely human question, something he hadn't been entirely expecting—at least, not phrased that way. Some protestations at taking everything away, or asking for confirmation, sure... but questioning the wisdom of leaving with everything in tow? Leon was expecting something a little more... *mindless* from the metal being, given the way it had spoken last time and the way that Nestor spoke about such things. But, given Nestor's other talking golem and the precedent of the stone giants, he didn't know what he was surprised...

Deciding to ignore that question for a few seconds, he said, "I want my wives to be allowed full access, if they don't already have that permission."

He heard some elated gasps from Elise and Maia when he referred to them as wives, but he felt that doing so would be the best thing to do if he were dealing with sentient golems, as he was suspecting he was. If they were anything else, then they might not be seen as being a part of the family, and thus restricted in some way from exploring the archives as they saw fit, even if they had his permission to enter.

"So long as they have the assent of a full-blooded member of the clan, those who marry into it have no restrictions," the Librarian helpfully responded.

Leon gave it a grateful smile and then turned back to Elise and Maia, both of whom were staring at him with their versions of love and adoration; looks which he unashamedly returned. "I'd like to stay here and speak with the Librarian a little bit more. I'll catch up with you two in a few minutes..."

"Sure thing, *husband*," Elise replied, giving him a smoldering look as she clearly relished whispering the word. "We won't be far..."

Maia was a little more subdued since she and Leon were already mates, but she could still sense something a little different in how Leon referred to her as a wife. She didn't say anything, but the way she stared at him promised only delight once they returned to a place where they could have a little privacy. It wasn't going to be this place, however, as Elise took Maia's hand and began pulling the river nymph further into the archives, laughing a bit as Maia stumbled when her lake-blue eyes broke their lock on Leon.

Leon was a little hesitant to let them wander off without him—he wanted to be the one to show this place off, after all. However, he also knew that what he needed more was to spend a little bit of time with people who could both help him with his current issues and were a little more removed from him. To that end, as his lovers vanished into the seemingly endless bookshelves, Leon turned his attention back to the Librarian.

"The last time I was here, you told me that this place stored histories, records of the Clan's culture, and of the magics they wielded."

"This one did say that," the Librarian responded with a slight bow of its head. "It's a shame that few have sought them out, but these records have been meticulously maintained."

"Let's go check these things out," Leon said, leading the Librarian off in a slightly different direction as Elise and Maia had gone, making some small talk with the golem as he went. The more he spoke with it, the less he thought it was properly sentient, but even if it wasn't, it was a tremendously convincing thing. Not quite up to the standard of the stone giants or Nestor's prized golem, but quite the achievement, nonetheless.

After perusing some of the books and having the Librarian explain them to him—they were mostly histories of House Raime from the past ten thousand years or so rather than histories of the Thunderbird Clan proper—Leon finally brought their conversation around to what he was a little more interested in hearing about.

“What was your relationship with Prince Nestor?” Leon asked, watching the golem for any behaviors that might indicate surprise.

The golem, however, wasn’t human, and if it displayed anything that could showcase its surprise or hesitation to answer, it was beyond Leon’s ability to perceive.

“This one’s creator was not present much, according to this one’s memories,” the golem answered without a shred of antipathy or bitterness in its voice. “Following this one’s construction, this one was shown how to manage the records kept here, and then this one was left to fulfill its function.”

Leon nodded, not really surprised but still a little disappointed.

“I found him, you know. Prince Nestor. He was dead.”

“A great loss to the Clan.”

Again, the golem’s tone of voice didn’t change much, any fluctuations in any emotions it might’ve been feeling not coming through when it spoke. Leon found it a little disconcerting, but he also felt almost comforted, in a way. It meant the golem wouldn’t judge him for what he was about to say.

“I’ve been thinking over the past few years. When I was last here, I was ready and willing to take whatever House Raime and the Thunderbird Clan had left for me. I wouldn’t have hesitated to take everything I could possibly carry; if we hadn’t been interrupted by that patrol sent to investigate my breaking into Argent Palace, I certainly would’ve taken more...”

Leon’s eyes drifted toward the back of the archives, to where the door that the Librarian had shown him to last time was, still almost impossible to notice tucked away in one of the many alcoves that dotted the circular chamber’s wall. The Librarian hadn’t been able to tell him how to open the door, but he was certain that something worth that protection was behind it, and that he would’ve spent quite a bit of time trying to get it open if he’d had more time four years ago.

He was still absolutely going to look it over again, even if he wasn’t reserving judgment on using whatever was inside.

“Now, however,” Leon continued as the Librarian patiently listened and waited for him to finish, “I’ve been having second thoughts about that kind of mindset. It’s not that I don’t *want* everything here, I do. But, more than that, I want to be my own person, someone who can credit himself for his achievements, someone who doesn’t rely on inheritance to ride to the top. I’m not sure how to reconcile these two wants. To be a part of the Clan, and yet not to partake in anything that was left behind. If I don’t take it, then it will probably fall into the hands of someone who isn’t a part of the Clan—the Thunderbird herself told me I was the last who bore her power, and recent events have convinced me that she wasn’t lying. If I don’t take what the Thunderbird Clan left behind, then I’ll be essentially giving away all of it to whoever is willing to take it.”

The Librarian waited patiently as Leon spoke, his mouth practically just letting loose with a stream of consciousness. He wasn’t sure he was making enough sense, and he wasn’t sure if the Librarian could even help, but he needed to tell *someone*, and he wasn’t quite ready to tell those who were a little more personally invested in him.

Unfortunately for him, that didn't mean they couldn't hear him, or that they could hold their tongues. From the depths of his soul realm, he suddenly heard the voice of Nestor, going against Leon's conditions and orders and speaking without being directly included in the conversation.

[Your struggle is not something unique to you, kinsman,] Nestor said, his voice resounding through Leon's mind more like the kind grandfather that he portrayed himself as right before he invaded Leon's soul realm. [Many in the Clan have wrestled with the same emotions. Many have even renounced their claims to any wealth and power that they might have received as part of the Clan. Some of these people went on to be great, proving to themselves and to everyone else that they were great unto themselves, while a great many others failed and died in obscurity, or came crawling back to the Clan, now convinced that the only way they would taste greatness was by proxy. Your thoughts are not new, and I don't doubt for a second that any descendants you may leave will struggle with the same things.]

Leon couldn't help but scowl as the man spoke, his distaste for Nestor almost causing him to throw out Nestor's comments without thought or consideration. All of this thoughts in his head started because of what Nestor did. But he paused just as the words almost left his mouth.

'Is this not the reason why Nestor was kept alive?' he mused as his scowl turned bitter. *'I suppose I can at least hear him out...'*

[And what sort of insights do you have in this specific matter?] Leon responded, unable to keep the bitterness out of his voice and the implied and unspoken threat of violence out of his tone.

Seemingly unfazed, Nestor replied, [You are the last of the Clan. If I were in your boots, I would take everything I possibly could. Our enemies are beyond counting, you'll need it all. Better all of it fall into your hands than the degenerates who looted the corpse of our Clan, after all...]

[Our enemies can wait,] Leon countered. [We're not in a rush and I don't want to grow reliant on handouts from the Clan.]

[There's a difference between relying on handouts and using provided tools, young one,] Nestor replied, his tone like that of an elder lecturing a junior, which while accurate regarding their situation, only served to infuriate Leon. [Besides, I'm not entirely convinced that this is actually about the items themselves.]

[And what do you mean by *that*?!]

[You didn't have these thoughts before coming to me, did you? And now you have them. What changed in my lab?]

'Everything,' Leon thought, though he didn't direct it to Nestor.

All of these thoughts could be traced to that damned lab, to being possessed and used like meat by a member of his Clan. He hadn't been able to think much about it at the time since he had other things to worry about, but it hit him when he returned to the prison, even if he wasn't entirely conscious of it at the time.

Nestor wasn't insane, at least not in a mentally-broken-by-time kind of way. He'd shown Leon exactly the kind of ruthlessness and callousness that his Clan had been capable of, how even for all its greatness, the Clan had been brutal and without mercy. Nestor had not only invaded Leon's soul realm

when Leon had shown up, but had also destroyed his own golems with a second thought. Justin's imprisonment, even if Leon didn't much care that it happened to Justin in particular, was indicative that Leon's treatment wasn't unique.

Leon's blood curdled at the thought of being used like that again, either having his body stolen or being plugged into one of those vine enchantments. To feel those things burrow into his skin and leeching away his magic power by stealing his blood.

As he thought about it, Leon had to stifle the urge to immediately vomit. He could fight and he could kill, but he would *never* be the kind of person who could steal another person's body, or who could imprison someone in such a contraption.

If Nestor was emblematic of what the Thunderbird Clan was, Leon wanted nothing to do with it. He'd rather be a Raime. He'd rather shed the former legacy entirely in favor of the latter. But that was essentially impossible. The Thunderbird's power was too tightly intertwined within him, he couldn't just abandon it even if he wanted to. No matter what he did, he'd always be seen as a part of the Thunderbird Clan.

He scowled, but he knew it was true. So that left him one option: he'd have to prove himself better than them, both to himself and to everyone. Leon took a deep breath as this new realization dawned on him, and with it came a degree of conviction. This would have to be his path forward, to build his own family better than the Thunderbird Clan in every way.

But first, he'd have to prove to himself that he could do it.

[I'll use knowledge, I'll take advice to heart,] he said as evenly as he could, setting aside any moral concerns he had for the time being. He was hardly the kind of person worthy of judging others for their actions, after all, and with some further thought, he was sure that some of the actions of the ancient Thunderbird Clan was likely justified in some way.

Having just come out of a civil war, Leon could understand that sometimes retaining power required the shedding of blood, and if the right person was doing it, then a people as a whole might be able to come out of the other side better off than they were before. The vines and tree roots that leeches mana and possession stuff still disturbed the hells out of him, though.

[I don't think I can take anything material right now,] he continued. [I... I need to prove to myself that I can do this, that I'm not just riding coattails or a child playing with old toys he inherited, that I'm not just a vessel with the illusion of free will that the Thunderbird is using to rebuild her Clan. If I don't, then what would be the point of fighting to prevent you from possessing me? I'm not an animal, I don't think I'm an idiot that needs to be lifted up to greatness. I *have* to do some of this on my own.]

He heard Nestor heavily sigh and fall silent, while the attention of both Xaphan and Thunderbird rushed to fill the gap.

[For what it's worth, boy, I completely support that decision,] Xaphan said. [Standing upon your own feet on foundations that you've built will always be better than doing otherwise.]

The Thunderbird added, [There's no shame in taking what has been left behind, but if you don't believe you need it, or you believe that accepting it would we

Chapter 528: The Card

On the plane of Aeterna, the Heaven's Eye Merchant Guild had a virtual monopoly on all banking from one side of the plane to the other. They were also the largest non-government operated group who participated in international trade, being more than capable of moving just about anything in any realistic quantity from one end of the plane to the other. Of course, this made them incredibly powerful and influential, but they were held in check by the power of the Central Empires. If Heaven's Eye started to get too political, the powerful mages of the Central Empires could, with what Leon understood to be relative ease, dismantle Heaven's Eye, for the Central Empires were not only the most magically advanced states on the plane, but also the only ones who were not at least somewhat reliant on the services provided by Heaven's Eye.

To help organize their businesses, Leon knew that Heaven's Eye issued various metallic cards to their customers and partners—the difference between the two mostly coming down to personal power. The cards were heavily enchanted to prevent fraud, and the information they recorded could usually be used to buy something instead of using physical currency—the money would then be transferred directly by Heaven's Eye without directly hauling huge amounts of silver coins around.

Commoners were usually the ones who had less business to conduct with Heaven's Eye, oftentimes no more than utilizing their banking services. Leon knew that they were issued bronze cards. From Elise, he knew that a bronze card carried with it no special privileges of any kind, whether that was access to Heaven's Eye's higher-ups or more niche services such as using them as trading middlemen.

The nobles—or whoever made up the ruling class of a particular state—usually had more business to conduct both within and without their country, and with their greater authority to advance Heaven's Eye's interests, they were seen more as partners than customers. To reflect this status and the privileges that came with these cards, these people were issued silver cards.

Royals—and only Royals—were given gold cards. These special cards essentially meant that Heaven's Eye would give them an accordingly Royal treatment no matter where the holders of these cards went, giving them access to all of Heaven's Eye's services and allowing them to directly meet with Tower Lords and other higher-ups almost at will.

Leon had inherited a gold card from his father, who had in turn inherited it from Kyros and all the other House Raime Archdukes going all the way back to the old Thunder Kings from before the First Bull King forged the Bull Kingdom. As far as Leon knew, his family was almost unique in that they weren't Royals, and hadn't been for five thousand years, and yet they had been allowed to keep their gold card and the status that came with it. Leon vaguely remembered Elise once alluded to some kind of special relationship between House Raime and Heaven's Eye, especially notable since apparently Heaven's Eye's first tower was built in Teira, but she hadn't uncovered any special information in that regard since.

That was it as far as Leon knew. Bronze for commoners, silver for nobles and the ruling class, and gold for Royals. With Elise as his lover, he'd absorbed quite a bit of information about Heaven's Eye and knew that this was true. Not once had he ever heard about any other metallic cards before.

And yet, in the archives below Teira, beyond the door that Leon had opened, was another card, suspiciously similar to those issued by Heaven's Eye, only it was platinum, not any of the other metals, its easily identifiable luster putting that of silver to shame. And Leon knew that it was a Heaven's Eye

card, for on one side of the platinum card was printed a heavily stylized eye, an eye that Leon knew was an old Heaven's Eye insignia—the oldest, as far as he was aware, though he was hardly an expert on such things. On the other side of the card, instead of the usual string of numbers printed on other cards along with the plethora of security enchantments to protect that information, was another heavily stylized image: that of a bird of prey soaring through the sky.

It was a suspiciously similar insignia to the more modern sigil of House Raime. It might've been some kind of confirmation bias, but in the archives of House Raime and with that resemblance, Leon felt certain that the bird printed on the card was the Thunderbird herself.

All of Leon's elation at having solved the puzzle of the door was gone almost as soon as he saw that card hovering over the stone plinth. He wasn't sure what he'd been expecting on the other side of the door, but it certainly wasn't... *this*.

Leon didn't touch the card. He simply stared at it as it hovered in the air, slowly turning in the air, giving him a good look at both sides.

"What the hells is this thing?" he wondered aloud. Surprisingly, he actually received an answer.

From behind him, the Librarian said, "That is an identification badge carried by the Clan leader and their direct subordinates. It is a thing of great honor and grants the bearer permission to enter any Clan stronghold they choose. It marks them as higher-ranked than everyone, save for the Clan leader and their children. Few are ever handed out, as they are things of great consequence and a sign of immense trust."

"I see..." Leon replied as he inundated the alcove in his magic senses, looking for any sign that this was some kind of trick or trap.

But he sensed nothing from either the alcove or the card itself; by all signs, it was safe for him to take if he so wished.

Leon didn't move. It was tempting, and he certainly wanted a closer look, but he wasn't about to just take the thing, not after everything that he'd been contemplating over the past week or so. But there was still a very large part of him that wanted almost more than anything to reach out and take it.

"Does this thing carry any kind of enchantments other than serve as an ID?" Leon asked, wondering if the card had an actual, *real* impact on Thunderbird Clan defensive wards, or if it was just a sign of authority for Clan members to obey. If it were the latter, he didn't have as many reservations about taking it as he would if it were the former.

"Unknown," the Librarian responded. "Such things are not meant for this one to touch."

Leon scowled, his mind turning to his dead kinsman in his soul realm. If anyone would know everything about these things, it would be Nestor.

After taking a step forward, Leon began to examine the platinum card a little closer, unwilling to ask Nestor just yet. He wanted as little to do with the ghost as he could get away with. Unfortunately, the more he examined the card, the less he could tell about it. Its inner workings were as much a mystery to him as his gold card was.

With a rapidly deepening frown, Leon steeled himself for what he had to ask. He didn't want to come across as a beggar requesting information from a superior, if only that superior could be so generous as to share his wisdom; rather, Leon wanted there to be nothing in his voice but iron and dignity. Nestor, by his own promise, had to give him the knowledge he wanted, there could be no alternatives. But still, Leon didn't want to embarrass himself trying and failing to achieve the effect he wanted.

[Nestor,] Leon growled, his voice deep but not overly so, his tone even and confident rather than shaky and anxious, [can you hear me?]

The answer he got was instantaneous, preceded only by a weak wave of magic senses to perceive Leon's immediate surroundings.

[Yes, kinsman?] Nestor replied. [Is there an issue I can assist with?]

Nestor's tone was neither servile nor arrogant, giving Leon no satisfaction, but also no reasonable cause to be irate other than Nestor calling him a kinsman. Still, Leon took that as a win.

[This card, what can you tell me about it? This Librarian told me it was an ID...]

Leon briefly summarized the information relayed by the Librarian, as well as his own observations. It almost felt like too much to reveal for Leon, as if he were admitting weakness to an enemy by proving just how limited his knowledge was, but he also didn't want to waste any time and patience by having Nestor go over information he already had.

[All of that is true,] Nestor replied, his tone unchanged. [These cards were used by the Clan for identification purposes, with platinum cards being the most prestigious. I and all of my siblings had one, as well as several of my father's closest advisors.]

[Do you know who held this one?]

[I couldn't tell you unless I had physical hands,] Nestor explained, pausing just long enough for Leon to start feeling defensive and almost long enough for Leon to snap back that he wasn't going to get any physical hands. [So, clearly I can't do much,] Nestor continued, [but I can tell you what to do and then interpret what you find...]

Leon followed Nestor's directions, though he went slowly and triple-checked everything to ensure that Nestor wasn't trying to do anything shady, and to treat the card with as much suspicion and reverence as Leon thought it deserved. As far as Leon could tell, though, the dead man only told him how to activate and interpret the enchantments placed upon the card, and nothing more.

Yet, it was still with a great deal of trepidation that Leon finished checking the card, and a moment later, a single name appeared on the side of the card that had the image of the Thunderbird.

"Demetrios..." Leon whispered, his mind quickly associating the name with the only other of Jason Keraunos' children to survive his death. As far as Leon knew, that Demetrios had apparently changed his name to Raime after the disaster that left the previous Storm King and all of his most powerful subordinates dead, and was the founding member of Leon's House.

Leon had held the card almost delicately until that point, as if it were alive and only one wrong move on his part away from biting his hand off. It wasn't something he particularly wanted to have, it was just

another thing from the Thunderbird Clan—worse, it was something that would directly identify him as a member.

But now, his hands clasped the card tighter as the card suddenly felt a thousand times heavier, carrying the weight of all the time that must have passed between when it had been placed on the other side of that door and when Leon had managed to get the thing open. A length of time that no doubt many more powerful mages would've laughed at but was almost inconceivably long to Leon.

At the very least, the card didn't seem to come with any immediate tangible benefits, so Leon resolved to keep it. This was a sentimental part of his legacy, and one that he didn't mind taking.

From what he could discern of Nestor's mental state, the ghost seemed to be lost in a similar state. Leon heard something that sounded almost like a gasp when the name was revealed followed immediately by a sigh of regret. But Nestor said nothing more, and Leon didn't push him to talk. Leon felt Nestor's attention vanish as the man's awareness retreated back into Leon's soul realm.

Leon held the card close to his chest, turned back to the Librarian, and said, "I want everything in this place catalogued and made ready to be moved. I'll not be likely to stay in this region for much longer, and I'll not leave any of this behind."

"Understood," the Librarian responded, giving Leon not a single word of complaint, for which he was grateful. Leon quickly dismissed the Librarian to begin preparing with the other maintenance golems, while he swept the area with his magic senses.

After quickly locating Elise and Maia, Leon started making his way back over to them. He'd vaguely wondered where the two of them had been in the couple hours they'd been apart, and it soon became apparent what they had gotten up to in that time. Around the archives were a number of comfortable places to study or do research, and Elise and Maia had set themselves at one such place, a small table with a handful of comfortable armchairs around it. The table had a couple of books on it—not quite as much as Leon had expected, but enough to have kept them busy for a while. However, instead of quietly reading, Elise appeared to be quietly whispering to Maia as she traced a sentence in the book with one of her fingers.

"...N-D. You see how each individual letter corresponds to the sounds we make when we speak? Every word we say is only made up of a collection of thirty-five-ish sounds, and each one of those has a letter associated with it, so a word is like a puzzle made up of these pieces. If you memorize each of these letters and the sounds they correspond to, as well as the little quirky ways they behave when they're assembled in certain orders, then reading becomes incredibly easy!"

As Leon approached their table, he saw that Maia had an expression of utmost concentration on her face, showing just how seriously she was taking this. She didn't seem frustrated or angry, but Leon could tell that she had made an incredible amount of progress already, which likely contributed to the feeling of conquest and victory that he could feel through their connection.

He felt a little guilty that it was Elise teaching Maia even though she'd asked him to do it, but he was also terrifically happy that Maia was still fulfilling her wish to learn how to read.

"When... K-Kay—" Maia hesitantly began as she tried to piece together the next line in the book.

“*Kai*,” Elise corrected, keeping on top of any mistakes Maia made as she interpreted the rune-based symbols that made up their letters.

“*Kai-ser-os*,” Maia said, immediately applying the correct pronunciation, “too-k t-he—”

“*The*.”

“—*the fo-rt, he... tore... do-wn... the flag of... the ene-my...*”

“Perfect,” Elise said with a glowing smile, not even looking up as Leon took a seat at their table, ensuring that Maia had been given sufficient praise before finally glancing in his direction. However, that wasn’t to say that she didn’t look ecstatic to see him, as she made clear once she turned that radiant smile in his direction.

“Sounds like a lot’s happened over here,” Leon said, a smile creeping across his face as both Elise and Maia smiled in pride at him.

“Indeed,” Elise replied, seeming almost impatient to show off just what Maia had accomplished in just a couple of hours, though Maia was, if anything, even more eager. Before Elise could say anything else, Maia immediately shouted into Leon’s mind.

[I’ve learned to read!]

Leon’s joyful smile grew wider, though there was quite a bit of surprise mixed in there, as well. But, in his experience, learning to read was something that took more than a few hours.

“In just a few hours?” Leon asked, being careful to keep any sign of disbelief out of his voice, inundating his tone with amazement instead.

“I found it a little surprising how quickly she picked this up, too,” Elise said as she cuddled up next to Maia and stared at their bronze-skinned lover with adoration and pride. “However, it seems that, with the power she has, it makes memorizing symbols terrifically easy. So, after showing her what each symbol was, all we’ve been doing is reinforcing their meaning in her mind.”

“At this rate, I shouldn’t have any trouble with this by the end of the week,” Maia boasted, pushing out her ample chest in pride, reveling in Leon and Elise’s adulation.

Leon found it impossible to doubt her, and he expressed that as best as he could over the next few minutes, letting her dazzle him with her new skill.

But after those few minutes and after Maia dove back into the book—a dry historical record, from the looks of it—Elise finally addressed the reason why Leon had come back over.

“Did you find anything fun, love?” she asked, Maia only looking up from the book for a split second before turning her eyes back to its pages.

“I...” Leon hesitated to tell her about the platinum card. It didn’t seem to carry any tangible benefits to it, and he didn’t want to keep it a secret from either her or Maia, but he also couldn’t help but suspect that it might have some kind of authoritative power in Heaven’s Eye. Just because he’d never heard of them using a platinum card didn’t mean they *didn’t*, after all.

It took him sitting in silence for a few awkward seconds, slowly turning the card over in his hands a few times beneath the table before he continued, deciding that being honest and forthright with Elise was the best way to go, regardless of any potential consequences.

“I *did* find something,” he said, producing the platinum card from beneath the table and almost defiantly snapping it down onto the table between all three of them.

For a moment, no one said a thing. Maia didn’t seem to pay the card any mind after a cursory glance, but Elise stared at it like it had just sprouted a mouth and recited a sonnet. She didn’t say anything for long enough for Leon to start feeling like *maybe* he’d just made a mistake.

Once she’d thrown off her shock, however, Elise’s expression darkened, and she pushed the card back to Leon.

“You should put that away. Don’t let anyone see it again. That could bring all of us a large amount of suffering if the wrong people heard about it...”

Leon stared at his fire-haired lover in utter bewilderment. He rarely saw her so serious about anything that didn’t involve him in conflict with Valeria—and he could tell she was not only deadly serious, but also a little bit terrified, if her aura rapidly descending into chaotic whirling was anything to go by.

“What’s wrong?” he asked as he sat up a little straighter and stared down at the platinum card. Elise hadn’t taken her eyes off the thing, her shining green eyes were locked on it as if it were about to jump at her like a spider. The tension that suddenly formed in the air was even enough for Maia to notice and put down her book to focus on them.

Elise didn’t immediately respond to Leon; instead, she gingerly laid a hand on the platinum card and did a few things that Leon quickly realized were almost identical to the way that Nestor had taught him to activate the identifying enchantment in the card.

“Yes, put that away and don’t show it to anyone,” Elise said as she pulled her hand back.

Leon frowned, but did as she suggested and pulled the card into his soul realm, storing it in his Mind Palace’s vault. He was relatively certain that it would be safe there—though not as certain as he would’ve been before Nestor had invaded his soul realm—and that he would be safe from it. It didn’t seem to warrant too much caution, though; it was just a card made out of platinum with a few small enchantments expertly woven into it, nothing directly dangerous.

“What’s wrong with it?” Leon asked, his tone both worried and curious.

Elise met his gaze and seemed a little conflicted. Leon imagined that she was trying to decide whether to explain or ask where he’d found the thing first.

It seemed that the explanation won out, for after a second or two of thought, she said, “Heaven’s Eye doesn’t use cards made out of platinum. As far as I know, there have been a few attempts by influential Tower Lords to create a new ‘level’, so to speak, of authority to give to the imperial states in the south, but the Director of Heaven’s Eye has always shot those suggestions down. We don’t make platinum cards.”

“Why not?” Leon asked. “Now that I think about it, it seems just a little bit strange that Heaven’s Eye has existed for... what was it? Something in excess of fifty thousand years? That long and they’ve always used bronze, silver, and gold? In all that time, those three levels of cards have never once been diluted with other levels?”

“I’ve...” Elise began before cutting herself off, suddenly seemed *very* apprehensive about continuing whatever train

Chapter 529: Raid for a Prince

The capital was fairly quiet; surprisingly so, in Jormun’s opinion. It had barely even been a month since the Bull Kingdom’s civil war had ended, so he’d expected to see their capital in an absolute flurry of activity. However, it seemed that many of the people who had fled the city had yet to return, and without the Legions there to make up the difference, the city was relatively deserted.

A smile crossed the pirate’s plain face as he gazed out over the railing of his small sloop, his eyes sweeping over the city as he and his closest of comrades slowly wound their way around the lake in the city’s center. Eventually, his gaze landed upon the capitol island itself, whereupon he knew his target to be.

He needed someone with the blood of some kind of Ascended Beast, someone whose blood held more power than average. Normal humans had power in their blood, of course, but for his purpose, he needed something with a little more kick, something that was a little more appropriate for his ritual. In that respect, he was unable to simply kidnap random people off the street to try and make up for the power deficiency with pure numbers.

No, in this case, plain old blood simply wouldn’t do, no matter how much he had. He needed those with Inherited Bloodlines if he were to ever accomplish his goal.

And upon that island was one such person: Octavius, the disgraced son of King Julius, the man who had been largely responsible for the bloody fighting that had consumed the Kingdom over the past year—or so Jormun had learned during his infiltration of the capital a week ago. The only other two in the Kingdom who were suitable to be used for his purposes were, unfortunately, too well guarded or not in the city to attempt to steal, so Octavius was his only choice.

It had been surprisingly easy to enter the Kingdom, what with the unrest in the west caused by the King punishing traitors or something of that nature—Jormun didn’t much care about the actual reason—requiring many of the Legion soldiers to redeploy. The city itself was only lightly defended, a sure sign in Jormun’s eyes that they were being watched over by the Serpent—not that he needed *more* proof of that. Still, Jormun knew that the fleets stationed in the south could be problematic, but with only a single small, fast ship and a reliable crew, he was confident that he could outrun and slip past anyone who tried to stop him from taking and leaving with his prize.

To that end, he and his crew had been slowly circling the capitol island from a distance for the past day and a half in a small fishing boat that Jormun had taken the unprecedented step of *purchasing*, doing their best to appear nonthreatening, not raise any alarms, and to blend in with all the rest of the ships coming and going. They were going to be seen eventually, if they hadn’t already, that much Jormun knew, but he doubted anyone would disturb them in time to stop them.

After all, they'd be launching their raid in only a few hours.

During their time circling the island, Jormun had managed to get a pretty good idea of where everything was on the island. The bribes he'd paid a former government official to furnish him with a hand drawn map hadn't hurt, either. He knew where the dungeon was on the island, and where he could land to avoid the Royal Guards for as long as possible. He knew exactly where he had to go and what he had to do.

Now, it was all about execution. This would be his only chance, for Octavius was scheduled to be executed the following day.

Jormun glanced around at the rest of his crew. His ship was small enough that the two dozen pirates he'd brought with him crowded the deck a little bit; a small force to challenge this powerful Kingdom, but Jormun wasn't really trying to challenge it. He simply wanted to steal a disgraced Prince. It would be difficult, especially since the Prince was likely to be under the heaviest guard that the King thought appropriate right now, but Jormun was confident that he and his most trusted followers would be fast and quiet enough to pull it off.

After all, he'd never failed before. If he wanted something, he'd always been able to take it without too much trouble. This Prince, he knew, would be no different.

—

Octavius leaned back in his cell, his blond hair dirty from lack of care, his clothes little more than rags, and he didn't even want to know what he smelled like to people who weren't used to the stench.

But all in all, he was strangely happy. He'd lost his bid for the throne by such an awful margin that for him, every waking moment was a nightmare. But his mood was so great because he knew that in less than twenty-four hours, it would all be over. He'd have to kneel and say a few words and suffer the indignity of hearing his 'crimes' read out to him, but then Bronze or Penitent or whoever would step forward and end him quickly. It would not be a protracted affair.

Still, he had his regrets. His dream to see himself upon the throne of the Bull Kingdom was still swirling about his head—along with the intense desire to see August dead—but a dream was all it was now.

Forever out of reach.

He'd spared a few thoughts for Sapphire, but no more. His current situation was her fault, and that of Earthshaker. They'd given him poor advice, not followed his orders correctly, and then either surrendered without a fight or gotten themselves killed by some nobody barbarian. Earthshaker was dead—and good riddance for worthless followers—and Sapphire might as well be dead, too, as far as he was concerned.

It was only when he thought of Leon that Octavius' mood was somewhat ruined. Humiliation was one thing, but that filthy savage had dared to lay hands upon him! A Prince of the blood assaulted by that walking embodiment of dirt and all that was wrong in the world. All that he had been determined to fix upon his assumption of Kingship.

But his passion didn't last long. The knowledge that he was about to die had dampened just about any foul moods he could possibly experience. A month of living in squalor—though not quite the oubliette

that he'd subjected August to during his brief imprisonment—had him ready to exit this world with as much dignity as he could manage. No, he'd gotten all of his bargaining attempts and furious shouting and denial of reality out of the way in the first two weeks. Now it was all about waiting for the inevitable.

Octavius continued to ruminate over his life, his regrets, the grand plans that he'd never gotten to accomplish, how great of a King he could've been if the traitors hadn't gotten their way; so in his own head was he that not once did he hear the shouting from other parts of the dungeon. Not once did he sense the faint ripples of magic as the guards in the facility were slaughtered like pigs.

Instead, he was consumed by the knowledge that, in only a matter of hours, the Bull Kingdom was going to execute the finest Prince it had ever had. Octavius chuckled, thinking to himself that the loss of his immeasurable talent and skill was exactly what the Kingdom deserved for failing to recognize it and rally behind him.

It wasn't until the dungeon itself shook all the way down to its foundation that Octavius finally looked up from his own navel, alarmed and confused as dust was shaken from the dirty ceiling of his cell.

Octavius, now shaken out of his own little world, leaped to his feet as he finally began to hear the sounds of violence outside of his cell. He grabbed the small table he was afforded and upended it so that he could take cover behind it in case his cell door was blasted open, yet at the same time, hope was ignited in his chest.

'It has to be my supporters,' Octavius thought to himself. Other scenarios flashed through his mind, including that of potential assassination, but given that he was due to be executed the following morning, he couldn't imagine that anyone was willing to assault the dungeon just to kill him a few hours early. *'No, they have to be here to break me out,'* he thought with expectation as he stared at his cell door, his body hunkered down behind the wooden table as he waited for whoever it was out there to reach his cell. *'It's about fucking time!'*

Still, for all his enthusiasm, whatever was going on outside was giving him enough anxiety and fear that he wished he could channel his magic power. He was only a fifth-tier mage, but that was still enough that his jailers had seen fit to shackle him with manacles that restricted the use of his magic power, as well as placing him in a cell that had been heavily enchanted to do the same. So long as he languished in this cell, his magic was lost to him.

'I wonder who it is...' Octavius thought as a few faces flashed through his mind. *'Grandfather is dead, Uncle Petrus is dead... Is it Sapphire? Has she finally made her move to save her King?'*

Octavius quickly concluded that it could be none other than his future Queen, and all of his terrible thoughts about her disappeared as if he'd never thought them at all, and as the sounds of death from outside faded and were replaced with approaching footsteps, he stood up and pushed the overturned table aside so that he could greet her. If she could get him out of this place and into the Western Territories where he could continue the war, then he'd forgive her for all of her inaction over the past couple of months, along with just about any other mistakes she might care to admit to.

However, when the door opened, it was not his gorgeous Paladin that greeted him, but a decidedly more plain man standing in the doorway, the light from the hall streaming in behind him and throwing

his face into shadow. Octavius almost froze in surprise, but he took another step forward to try and conceal his sudden spike of fear at the sight of this unknown man.

“W-Who are you, Good Sir?” the fallen Prince asked as he stood with as much dignity as his current state could express—he was dirty, having been unable to wash for days, and extremely tired, having been given nothing to eat for the past week but bread and water. But he was still a descendant of the Sacred Bull, and so he stood tall and proud.

“My name is Ephialtes,” the man said as he stepped into the cell and let more light fall onto his smiling face. He was a fairly average-looking man, with no real notable features or clothing. He had a wide smile with deep laugh lines, brown hair and eyes, and a body that seemed more than used to its fair share of hard work and violence. He was clad in a dull red brigandine, with what looked like steel greaves, no helmet, and a pair of black gloves made of some kind of dark reptile skin.

However, for how otherwise unremarkable his looks and attire were, his aura was decidedly non-standard, with it being completely opaque and indiscernible to Octavius’ eyes, indicating a minimum of sixth-tier strength. Strong on a personal level, for sure, but not strong enough in Octavius’ eyes to have staged such a bold attack on the dungeon—at least, on his own.

“Your Highness,” Ephialtes—if that was, indeed, his name—continued, “I have been sent here by Her Grace, the Duchess of Valentia, to break you out of this place. Come now, we haven’t much time.”

Ephialtes held out his hand in a friendly gesture, and Octavius began to relax. His aunt, the daughter of Duronius, and sister to the Queen and Earthshaker, would’ve had to inherit her father’s title after the King executed him. It seemed, then, that she was willing to continue the fight. With her resources, the throne wasn’t quite out of Octavius’ reach, yet!

Wasting no more time on distrust—for who else but his true supporters would risk breaking him out at this latest of stages?—Octavius nodded and strode out of the cell, Ephialtes just behind him.

Once out in the hallway, Octavius saw several more of Ephialtes’ companions, and they hardly looked to be the kind of people that he would’ve otherwise associated with; kind of dirty and disheveled, many of the men unshaven and with scandalously long hair, the women looking just as dirty and most with long braids in their hair to manage their greasy, unwashed locks.

And yet, all of their auras were beyond Octavius’ ability to perceive; all were stronger than him by at least a tier. They were powerful, and there was half a dozen of them in the hall, with undoubtedly many more outside.

‘All of them are here for me...’ Octavius thought, the notion helping him to push his fatigued and slightly malnourished body a little bit further so that he could walk with all the dignity he still had.

“What’s your plan, Ephialtes?” Octavius imperiously asked the other man as they walked down the hall toward the central courtyard of the dungeon.

“Our ship isn’t too far, if we’re quick we can reach it and be out of the city before the local fleets can do anything to stop us,” his rescuer replied as the rest of Octavius’ rescuers fell in behind them.

“Are we at any risk of the Paladins showing up?” Octavius asked. They were approaching the door, and it took an immeasurable amount of self-control not to break with his rescuers and sprint to the outside, to the promised freedom.

“That’s always a possibility, but I’d say that we’re not in any great danger, Your Highness,” Ephialtes replied. “Bronze and Brimstone are both out leading Legions to deal with the Western Territories, so neither are present. Sapphire is currently under house arrest, and from what I’ve been able to gather, she won’t be risking the King’s wrath by making a move. The only two people who might prove to be a challenge are His Majesty and Penitent, but if we move fast enough, then neither will even realize we were here until we’re already on the ship.”

Octavius momentarily scowled as he paused at the door. His father had ascended to the eighth-tier, and while he’d undoubtedly been quickly recovering his strength—not that Octavius would know since the King hadn’t come to visit him in weeks—he likely wasn’t quite in fighting condition, yet. Penitent, on the other hand, was an old man hardened by war and personal tragedy. If he caught even a hint of their betrayal, Octavius could easily see his father ordering Penitent to stop them, and Penitent doing so in brutally efficient fashion.

“Then let’s move quickly,” Octavius said, and pushed open the door to the dungeon’s inner courtyard.

—

Jormun could hardly believe his luck. He knew he was a fantastic liar, but Octavius had barely even questioned him once he’d opened the cell door. He supposed he could understand, though, since the Prince was less than a day from execution; he was a drowning man ready and willing to clutch at even the thinnest and weakest of lines thrown to him.

Still, there was a moment right after the Prince opened the door and stepped out into the courtyard that Jormun worried would turn him against the pirate. He found the rest of Jormun’s lieutenants waiting for them, and it seemed that they had had some fun while Jormun and his most trusted and powerful followers had gone into the dungeon’s buildings looking for the Prince.

All across the walls, the dead Legion soldiers that had once guarded the place had been strung up or nailed to the walls, mostly upside down and many completely disemboweled. One of Jormun’s pirates even fancied himself something of a painter—Sturli, if Jormun’s guess was correct about who did it—and had used the blood of dozens of the guardsmen and the few minutes Jormun had been gone to paint a large and surprisingly detailed, if stylized, serpent along one of the dungeon walls. The serpent had a single long horn extending out of its forehead and curving back along its body.

Jormun appreciated the art and the message the bodies would send, but it ran counter to his goals, at the moment. He almost apologized to the Bull Prince to maintain his façade, but before the words left his mouth Octavius only shrugged and kept on walking toward the exit of the dungeon.

Jormun smiled and gave his people a goofy smile of triumph before waving at them to fall in line. All of his pirates with him were sixth-tier or stronger, but his force wasn’t big enough to hold the dungeon against the inevitable counter-attack by the Royal Guard. He and his people had attacked hard and fast enough that they’d managed to kill everyone before a signal could be sent out—at least, as far as Jormun was aware—but they had to leave as soon as they could.

As they walked to the main doors, he kept an eye on the disgraced Prince. Jormun had to admit to himself that he admired the man's poise and pride to walk out of the dungeon like he owned the place after all that had happened and the state he was in. The pirate wondered how far he'd have to push Octavius to break it.

'Not that far, probably,' he gleefully thought.

As he followed behind Octavius, the Prince remained silent, allowing Jormun to glance back at his people and make sure they were following. He did a quick headcount and smiled as he realized that he hadn't lost a single one of his pirates. The Bull Kingdom was too preoccupied with unrest in the west for them to keep their best soldiers in the capital, and probably didn't ever seriously consider the threat of Octavius breaking out. Not that they left him unguarded, as the many corpses that now littered the dungeon could attest, but it had still been surprisingly easy for Jormun to take. There hadn't even been any other prisoners held in the dungeon that he had to filter through.

He saw Rolf, one of his oldest comrades and a giant of a man walking through the ruined courtyard like an indestructible war god, a tremendous ax resting over one shoulder and blood dyeing his mail crimson. Even with his helmet obscuring most of his features, that ax and his immense frame made him instantly recognizable. His wind magic gave him an unparalleled speed among Jormun's followers and an irreplaceable position on Jormun's ship, despite 'only' being a sixth-tier mage.

Andoral, too, cut an impressive figure, but his was of a more wiry and lithe build, though the strength he possessed wasn't something anyone could ignore. The handsome brown-haired man had recently ascended to the seventh-tier, and the light magic he wielded ensured that any injuries that Jormun's people had sustained were almost instantly healed.

Jormun's only other seventh-tier mage was a young-seeming woman who wielded fire magic to great effect whenever Jormun set his eyes on a trading ship. Many were the sailors who had chosen to forfeit their cargo rather than face the wrath of Friga, though whenever it happened, Jormun was always entertained to see the disappointment in her wild and barbarous face; her unkempt vibrant red hair which seemed to poof out whenever she was excited and looking forward to a fight would then sag back into her scalp whenever she saw their white flag.

With these three alone at his side, Jormun doubted he'd have had any trouble at all taking the dungeon, but he was glad for the aid of his fellow pirates, nonetheless. They had all sailed with him for many years, and they had proven their usefulness to him time after time.

Once Jormun's people had filed out of the dungeon, leaving nothing but mangled corpses behind, they immediately turned east. Jormun could see with his magic senses that even if the alarm hadn't gone off, the Legion forces on the capitol island were already moving in their direction, so they had to get back to their ship and leave before the local naval garrison could follow the example of the Royal Guard.

However, what was far more concerning was the fact that a small Legion unit had already found his ship. It almost seemed like a terrible thing to have happen, but Jormun hardly cared. With his crew and with the recent losses the Bull Kingdom had taken, he didn't think they'd be able to stop him and his crew from leaving if they went all out.

He was actually looking forward to the fight, especially once he realized who was leading the Bull troops.

A few minutes later, he, Octavius, and the rest of Jormun's crew didn't have to rely on magic senses to see their new foes. Forty powerful Legion soldiers stood around the small inlet where they had beached their fishing barge, surrounding the craft and keeping it under lock and key. Every one of the soldiers was above the fifth-tier, which given how strong Jormun's crew was, made them about even.

The only unknown among them was the man who stood on the beach itself, one hand resting on the hull of the ship with his back to them. He had a bald head, was dressed in plain brown robes, and lacked any and all sign of his office or his lofty position.

Slowly, as if he were expecting them, the Penitent Paladin turned around and fixed Jormun's crew in his gaze. Not even seeing three seventh-tier mages and Octavius arrayed against him was enough to get him to crack his stony exterior. Instead, he just stared at them with a baleful look that promised nothing but death if they should continue trying to escape.

The Paladin's eyes swept over each one of them, and even Jormun had to suppress a shiver as those black pits passed over him. It almost felt like standing upon the edge of the ocean during a storm; one wrong move, and Jormun would plunge in and never surface again. Penitent was so full of power and killing intent that he felt like a force of nature, not a man who stood in their way.

But after a moment, Jormun's mouth curled upward in a wide smile. He didn't fear this ocean; he'd seen all the horrors the abyss could throw at him, and every time he'd fallen under, he'd returned stronger than before. This was to be his greatest test yet, to fight against the man who had obliterated his home island, the specter of death that had haunted the dreams of countless Serpentine Islanders, the only man who was more hated there than King Julius himself. It was a good opportunity to put on a bit of a show.

Most of Jormun's crew were not from the Serpentine Islands; he'd recruited them, forcefully or otherwise, during his many voyages across Aeterna, raiding and plundering. They did not have the same visceral reaction to seeing the Penitent Paladin as did Rolf, Andoral, or Friga.

"Take heart, my friends," Jormun whispered to them as the Paladin's eyes focused in on Octavius, "this old man shall not stand in our way for long. When things kick off, see to the Prince."

He was about to finish there and let his crew steel themselves for the inevitable battle that was only a minute away, but a strange sensation crawled around in the back of his head as if there was something quite literally crawling around in the back of his skull, and he heard a faint rustling like a serpent slithering through the grass.

"The Serpent is with us," he said as his smile grew wider. "The new age of the gods is inevitable. It will start with us."

It was only then that Jormun saw his people start to animate and show their determination, once they knew their god was on their side. Octavius, however, didn't hear a word that Jormun had said. He'd stepped forward and addressed the Penitent Paladin before the latter could speak, though Jormun had been too in his own head to pay attention to what the Prince had said. He only caught the tail end of their quick exchange.

“... Highness has told me that I need not bring you back alive, Octavius,” the Paladin said as he stood there on the beach, unmoving yet having a more menacing aura than if he’d taken a few steps forward. “Now that you’re here, I suppose this just means that your execution has been moved up a few hours.”

With barely a hint of movement, the rough line separating the sandy beach from the forested island was defined by the Penitent with a great crack that split the beach off completely from the island, sending a thunderous boom echoing throughout the entire city and swallowing up five of Jormun’s pirates who hadn’t moved in time.

Jormun hardly cared, though. If they weren’t quick enough to avoid that, then they weren’t worthy of being in his crew. He didn’t spare those pirates another thought, not even as he leaped over the rapidly-widening crack and heard the sounds of crunching bones from the deep black abyss that had formed.

With barely more than a quick yell of exertion, Jormun charged straight at the Paladin, trusting in his crew to see Octavius to the ship and out onto the lake even as the Paladin’s knights charged to meet them.

Jormun’s pirates were outnumbered, but not a single one of them failed to charge in after their captain. In only a moment, the beach erupted in a conflagration of elemental magic that seemed like it was about to rip the entire island apart.

But Jormun barely took any of it in; he confidently charged toward Penitent with Octavius right behind him. He conjured a long curved saber in his hand, and with it in hand, he knew nothing could threaten him or the young Bull Prince.

Penitent just watched them come, power pouring out of him like he was the font of all magic. Nothing fazed him, he was a rock effortlessly weathering the storm of magic around him.

Jormun, however intended to *be* that storm, and with a slash of his saber, the water just off the beach receded into the lake. No one but Penitent saw this happen, but he regarded it with cold detachment. His attitude was justified when only a few seconds later all of that water suddenly rushed back in with another slash of Jormun’s blade. It came crashing back onto the beach in a great wave that swept many of the combatants, both pirate and soldier, off their feet.

But Penitent remained standing. He barely moved and a huge stone wall appeared as if from nowhere that parted the water around him. His feet got a bit damp, but apart from that, Jormun’s move barely did anything to the Paladin.

“Get to the boat,” Jormun said to the Prince, completely unfazed by Penitent’s obvious power and seeming lack of concern, thinking merely of the strangeness that the Paladin wasn’t being more proactive.

“Are you sure?” Octavius asked, showing a bit of doubt and uncertainty in Jormun for the first time since leaving the dungeon.

Before Jormun could respond, Penitent finally took a step in their direction. Just one step, and when his foot hit the soft sand, the earth beneath them shattered like glass and the sandy beach practically exploded into a great whirling storm.

The Prince visibly paled in fear, but Jormun was unharmed. Only a few steps were required to see him and the Prince to safety—though two more of his pirates weren't quite so lucky.

"I'm sure," he said as he grabbed hold of the Prince and threw him toward the boat like a ragdoll.

He then took a menacing step toward Penitent, letting his magic flow out of his body like a river and down into the lake. All the material he needed to work his magic was there, both he and Penitent were precisely in their element. As the lake water just off the beach roiled and churned and began to rise up and flood the beach, the fighting between the rest of the combatants died down. It seemed like Jormun's pirates had come out of it better than the knights, but not by much.

Penitent, meanwhile, took another step toward Jormun, his eyes never leaving the pirate despite Octavius landing in the boat. As his foot hit the ground, an immense stone pillar erupted out of the ground and propped up the ship, ensuring that no matter what, it could not leave the island.

The Paladin remained eerily quiet during this, his face an unchanging mask of resignation to his duty. Jormun's was only marginally more expressive, with a shallow smile that didn't quite reach his eyes marking the only difference between the two.

But as the two sides separated, Jormun knew he had to put on a bit more of a show; with the Serpentine Islanders in his crew watching, he couldn't take things in stride. He was facing the man who had destroyed their islands and killed tens of thousands, he had to show more passion.

He forced his smile to grow wider, and with another slash of his sword, another great wave arose out of the lake and came crashing down upon the beach.

"GET TO THE SHIP!" Jormun roared, his target no longer just Octavius, as the lake seemingly tried to eat the beach. It was stopped in its tracks by another great stone wall raised by Penitent, but Jormun's pirates had already started moving.

With a few quick movements, Jormun caused the water that had already seeped into the sand in the beach to suddenly and violently spring up like hidden spring-loaded razors, slicing apart nearly half of the Legion soldiers, freeing up plenty of space for the remainder of his crew to sprint for the ship. Anyone else who got close wound up on the wrong side of Friga, Rolf, or Andoral.

Penitent tried to stop them. His efforts were quite admirable, but Jormun countered them every time. Lake water and exploding stone clashed in a titanic battle that utterly ruined the beach, fracturing it beyond recognition and killing many more Legion soldiers who weren't able to retreat in time.

But Jormun's people made it to the ship, and a tidal wave combined with some explosive fire from Friga freed it from a stone shackle that Penitent tried to use to prevent their escape. Another wave then carried it out dozens of feet into the lake, and from there, it began to quickly turn and flee as the remaining pirates got to work. They'd left half of their comrades dead on the island, but they had the Prince and were leaving as fast as they could.

Jormun, meanwhile, exchanged blow after blow with Penitent. The old man, seeming to finally realize that things weren't going the way he needed them to, or perhaps finding some reserve of strength that he hadn't yet tapped, suddenly lunged at Jormun, moving as fast as a charging bull. His fists hardened into stone which, combined with the alarming speed that he closed the distance with, made him a

potent threat that Jormun hadn't quite been expecting. The pirate was able to dodge and weave, but the Paladin's raw strength meant that Jormun couldn't match him in such a bout; even a single mistake on Jormun's part could lose him the match.

Jormun, of course, knew this, and he wove around Penitent's blows like he was made of water. Throughout all of it, he didn't once make a physical counter-attack, but he and the Paladin still exchanged many blows with their magics. Water blades and exploding boulders, tornados of sand and tidal waves, stone spikes and deadly water jets all clashed, making for such an intense display of magic that none of the soldiers could intervene; all had to retreat to a safe distance, and could only watch their leader fight with all he had and the rest of the pirates sail away across the lake.

After maintaining this status quo for a few long minutes, Jormun abandoned the fight. Killing Penitent wasn't his goal, and while the fight was exhilarating, there was no reason to stay. Instead, he summoned a wave of water that had Penitent go on the defense just long enough for the pirate to allow it to sweep him out into the lake. Penitent was left standing on the annihilated beach with a look of confusion and rapidly-mounting fury overtaking his early detached demeanor, and more than a hint of fatigue in his aged face.

Jormun's smile, meanwhile, only grew as he rocketed out into the lake, his mastery over water magic carrying him away from the battlefield with great speed. In mere seconds he was already underneath his ship as it swiftly cut through the waves toward the outlet of the southern Naga River.

He didn't immediately rise out of the water, though. He could sense Penitent back on the beach using his magic to try and halt their retreat, throwing boulders and conjuring stone spikes out of the lakebed, but neither of these things concerned Jormun. Friga or Andoral could handle them easily enough.

Rather, it was his physical state that needed some work. Penitent had been left on the beach with many superficial wounds that had already stopped bleeding. Jormun, on the other hand, had barely been touched—a few light tears in his clothing and maybe some shaved skin was all that he'd suffered.

That wouldn't do, not with many in his crew and back in the Isles practically chomping at the bit for Penitent's blood. So, before he rose up to rejoin his people and take them back to the Serpentine Isles with their prize, he called upon his magic once more, running sharp water over his face and body, sundering his clothes and inflicting bloody flesh wounds upon himself.

The pain was fleeting, but intense, and he felt the slithering in his mind increase in acknowledgment and approval of his bloody sacrifice. The fight with Penitent had been intense enough that he doubted anyone would realize his deception.

He then exploded out of the water and landed upon the deck of the ship, almost collapsing as he played up the extent of his injuries. Andoral reacted immediately, shouting in alarm as Jormun hit the wooden deck and reaching out with his light magic to heal the pirate captain's wounds. Jormun smiled in vicious appreciation at how well he'd trained the other man to respond to him like this.

Out loud, however, he said, "The Paladin... was too much... We have to leave... now! Everyone... hang on!"

With seemingly great effort, Jormun reached down to the water beneath their ship and used it to propel them faster than just about anything else on the waves that might be heading in their direction. They'd

be halfway down the Naga before word reached the Consul of Discord of what they'd just done, and Jormun knew plenty of ways to get through the swamps of the Southern Territories without detection. They'd have to ditch the ship at some point and link back up with the rest of Jormun's fleet somehow, but he had a few plans for that, too.

Despite the casualties, despite the bloodshed, despite Penitent being still alive and glaring at them from shore, this was a success as far as Jormun was concerned. He had his prize, the Prince approaching him with a look of concern, confusion, and mistrust all mixing together on his handsome face, and that was all that mattered.

There was no more need to look back for Jormun. The past was the past and he had no interest in avenging it. His focus was the future, and what the Prince would be able to do for him.

Or at least, what the Prince's blood would be able to do for him.

Chapter 530: Hasty Return to the Capital

Leon numbly listened as Ajax narrated the events of only two days ago from the report he'd received. Octavius had escaped from the dungeon, broken free by unknown persons who were possessed of alarming strength. The current theories in the Bull Kingdom pointed to only a few parties, with the most likely being a group of rogue actors within the government of the Talfar Kingdom trying to exact some measure of revenge for their loss in the recent war.

But Leon didn't think much of that. All he'd heard was that Octavius had escaped the day before he was set to be executed, all the other details were practically superfluous.

It had been a while since Trajan had been murdered. Leon had mourned and moved on; killing Earthshaker and removing Octavius from power had done a great deal to help with that. However, Leon had thought that his business with the Bull Kingdom had been over with the King now awake and Octavius set to be executed. He hadn't felt the need to stick around to watch it, he just wanted to move on.

And now, the man responsible for Trajan's murder had escaped justice. That shocked Leon almost to the point of a complete shutdown. It was a few seconds after Ajax stopped speaking that Leon finally came back to reality.

When he did, it was like the emotional floodgates had opened—fury poured out of him, the wound that Trajan's death had left in him suddenly and violently tore open, and Leon had to fight to keep himself in check. Having just come back from the Northern Vales barely a day ago and with all that had happened there still fresh in his mind, he wasn't sure if he was even capable of keeping his emotions balanced if he tried, though he did the best he could. His eyes burned with unshed tears, his hands shook with the desire to wrap them around Octavius' soiled rich boy neck and squeeze until the Prince's eyes popped, and his legs felt like jelly as his brain tried and failed to comprehend the consequences this could have.

Octavius had escaped, and no one knew where he was. The last time he was seen was when he'd been loaded onto a ship and taken south by those who'd broken him out of the dungeon. More than a hundred Legion knights had been left butchered in his wake. Not even the Penitent Paladin had been able to stop his escape.

“... you get all that, Leon?”

Ajax asked him something, but Leon only caught the tail end of it. Still, he pretended like he'd heard all of it.

“Yes. I'm going to need to head south as soon as possible.”

He was a little surprised at how calm his voice sounded; his heart felt like it was only a few beats short of breaking free of his chest. But even in that haze of shock and anger, Leon knew that he needed to return to the capital. His time in the Bull Kingdom wasn't quite over, it seemed.

Ajax offered to arrange a carriage to take him south and allow him to reach the capital in a week, but Leon declined the offer. He and Anzu could make that distance in half that time. He'd have to leave everyone else behind, which Elise, Maia, and Valeria were *not* happy about, but they at least understood why he needed to move quickly. Maia made sure to emphasize that they'd only be a few days behind him, though, and that he shouldn't do anything rash before she could arrive to back him up. Elise, too, emphasized the point, making him promise to wait for them before taking any foolish actions.

Leon agreed. He just wanted to get south and get the lay of the land as soon as he could. Before that, though, he had one last bit of business he now had to rush to complete.

—

In the archives beneath Argent Palace, Leon was a little surprised to find that the Librarian had already catalogued and prepared every single tome stored down there for transportation. He was relieved, of course, but surprised. He supposed that how organized the place already was made the task easy for tireless golems to accomplish, but he'd been expecting to have to leave most of the books behind.

Instead, it took Leon only a matter of fifteen minutes to grab every single book in the archives and pull them into his soul realm. He knew that many of them were multiple copies of the same book, but he wasn't willing to leave even a single solitary page behind. He had no idea what could be contained within all of that paper, and the idea of possibly leaving behind some crucial secret of House Raime or the Thunderbird Clan was too much to bear.

But once he was finished, that left him to deal with the issue of the golems. Like the books, he had no intention of leaving them behind. They were too valuable, and even though Leon had vowed not to use any of the material benefits of the Thunderbird Clan, in his mental state, he just wanted to grab everything, head south, and deal with all of it later.

To that end, he felt a little strange about it, but he managed to pull all of the golems into his soul realm. It was almost concerningly easy to pull off.

With the golems put to work organizing all of the books in a hastily thrown-together library in Leon's soul realm, Leon had to think that it was possible to bring other things in there as well...

He filed away that thought for later. Now was a time for movement, not for discussions with the Thunderbird or Xaphan about the nature of his soul realm. He simply accepted that his impulsive attempt to pull the golems into his soul realm worked.

However, for all that Leon wanted to get moving, he paused just before he was about to leave the archives. He wasn't sure if he was ever going to see the place again, and even with everything that it contained safely stored away in his Mind Palace, it was still a magnificent chamber to behold. The nature aesthetic resonated strongly with Leon, and he vowed that even if he brought nothing else with him into his new Clan, he'd at least bring along that decorative style.

He hadn't the time to stay for long; after that brief pause, he left the archives with all due haste, slowing only to make sure that the doors were sealed on his way out. He may have cleaned the place out, but that didn't mean he wanted to keep the place open for anyone to wander into. He then made his way as quickly as he could back to Ajax's palace to finish up his preparations.

—

"We won't be too far behind you, so don't do anything rash," Elise reminded him as he and his three companions met up in the front courtyard of Ajax's palace.

The sun had set about an hour beforehand, but Leon hadn't a single thought in his head about staying behind until morning. He'd have to land at some point during the night to rest, but he wanted to get to the capital as soon as he could.

It had only been a few hours since he'd been told about Octavius' escape, but already his blood was boiling knowing just how behind the news he was. It had taken two days for news of the breakout to reach Ajax, and even then, the Tower Lord hadn't received much in the way of information—mostly just the bare basics and a formal request from the King to keep his eyes out for Octavius and not to offer him sanctuary if he showed up in the north. With all of that in mind, Ajax couldn't make it to see him off, being too busy helping Emilie back in the capital prepare for any potential fallout from this event damaging Heaven's Eye.

Two days was a long time for these sorts of things. For all Leon knew, the situation in the capital could be completely different than what it had been two days ago, though he was slightly comforted by the fact that the message had been sent via comm stone, meaning that it had been effectively instantaneous, so the situation likely wasn't different in the capital, yet. Still, it would take him at least three days, probably more like four to reach the capital even at Anzu's quickest speed.

"I won't do anything reckless," Leon assured his fire-haired lover. He took her in his arms and pressed his lips against hers, reveling for just a moment in how she almost instinctively pressed herself into him. He had no intention of going back on that promise, not to one of the women he loved.

One of the other women he loved was staring holes into his back with the force of her gaze; Maia wasn't happy that he was choosing to not travel with her, but she at least acknowledged the need for speed. Anzu was the fastest mode of transportation they had for long distances, and he would fly fastest with only one person on his back.

Breaking away from Elise, Leon then pulled Maia into his arms.

"I'll be waiting for you," he whispered to her.

[You'd better not do anything stupid,] she warned as she wrapped her arms around him. She didn't say anything more, but she did open herself up to him through their connection, letting him feel everything

she was feeling right now: her love, her worry, and her anger. Her love for him, her worry that he wouldn't be able to keep that promise, and anger at the circumstances that were pulling him away from her.

Feeling all of this, Leon squeezed her tighter against him and whispered into her mind, [Maia...]

He then did the same, opening up his emotions for her to feel his own love for her at the same moment that the effect of his speaking her name had her shuddering in his arms.

Leon could've remained there for hours, simply holding his two lovers, but the moment ended far too quickly. It was time to go.

He spared one last moment for Valeria, who stood not too far away, clearly uncomfortable. If Leon had to guess at what was going through her mind, he'd say that she probably didn't know if she should join them in their goodbyes or not. She still hadn't given him an answer about what she wanted their relationship to be.

In that respect, Leon figured a little bit of time away would do them both some good. It would give her time to think over her feelings without him there, while in turn it would help him to come to terms with his own emotions. He felt like he was in too much of a hurry when he'd sprung his invitation on her to join his family. Riding on the high of finally defeating Justin—though not in a way he'd ever have expected even just a month or two before—and Maia telling him that she was all right with him and Valeria starting a romantic relationship, he'd acted in haste.

'Making myself scarce for a while is probably for the best...' Leon thought to himself as he gave Valeria a brief nod, which she quickly returned. Neither of them could bring themselves to say anything more, so after a few awkward moments, Leon turned around and strode as confidently as he could over to the waiting Anzu.

Despite the late hour, Anzu seemed ecstatic to finally get back into the air; his wings twitched, he was crouching down low in preparation to take off, and his body was wiggling a bit in anticipation. Leon couldn't help but smile at the griffin's behavior, and he ran his fingers through Anzu's fur, eliciting a low rumbling chirp of contentment from the albino griffin.

Almost as soon as Leon got into the saddle, Anzu shot off like molten rock from a Flame Lance, giving Leon only enough time to give the other three a quick smile and a wave before he and Anzu were in the air. Leon steered the griffin in a roughly southern direction, following the Julian Road toward the capital.

—

It took Leon roughly three days to reach the capital by griffinback. He'd left in the evening but had only been able to fly for a few hours before stopping to rest. However, the following morning, he and Anzu had risen early and reached the capital in good time.

He didn't fly low over the capital as he came in, but he didn't fly high enough to make himself inconspicuous, so he guessed quite a few people noticed him on his way back in. By the time he landed in the front yard of his villa, he hoped that someone was already on their way to summon him to the Royal Palace.

However, he didn't count on such a thing happening. He'd made it abundantly clear to the King when he resigned that he wasn't interested in the political affairs of the Bull Kingdom, but the escape of Octavius the night before his execution was something that greatly concerned him.

'At least the city itself seems fine,' Leon had thought to himself as he'd flown. Whatever had happened during his absence clearly hadn't been intense enough to leave much collateral damage.

Leon didn't spend much time dwelling on these things. He couldn't count on anyone sending him a message, so he only spent the time to wash up, change his clothes, and get something to eat for himself and Anzu. Once all that was taken care of, he had Anzu carry him in the direction of the Royal Palace—on the ground, this time, as he knew that the officials who ran the city didn't care overmuch for people flying about as they pleased. It wasn't a common enough problem to have laws against it, but Leon didn't want the first thing he did upon his return to be to step on anyone's toes.

As he rode toward the Royal Palace, he had plenty of time to think—something which he'd done quite a bit of on the flight south. His immediate and visceral anger at Octavius' escape had quickly faded once he'd gotten on his way, and he was able to look at things with a little less fury.

From what he knew about Octavius—which he would readily admit wasn't much—he doubted that the disgraced Prince would abandon the Kingdom he'd tried so hard to take for himself. He imagined Octavius would try and restart the war, but wouldn't seek foreign aid to do so. Leon couldn't see Octavius managing to wrangle up the support he'd need now that the King was awake and a huge proportion of the retainers under the landed nobility had been crushed.

Leon had no idea where Octavius might find support... but then again, *someone* had broken him free of his prison, and from what Leon had been told by Ajax, that someone was powerful enough to either be a seventh-tier mage, or have the loyalty of a small handful of mages at that level.

So, Octavius had support *somewhere*, and that support was likely strong enough to pose a legitimate risk to the Bull Kingdom. Leon doubted that it could be strong enough to challenge a united Kingdom, but he didn't think the Kingdom was particularly united, right now, with the civil war having ended only about a month ago.

As Leon rode on, he noticed that the noble district was a little less populated than he was used to seeing. Many of the local nobles who had fled the city during the war clearly hadn't returned, and the only people on the roads that he saw were a small group of Legion soldiers looking harried as they ran in his direction.

It took Leon a moment to realize that they weren't just running down the road, but were looking for him, specifically, if the sudden look of realization in the lead Centurion's face when he saw Leon was anything to go by. It took him another moment to pull himself out of his thoughts and slow down as he approached the group.

"Sir Leon?" the Centurion asked, his voice tinged with apprehension and worry.

Leon briefly scowled, but he nodded and said, "Just Leon, if you please."

"Of course, Si—uh, Leon..." The Centurion clearly wasn't comfortable using such an informal mode of address, but Leon wasn't in the mood to care right now. He hurried the Centurion on with a long, hard

look, and the Centurion quickly relayed that the King had sent for him as soon as he'd appeared over the city.

"Then lead on," Leon replied, and the Centurion and his escorts swiftly turned on their heels and began running back toward the palace with Leon in tow.

—

"... and that's where we're at," the Legion Legate said as he finished walking Leon through everything they knew about the attack on the dungeon that saw Octavius freed.

Leon was standing in a small meeting room in a private wing of the Royal Palace, with the King, the Penitent Paladin, and half a dozen Legates in attendance. Any worries he had of them not bringing him into the loop regarding these issues had been almost immediately quashed upon his arrival, with them wasting no time ushering him into this quickly-assembled meeting.

Leon hardly said a word, merely asking a question or two here and there regarding the timeline. The King and the Penitent Paladin were likewise silent, speaking nothing more than a greeting to Leon after he had been shown into the meeting room.

But once the Legate briefing Leon was finished, the King cleared his throat and the Legate and the rest of the Legion knights made themselves scarce, leaving Leon alone with Julius and Penitent.

"What do you think about all of that?" the King asked, his voice smooth and confident, indicating without a shadow of a doubt that he'd largely recovered his strength during this past month. His body was still rail-thin and deathly pale, but overall, the King looked almost healthy to Leon's eyes. His aura, in particular, radiated off of him like light from the sun, and he oozed the confidence of a man who knew he was the most important person in the room. The only thing that dispelled that illusion was the look of worry on his face and the bags under his eyes showing his fatigue.

"I think it was a hell of a story," Leon replied, keeping his less charitable thoughts to himself. "A group of two dozen people—along with three seventh-tier mages, no less—managed to break into the prison, slaughter more than two hundred guards, and made off with the Prince who was supposed to be executed barely half a day later. If all this is accurate, then I'm both impressed with their boldness and appalled that they managed to succeed."

Leon kept his tone even and calm, but a little bit of accusatory sarcasm crept into his words here and there, and his stoic exterior cracked a bit to show some displeasure, disbelief, and disappointment. All of this had little visible effect on the King or Penitent, however.

"They were quite skilled," Penitent quietly replied as he seemed to unconsciously bring his hands together to rub his knuckles in what Leon interpreted as both guilt and a desire for a rematch against these people.

"Leon Raime," the King said, his voice stern and commanding, "Octavius has been taken by whoever these people were. Things are complicated in the Kingdom right now, and we can't spare the forces I'd have otherwise sent to retrieve him. I would like to know if you're amenable to being on standby to join the punitive expedition that gets sent after him whenever we locate him."

Leon was quiet for a long moment, turning over what the King had said in his head. After that moment was over, he hadn't come to any conclusions about what he wanted his place in whatever this punitive expedition to be, and he realized that he'd need some clarification before making that decision.

"If I recall, the Royal Legions are supposed to have forty Legions when at full strength," Leon said, his lack of formality going by without comment by either the King or Penitent. "I know that the Legions took some serious losses during the civil war, but how 'complicated' are things right now that you can't even spare the soldiers to find your runaway Prince?"

The King, clearly expecting this question, replied without hesitation despite how it might reflect upon himself. "When my youngest son made his promises during the meeting between his supporters and the Consul of Discord, that cemented the course of actions we could possibly take. If I had been awake and running things when Octavius rebelled, I would've offered amnesty and forgiveness to any of my vassals that had sided with my son after scoring a victory or two. Unfortunately, Crown Prince August promised to seize all the land of the landed nobility everywhere in the Kingdom, so forgiveness was off the table."

"And you started the process so soon?" Leon asked, a little incredulous at how quickly the King was moving.

"We have to," Penitent answered as the King nodded. "A conservative estimate would say that the nobility lost at least a third of their total profession