

## **Storm King 601**

### **Chapter 601: The Serpent Falls**

Gaius could only scowl as the dreadnought pushed deeper into the storm, the sounds of battle growing steadily louder as they cut through the waves. He could feel an immense amount of power up ahead, so much that he was feeling quite queasy, but regardless, he stood at the bow of the dreadnought, guiding the ship forward.

Not that the ship needed a guide, for all the islets that had been here only a few hours ago were now gone, having fallen into the sea. However, what everyone on the ship was far more concerned about were the bolts of lightning, fiery explosions, and bestial roars that were rolling over the waves.

But still, even with the titanic auras, the monumental killing intent, and even the occasional convulsion that rocked the ocean hard enough to shake the teeth in Gaius' mouth, the dreadnought soldiered on. The rest of the broken fleet remained outside of the storm, for the sole remaining Legate of the fleet refused to put those survivors in danger, but he trusted Gaius' word that Leon was still active and committed the ship to sailing to the former knight's aid.

Naiad had long since abandoned the ship to fly ahead with Anzu, but the rest of Leon's retinue were only a little bit behind Gaius, silently staring ahead just as he was. Alix, Marcus, and Alcander were all equipped with the best bows that the Legion could provide them with and were furnished with all the remaining explosive arrows that Leon had given them. None of them expected to be able to do much with them since the serpent had proven itself invulnerable to even the Flame Lances of Sigebert's flagship, but they were resolved to use them regardless.

Whatever it took to end this threat, they were ready to do it.

They hadn't even moved through the swirling clouds before that resolve was tested, though. There was a loud, though hoarse, roar, and the seas shook even worse in response. That roar was answered with several claps of thunder that had Gaius' hair standing on end.

But even with the titanic amounts of magic power that were emanating from deeper in the clouds, the ship kept on.

They heard many more terrifying things, but they never once thought of turning around. They kept moving forward, the Flame Lances at the ready, the sailors and marines that were on the ship prepared for whatever may come.

Soon enough, the ship was pushing out of the swirling clouds and finally let everyone aboard see what they had obscured. They saw the maelstrom, and the Black Eagle high in the sky. They saw the demon seemingly trapped in the Eagle's wake, and the white griffin and his rider behind them. Most eye-catching was the serpent, still raised into the air, fury in its eyes, and long, jagged lacerations and burns decorating its scaled hide.

Before the Flame Lances could be brought to bear, the massive reptile slid back into the ocean, and the maelstrom ahead began to spin even faster. In only a moment, the dreadnought was seized by the current, and any chance they had to turn around and flee to safety vanished.

"Hold on!" Gaius called out to the rest of Leon's retinue. "We're committed now!"

“So be it!” Marcus responded.

“Nowhere I’d rather be!” Alcander added as both young noblemen held the guardrail and prepared themselves for battle.

Alix didn’t verbally respond, but her eyes kept flitting between the ocean and the griffin high above. Her body radiated killing intent, though, so Gaius knew that she was ready for battle.

The Eagle above—now that they were closer, Gaius could see a little bit of blood amongst its black feathers and, oddly enough, fire and *scales*—screeched, and dove after the serpent. It seemed to completely ignore them, its attention focused entirely upon the sea monster that they were all battling. Behind it flew the demon and the griffin. The demon streamed magic power, while the river nymph riding the griffin seized control of nearby rainwater and formed a ferocious water dragon that she pushed ahead of them.

The Eagle spread its wings and pulled out of its dive about a hundred feet above the water, while the water dragon continued downward and crashed into the ocean surface. Gaius couldn’t see what was going on below, but he could feel some titanic collisions buffeting the dreadnought, and he guessed the water dragon was now wrestling with the serpent.

This didn’t last long before dying down, but the river nymph’s power was inundating the sea by then, and the Eagle had begun to rapidly fly in a tight circle at the edge of the maelstrom, doing something that Gaius guessed had to do with wind magic.

After a few seconds, what the two were doing became clear: a twisting tornado formed at the water’s surface that grabbed hundreds of tons of water every second and lifted it into the air. The river nymph seemed to be assisting, and Gaius could see the serpent caught up in their combined power, struggling to escape as the power of the maelstrom was slowly overcome.

Gaius, realizing what they were doing, quickly turned and began signaling to the control tower to slow down and bring the Flame Lances around. The Legate in command followed those directions, and the dreadnought began to turn slightly so that both of its Lances could be used.

Slowly, the Eagle with its wind magic, and Naiad with her water magic, pulled the serpent out of the sea. The monster roared in wrath as its head was exposed, and huge spears of water were launched from the ocean at those causing it grief.

The Eagle and the griffin nimbly dodged these strikes and kept going, slowly but surely yanking the colossal serpent out of its domain. At the same time, the ship continued to slide closer to the immense serpent, pulled in by the currents of the maelstrom.

“Get ready!” Gaius shouted as he raised and aimed his bow, one of his explosive arrows nocked. The wind was strong, so the range of the bows was drastically lower than usual, but he guessed they could still shoot accurately out to at least five hundred feet. Still, for a creature the size of this serpent, that was practically close enough to reach out and touch it. The other three got ready as well.

As the serpent’s body was slowly lifted out of the sea, the flying demon plunged in and started hurling great fireballs. The demon concentrated on the wounds that the monster had suffered in previous

clashes and seemed to do some good damage as Gaius could see some of the monster's huge scales torn from its frame.

He wasn't too happy that there was a demon on the field, but after seeing this and feeling the power of its attacks, he was at least placated that the demon seemed to be fighting their mutual enemy.

The serpent roared again, this time its hoarse reptilian voice sounding more pained than usual. Massive serpents of water whipped out of the sea, biting, gnashing, and lashing at the demon as it circled, still throwing fireballs. Most of the demon's flaming attacks were thusly blocked, but the demon itself was more than maneuverable enough to avoid being hit by the tentacles. The Eagle and the griffin stayed far enough up that the serpent couldn't easily strike at them with such an attack.

More and more the serpent was ripped from the ocean, and as it took more and more damage from the demon, the serpent finally seemed to abandon all resistance—it suddenly lifted its immense head out of the ocean, throwing it back in an attempt to impale the Eagle upon its horn.

Up until now, Gaius had gotten the impression that the Eagle was more than quick enough to escape this slow attack, but as the horn rose up, speeding toward it and the griffin, the Eagle beat its wings, creating a powerful burst of air that sent Anzu spiraling away from danger—for the first time, Gaius noticed that Anzu had been somehow injured, with one of his white albino wings covered in crimson blood. Unfortunately, this move left the Eagle open, and the serpent's gigantic horn pierced through one of its wings.

The Eagle let out a dreadful shriek, and a moment later, innumerable bolts of golden lightning rained from above down upon the serpent, while the Eagle's body sparked and crackled, and lit up with silver-blue lightning. The power within these bolts shook the sea with every strike, nearly blinded those whose eyes were turned in the serpent's direction, and just about deafened them as well. Each strike tore scales clean from the serpent's hide and ripped and burned its flesh, spilling immeasurable quantities of the serpent's blood into the ocean.

Gaius' eyes went wide at that sight, a hundred theories for why it would have Leon's lightning thundering through his mind, each one crazier than the last. But he barely had time to widen his eyes in shock before the serpent howled in pain, its voice louder even than the Eagle's thunder. The Eagle shrieked again, its wing still caught on the serpent's gigantic horn, and the lightning strikes intensified.

A moment later, something small and bright erupted from the ocean, catching the light just enough that Gaius was able to spot it in all the chaos of the storm and the battle. Gaius only recognized it as Leon's sword after this object had embedded itself into the chin of the serpent, driving in all the way up to the hilt.

The serpent's howls grew worse as its body was fried from within and without by lightning.

Anzu limped through the air a little closer, and Naiad conjured a few more water dragons that descended upon the serpent, biting, scratching, and succeeding in tearing away scale after scale from the monster's previous wounds; all the while, the demon continued circling, bombarding the serpent with its dark red demonfire.

“We’re about to bring these things around!” Gaius heard a marine shout from somewhere behind him, and seconds later, the Flame Lances spiked in magic power and sent their deadly payloads on a crash course for the serpent. At their current range, it was almost point-blank.

One missed completely—the seas were choppy, and these were the first shots, Gaius passed no judgment. The other shot, however, splashed across the serpent, covering one of its more severe wounds in molten stone.

From every direction, the serpent was picked and peeled at, and its responses grew less and less frequent. It started to sink back into the sea, but fresh lightning from the heavens started to pierce its hide and caused its muscles to seize, keeping its head well above water.

The Flame Lances sounded again, this time both shots striking true. One gouged out a huge chunk of flesh from a hole in the serpent’s scaly armor that the demon had widened, while the other struck where Naiad’s water dragons had concentrated their fury. The serpent’s howls of pain died down, but the barrage continued; again and again the serpent was hit from all sides. Chunks of flesh were torn from its body, scales were ripped clean off, and rivers of blood flowed from its wounds into the ocean.

Soon enough, the dreadnought had drawn close enough to the beast that even Gaius and the rest of Leon’s retinue could start peppering it with explosive arrows. By this point, the beast had grown so weak that even these weapons were having an effect, ripping whole sections of flesh free from its scaled form.

And finally, the beast went silent, and fell. Almost at the same time, the ocean became noticeably calmer, with the nearby maelstrom closing up as the serpent’s head crashed into the water.

The Eagle, though, was still impaled upon its horn, and as it hit the water, too, the clouds above suddenly brightened, the winds died down, and the rain stopped. Gaius watched the Eagle, fearful of what its possession of Leon’s lightning could mean. It wasn’t until he saw Naiad leap from Anzu’s back into the sea that he truly understood the gravity of what this meant.

He turned around and began to furiously signal to the command tower to get closer to where the Eagle had been dragged beneath the waves. It seemed this course of action was a little more debatable amongst the dreadnought’s command staff, for it took an agonizingly long time for the ship to turn in that direction.

Even the demon started hovering around that area, and as the serpent’s body drifted down into the depths of the ocean, Gaius couldn’t help but feel just as tense now as he did when the ship had first joined the battle.

They had to retrieve that Eagle. Whatever had happened to Leon, that Eagle was related, Gaius could feel it and knew it to be true. They couldn’t just leave it to the monsters of the deep to rip apart.

Fortunately, Gaius didn’t have to worry about diving beneath the waves, for just as the ship was pulling closer, the water rose and disgorged Naiad and the entire massive Eagle upon the deck of the ship. Naiad looked absolutely beside herself, and Anzu didn’t look much better when he landed upon the deck a moment later, one of his wings hanging limp at his side, bright red with shed blood and mana.

The Eagle was in bad shape, with the wing that had been impaled upon the serpent's horn mangled almost beyond recognition. Still, the enormity and strange features of the Eagle had Gaius staring for longer than he would've cared to admit. It wasn't until Alix ran forward a few steps, her face perfectly expressing her disbelief.

"Is that... Leon?!" she asked.

—

The serpent was dead, that much the Thunderbird could sense. She sighed with weariness, and finally let go of her descendant, letting him rest upon his throne. Leon, though clearly heavily affected by his transformation, had still fought magnificently, and she was proud of him. But the effects of his transformation were not even close to being done.

"What next?!" Nestor shouted in fear, as Leon's soul realm was still in complete turmoil.

"We need to stabilize him!" the Thunderbird shouted, barely missing a beat as she began to draw runes in the air around Leon's mind palace. "His soul realm is still growing far too quickly!"

"Is there anything I can do?" the dead man asked.

"You can be silent!" the Thunderbird sternly replied.

Nestor, without a body, was useless to her right now. She needed someone who could act, and for the first time, she found herself *slightly* missing the demon. She briefly glanced outside of Leon and saw the demon flying away into the clouds as the dreadnought's primitive weapons were turned in his direction, and knew that she would have to help Leon alone.

Her bronze face turned up in a terrible scowl; she was never one for enchantments and the healing arts, but she knew that if she wasn't able to stop Leon's soul realm from expanding as quickly as it was, then he would be left in a similar comatose state to that of the King of the land he'd been living in, let alone being able to transform back into his human form again.

Rune after rune she carved into the air, letting them all spiral around Leon's Mind Palace in a manner that she knew Nestor was probably analyzing, but she hadn't the luxury of time. Already, Leon's soul realm had flown past ninth-tier and was pushing against the boundaries of the tenth, with the Mists of Chaos more than nine thousand miles away. That Leon's soul realm was still intact at this point was most likely a testament to the enchantment that had brought about this change more than anything.

She'd thought she recognized some aspects of that enchantment when Leon had found it and had guessed that it was probably fine for him to use, but she'd been unable to quiet her doubts and so had sought a second opinion.

The Great Black Dragon had been her choice of consultants. However, that stubborn bastard had barely even acknowledged her presence until Leon activated the enchantment. Only once his blood that Leon had inherited began to truly awaken did he start to intervene and tell her what she wanted to know of the enchantment.

It would awaken Leon's blood, and stimulate it until he transformed into something akin to the two of them, but the enchantment had been designed for someone else, and so would have terrible effects upon Leon. Those effects were what the Thunderbird now tried to counter.

"If you're doing what I think you are, that's not going to be enough!" Nestor called out as the wind within Leon's soul realm grew more intense.

"It's all that can be done!" the Thunderbird shouted back. "I have to make up for the shortcomings of that enchantment array!"

"Then aim for his blood!" Nestor responded. "You're trying to stabilize his soul realm while the cause of its destabilization still ravages him!"

The Thunderbird felt like screaming in frustration. Leon's soul realm was already so damaged by this horrific growth that she felt some of the damage might be irreversible. To stop her attempts at stabilizing him felt like it would do far more harm than good. But she knew that Nestor was right, and that her attention had to be Leon's blood. His body had to be stabilized before his soul realm.

Still, it wasn't easy turning her—

Suddenly, Leon's soul realm was lit up with red-orange light, and its growth was almost completely arrested. It still grew, but with this, the Thunderbird had been given an immense amount of valuable time to work.

She cast a quick look out to where she knew the Great Black Dragon to be watching, a look filled with many different emotions. Gratitude was the strongest, but there was also plenty of pride, pity, and smugness there, too. Try as he might to deny Leon's existence, blood was blood.

She turned away from writing runes in the air and began writing them close to Leon's magic body, where they flashed and sank into his 'flesh'. It was a long process, one exacerbated by her relative lack of knowledge regarding the matter of bloodline awakening and transformations, but eventually, things began to quiet down within Leon's soul realm, and the Great Black Dragon's power stopped its growth entirely.

And then Leon's soul realm began to contract—with Leon's stimulated blood now calmed, the force pushing his soul realm out had greatly lessened.

The Thunderbird turned back around and did her best to keep his soul realm from collapsing entirely. She placed great runes and enchantments around his Mind Palace, and eventually, Leon's soul realm began to stabilize enough that it was no longer in danger.

Only then did the Thunderbird breathe a sigh of relief. The red-orange light filling Leon's soul realm died down, and she took a seat upon the steps of the throne platform.

"What was *that*?!" Nestor demanded, his voice sounding quite panicked. "Was that the mysterious second Ancestor I've been hearing about?! What was it?! Why did it choose *now* to intervene?!"

"Quiet!" the Thunderbird snapped, and she glanced over her shoulder at Leon's magic body, still silently slumped over on the throne of his soul realm.

Leon was alive, and he wasn't in danger of death anymore, but the consequences of what had happened over the past few hours couldn't yet be measured. She had to wait for Leon to wake to know if his mind had survived this or not.

## **Chapter 602: Comfort in a Dream**

The wind was in his feathers, his talons were raking across the hide of his serpentine enemy, and the clouds above bent themselves to his whim, all the energy they contained his to do with as he pleased. The power of the Heavens was at his command, requiring nothing more than a mere wisp of intent to manipulate.

*This* was joy to him. He'd rarely ever felt anything like it; only those times when he was with his mates would his joy surpass this. It was absolute freedom—freedom from the earth, and freedom from earthly expectations.

And yet, there was fury there, too. Murderous rage so intense that it drove his joy deep into his mind until he could barely feel it. And then pain, sharp and bitter cold as it bore deep into his shoulder—

Leon bolted upright, his eyes opening in panic as his left arm went to his right shoulder, where he'd just felt that pain, a groan on his lips.

But he didn't feel anything but his own shoulder when he grasped himself, and sure enough, when he turned his head, Leon saw naught but his shoulder, perfectly fine, clad in a dark green silkgrass tunic.

Leon sighed in relief as the pain of his dream faded, but then he took in his surroundings, and all the emotions of the dream faded as the mists of confusion rushed in to replace them.

He lay in a small grassy clearing, with the familiar white and dark brown trees of the Forest of Black and White surrounding him. At the edges of the clearing were the spectacularly multicolored bushes and flowers of his childhood home, bringing him both panic and comfort.

Something was obviously going on here. He felt more clear-minded than he had since arriving at the Serpentine Isles, clear-minded enough to immediately recognize that this was some kind of dream—it had to be, there was no way he'd just somehow been teleported to the Forest of Black and White. The clothes he was wearing—the same as he generally wore when he was a kid growing up here with his father—were also a clear sign that this wasn't really happening.

So, Leon banished the growing panic as best he could and laid back down in the soft green grass. It had been a long day filled with violence, power, and things forcing their way into his mind. But he felt like it was over—at least, for now, and he needed to get some rest. Maia and the rest were still out there somewhere, but when he closed his eyes, he could feel Maia's presence close by, and he felt like things were all right. He could rest here for a little while longer.

He closed his eyes and moved only to breathe. He lightly smiled as the familiar scents and noises of the Forest of Black and White filled his senses. This was only a dream, so he could enjoy these things at his leisure without worrying about ice wraiths or banshees.

After a while, though, his restful state became marginally less so. His mind had inevitably wandered, and while he greatly enjoyed this moment of rest, he'd begun thinking about his and his father's compound, and he couldn't get it out of his head.

Without moving, Leon quickly projected his magic senses, and was quite startled to find that he was only about half a mile away from his old home. It was still utterly ruined, but he figured that while he was here, even if it was only in a dream, he ought to go and pay his respects to his father, especially after these past few weeks where Artorias' image had been invoked against him not once but twice.

Leon took a deep, steadying breath, and pushed himself to his feet. He had a feeling that he wasn't going to experience quiet like this for a while, so he took his time and savored every step he took on his way home. The wind in his hair, the sun on his face, and the sounds of distant forest animals going about their day, all of the old ambiance of his home he absorbed until he finally drew within direct sight of his old home, and he froze in sudden alarm.

With his magic senses, he'd clearly seen that his old home had been in the state he'd last seen it: completely broken, with all of the shacks burned to the ground, the walls destroyed, and much of the ruins trashed by the ice wraiths and reclaimed by nature.

However, his eyes told him a different story: the walls were pristine, just as they'd always been in his childhood. He couldn't see within, but everything that he could physically see was telling him that the compound was intact. And he could hear the sounds of activity within.

Leon began giving the walls an apprehensive look. He wanted to know what was going on inside that he couldn't see, but also very much did *not*. The side of him that did, won in that internal debate though, and he slowly, hesitantly began to walk toward the underground passage that would lead inside the walls. With his power, leaping over the walls would've been child's play, but going in the proper way was only polite.

And he needed the extra time to walk around the walls to work up his nerve.

The pit to the short underground passage was just as he remembered: blocked by a fully intact wooden door. Unlike most of the rest of the compound, however, as he approached it, his magic senses seemed to reconcile what he was seeing with what they perceived, and he was able to sense the faint wisps of magic within the door that told him its defenses were still up.

That was hardly an obstacle to him, though; he knew exactly what those defenses were and how to safely get past them. He picked up the pace a bit and proceeded through the door and into the tunnel.

From up ahead, the sounds of activity were growing louder, and he recognized what he was hearing to be the sounds of training, and the occasional barked instruction. He couldn't quite make out what was being said, but his heart skipped a beat as he recognized the tenor and tone of the commanding voice.

He walked down the passage almost in a daze, knowing exactly what he would find when he ascended the stairs on the other side. When he did, he was not surprised.

He found Artorias training in the central square of the compound with a younger version of Leon, dodging, striking, teaching the younger Leon how to wield a blade. Every sword swing Leon recognized; he'd performed them himself enough times to pick out every little detail of his family's aggressive fighting style, even though Artorias was taking a more passive role in his instruction than the style usually demanded.



Leon wasn't sure how long he watched the two fight. He wasn't even sure if they noticed he'd arrived, or if they even *could* notice him. They could just be projections, a memory his brain had recalled of a specific training session that he wasn't able to consciously remember—his younger self appeared to be about eleven or twelve, so it had been almost a decade since this would've had to have taken place.

Eventually, the training session ended, and the younger Leon collapsed in front of the obelisk in the center of the compound, drenched in sweat and already starting to bruise where Artorias had made his lessons known a little more viscerally than words were capable. Leon's eyes remained locked on his father as Artorias smiled at the younger Leon and whispered a few words to him that Leon wasn't able to pick up.

And then Artorias turned around and locked eyes with Leon himself, standing at the top of the stairs.

"Waiting for an invitation, little lion?" Artorias asked with a wry smile, catching Leon entirely off-guard.

Leon stood there, his mouth hanging slightly open, his golden eyes wide and darting around in embarrassment, utterly at a loss as to what to do. This could just be a trick for all he knew; he called upon his lightning, just in case, and his body briefly sparked and crackled with silver-blue lightning—but what he was seeing didn't change.

"You've certainly grown stronger," Artorias said appreciatively, his smile becoming one of immense pride. "Come on in, kid. Let's talk a while. It's been a hot minute since we last saw each other."

Artorias began walking toward the far end of the pavilion, and Leon noticed that his younger self had vanished without him even noticing. And then he realized that his magic senses had reconciled the interior of the compound, too, showing him the same things that his eyes were, and Leon momentarily bathed in the nostalgic high of returning to his childhood home, a place that he'd never thought he'd ever see again. This could all be a dream, or some kind of trick, but for the moment, Leon decided to set aside those thoughts. All of his senses were telling him that this was real, and his magic hadn't caused anything to change.

Quickly, Leon followed Artorias to where a stag had already been skinned and prepared on the enchanted cooking counters that Artorias had built when they'd first moved here, so long ago that Leon couldn't clearly remember it. The smell was delicious; there were Greenhand potatoes and other produce from Vale Town in whatever he was making, and Leon's mouth began to water, just as his eyes were starting to do likewise.

Leon hurriedly wiped his eyes before Artorias could turn around.

"So, how have things been going, little lion?" Artorias asked as Leon approached from behind.

"Uh, it's... um..." Leon stumbled over his words, "... fine, I guess. Actually, no, they've been terrible..."

Leon began telling Artorias of the campaign on the Serpentine Isles, giving him nothing more than the briefest of rundowns to not be too long-winded, but as he spoke, Artorias began asking questions, and Leon began to get into the story a little more, and the words just poured out of him. When he was finished with the Serpentine campaign, he even told his father of the other things he'd done since leaving the forest more than four years ago. By the time Leon had finished his story, he felt like he'd

largely covered everything that had happened—or at least, the broad strokes—and that hours had passed. Both of them had finished eating by then, and Leon was feeling much more at ease and relaxed.

If this were a trick, he hoped it wouldn't end anytime soon.

Artorias sat and listened as Leon spoke, only asking for clarification a few times, and when Leon was finished, he sat back and sighed in what to Leon sounded like amazement.

"That... was quite the story, little lion," Artorias said.

"It's been... a rough few years," Leon admitted as he leaned back until he was flat on his back on the floor of the stone pavilion, looking up at the slowly darkening sky of his childhood home.

"Sounds like it," Artorias responded. "Maybe some good parts, though? This girl 'Elise', and 'Naiad'?"

Leon felt his cheeks heating up, but he kept himself as calm as he could when explained who they were to him.

"... They are the women I love," he said in conclusion. "It kills me to be away; if they would ask me for the world, I would do everything I could to give it to them."

"A bold declaration," Artorias said. "Sounds a lot like how I feel about your mother."

Leon felt the color in his cheeks swiftly drain and he started to sit up in panic. "Dad... about Valeria and her father—"

"Nope!" Artorias interrupted as he shot Leon a quick smile. "Don't even worry about that, little lion. As far as I'm concerned, you did the right thing. Justin has been harshly punished, all of his people are dead, and you chose the future over the past. It sounds like it took you a while, but you steered yourself true."

Leon laid back on the ground, his breath rate quick and shallow, but he took his father's words to heart, even if he had a couple doubts about the choices he'd made regarding Valeria and her family.

"Little lion," Artorias said, apparently noticing Leon's mental state from his expressions alone, "I'm proud of you. I don't think I would've made the same choice you did if I ever found this 'Kamran', or if I ever saw Ryker or Fain again after how they took Serana from us. I don't think I'd be strong enough to do so..."

"Would anyone blame you if you did indulge that desire?" Leon wondered aloud. "I certainly wouldn't."

Artorias went quiet for a moment, a contemplative look in his eye. "No," he said, "I suppose most would probably understand. Many would even applaud it, I think. That doesn't make it right, though. If they fought tooth and nail to keep us separated, it may be a different story, but the way you found Justin Isynos... It's better that you spared him. You'll live with less regrets this way, and you'll make less enemies. And more friends."

It was Leon's turn to go silent for a long moment. "I'll never forgive him," he stated when he found his tongue.

“Nor would I ever ask you to,” Artorias said with a cheeky grin. “He ordered me killed, I would hate it if you forgave him so easily. But sparing him and forgiving aren’t the same thing. Always remember what he did and keep an eye on him going forward.”

Leon nodded.

“Other than that, little lion, what are your plans next?”

Leon went silent again, unsure how to respond. He wasn’t sure how to proceed, whether in the long run or the short. He knew what he wanted, *eventually*, but not how to get there. Heaven’s Eye would be his ticket to the Central Empires, and from there he could use them as a springboard to achieve Apotheosis and enter the Nexus, then from there rebuild his Clan and find his mother, but the exact specifics of even just that much he had no idea.

“I... don’t know,” Leon eventually admitted. “I’ve... never really known what to do...”

“You seem to have done a good job so far,” Artorias replied a little playfully, but that playful demeanor vanished when he glanced at Leon and saw his son’s utterly lost expression.

“I can’t really say that anything I’ve done reflects well upon me,” Leon evenly stated, doing his best to control his expression and emotions to stop himself from just letting loose with all of his pent-up frustrations and grief. “Most of the problems I’ve gotten into have been resolved in spite of me, not because of anything I’ve done. I can’t really claim credit for anything, it’s all due to our bloodline...”

“Stop!” Artorias commanded, his tone turning stern. “Stop right there! Don’t go down that road, there’s nothing at the end of it, I assure you.”

Leon, with the calm of a man who was resigned to his situation, responded, “It’s true, though. I have no idea what I’m doing. I’ve never known what to do. I can only make one decision at a time, and anything beyond that... I just... Ever since...”

Leon’s voice began to crack as his calm demeanor crumbled. His eyes watered, and it took all he had in him to keep those tears from falling.

“I love you, Dad,” he croaked. “Ever since you... I’ve felt alone and lost. I don’t know what to do...”

Artorias scooted a little closer and wrapped an arm around Leon’s shoulders.

“It’s all right, Leon,” he whispered soothingly into Leon’s ear. “No one who has the choice presented to them knows what to do at your age. You’re almost twenty-one, still barely a kid in the eyes of the powers-that-be. It’s all right to take a decade or two and figure out how to proceed. Being lost now is nothing to be ashamed of. I’ve never known what to do, either. When my father kicked me out for marrying your mother, I only had the vaguest idea of heading south to serve King Julius. After Serana was taken, I lost even that. We went north to the Vales because I had no other ideas of what to do. ‘Seclude ourselves beyond the reach of civilization’, that was my grand master plan for keeping us alive. Anywhere else, you could’ve been found. But even beyond that, I had no plans for what to do once you’d grown older, just some vague desires. I was not a man who knew what the hells he was doing—when you were born, I was only about your age, you know?”

Artorias paused, and he pulled Leon closer. He then gently turned Leon's head in his direction until Leon's golden eyes locked with his dark brown. And then, with all the love and sincerity that he could express, Artorias continued.

"Focus on what you can do. Take some time and learn. You have good people around you, let them help you. And don't be afraid to ask them for help. You don't need to be a hundred steps ahead of our enemies, and you certainly don't have to have your life planned out in exhaustive detail. Surround yourself with good people, and focus on what you can actually do.

"And always remember this: you are my son. You are the last son of House Raime. You are the son of Serana. You have everything you need to live up those names, and you will, I have no doubt of that. But even if you don't think you will, or you have doubts of your own skill, it won't change the fact that you're still my son, and I will always love you. You have absolutely nothing to prove to me, or to anyone else. I don't expect anything else from you other than for you to be happy. So long as you pursue that which makes you happy, then you're living a far better life than I could've ever hoped for you. OK?"

Leon swallowed, and finally looked away from his father, his eyes turning back to the sky where they began to pick out familiar stars. It wasn't long, though, before his eyes found the brightest star in the sky, the one in the exact center of the sky, unmoving, always there, the locus upon which the rest of the universe turned.

The Nexus.

He'd go there eventually, but it might take a great deal of time. In that case, there wasn't any reason he couldn't do as Artorias suggested. He would pursue that which made him happy, and he would surround himself with people he loved, and who could love him in return. He'd made a good start with Elise, Maia, and his small retinue, but this wouldn't be enough. He'd need more.

How many more, he couldn't say, and more importantly, he *wouldn't* say. He'd take them as they came, and if they left, then so be it, but it wouldn't be because he drove them away. When he did go to the Nexus, he wouldn't be going alone; he wanted his family and a great many friends to be there with him.

"Thanks, Dad," Leon whispered. "I... I think I have a better idea of what to do, now..."

Artorias simply smiled, and held his son a little tighter against him.

"Just be happy, kid. No one's forcing you to do anything. Live a good and happy life, and no matter what, remember that I will always love you."

Leon and Artorias laid there on the bare stone of the pavilion for a long while more. How long, Leon couldn't say, for his eyes soon began to grow heavy, and he fell asleep. But he was ready for whatever would come next.

Whether or not this was just a dream didn't matter; but he was ready to wake up.

—

Deep in Leon's ravaged soul realm, still bathed in the red-orange light of the Great Black Dragon, still surrounded by the storm clouds of the Thunderbird as these two magnificent beings joined their power together to help Leon's soul realm recover, was a long-forgotten corner of his vault.

This tiny point of his soul realm, no larger than perhaps an average walk-in closet, had completely frozen over, with frost covering every inch of the surrounding stone. However, long before the Thunderbird and Great Black Dragon finished their work, this ice began to melt as the power that created it receded, until only a small stone box remained frozen.

And after a time, even that box defrosted, as the power that had frozen it retreated into the cold, black Heartwood seed within.

### **Chapter 603: Wild Pride**

Leon woke from his dream slowly. He was calm; he may not have spoken to Artorias himself, but even exchanging words with his father in a dream had soothed his soul more than he ever would've thought. He momentarily thought about Jormun and panicked, thinking the pirate was still out there somewhere, but before he could even sit up off the cool stone he was laying on, he remembered everything that happened during the battle.

It was a lot to take in; he wasn't exactly conscious during that battle, but he wasn't unconscious, either. Rather, it was more like he couldn't remember himself while he was in that state and was operating almost entirely upon animalistic instinct.

But he remembered killing the Great Horned Serpent that Jormun had transformed into, so he relaxed and decided to take just a few more minutes to relax his mind before he opened his eyes. There would be much to do when he did; he remembered his sword falling into the sea, and he'd have to figure out a way to retrieve it. There was also the issue of the state of the fleet, and that of his retinue.

Most of all, he thought of Maia and Elise. The faces of his two lovers flashing through his mind, and that of Valeria, was what finally prompted him to open his eyes.

The entirety of his vision was a deep grey, and he reeled in confusion for a moment, until his mind kicked into gear and he realized he was staring up at the sky of his soul realm. All of that grey was the Mists of Chaos, thick and billowing at the edges of his soul realm...

... Which he swiftly realized was *much* farther away than it was the last time he was consciously aware of himself within his soul realm. Back then—hopefully only a matter of hours ago, but he couldn't begin to estimate how long he'd been out—his soul realm had been about twenty miles in radius. Now, it was more like two *hundred*.

That made him an eighth-tier mage by a wide margin.

He lay there, stunned at what he could sense. He could store so much more power within himself, and it meant he'd likely live at least up to half a millennium if he chose to stop ascending in magical tier.

Having that much more power was... difficult for him to immediately wrap his head around.

Unfortunately for him, it didn't seem he was going to get time enough to do that, as after a minute or two of him staring up at the sky of his soul realm, a figure entered his vision, standing imperiously over him, his red-orange eyes blazing in his skull like hot coals.

This was his soul realm, so that made this man an invader; Leon, the memory of Nestor's invasion, and that of the Primal God, fresh in his mind, sprang to his feet and instinctively summoned his power.

Only when he heard the familiar authoritative tones of the Thunderbird in her human form shout, "Wait, Leon!" did he take a moment and look around. Even then, lightning still danced across his body; he wasn't going to relax entirely with an unknown figure in his soul realm just yet, even with the Thunderbird shouting for him to stop.

Leon took a few steps back. He'd been lying down on his throne platform in the center of his Mind Palace. The figure now stood between him and his simple black throne. Between him and waking up in his physical body.

And it didn't look like he'd be able to get past this man easily, either. The unfamiliar man stood at least seven feet tall, if not more, easily head-and-shoulders above Leon. His figure was so heavily muscled that Leon estimated he would've been probably double Leon's weight at least if they'd been in the physical world, with arms filled with corded muscle, chest and core rippling with strength, and legs like ancient tree trunks.

Most of that muscle was put on display, for the man wore tight leather shorts that barely reached mid-thigh, over which hung a long loincloth of brown animal hide trimmed in white fur that almost reached his calves. His feet were clad in thin leather sandals that covered less than they didn't, though they wrapped quite tightly around his ankles. Covering some of his torso was a sleeveless vest that looked like two strips of bear fur sewn together, open at the sides so that it covered only his front and back, while his midsection beneath was wrapped in what looked like cloth strips.

The man looked almost like a stereotypical barbarian, and the rest of his appearance matched; long, thick, black hair, wild and tangled, only lightly tamed by tying into a perilously loose braid which reached his lower back. Thick black eyebrows that greatly enhanced the severity of his threatening gaze. He had a wide jaw and long chin, though both were devoid of hair and slightly angled, skewing his looks more pretty than rugged. His nose was long and proud, while his fairly thick lips were curled into a deep scowl of judgment as he coldly regarded Leon's threatening posture.

All of these details faded into the background as Leon took in more about him, though. The man was dark-skinned, with skin darker even than the Thunderbird's bronze hue, which made the more inhuman aspects of his appearance take a moment for Leon to notice—in long vertical strips along his bare arms and legs and surrounding his eyes so completely that they stretched all the way into his temples, were glittering scales darker even than Xaphan's obsidian skin. Most of all, though, were his red-orange eyes, glowing brightly enough that they almost seemed like magical lanterns unto themselves.

"What is this?" Leon demanded, though he already had enough of an idea who this was after taking in his appearance that his tone wasn't nearly as commanding as he tried to make it. In fact, his hands began to shake, though from both fear and anger.

The man answered, speaking in a rumbling voice that seemed enough on its own to put Leon's soul realm in danger of shaking apart, while his unblinking eyes stared at Leon with blatant hostility, "You know who I am, bastard. You cannot mistake me for anything but what I am: the greatest of all beings birthed from the universe; the mightiest of all those that live in the light of the sun and even those who do not; I am the Great Calamity; the Living Night; the Black-Winged Terror. I am the eldest of my brothers, the First and Highest of all Divine Beasts. I am the progenitor of my Clan, the most feared in all

the universe, whose wrath shakes the Nexus, and whose power outmatches all who dare to oppose them.

“I am the Great Black Dragon.”

The man spoke with immense pride, though he didn’t emote that much. His overt hostility softened slightly by the end of his overlong introduction, and Leon could see that he was one who greatly valued his titles and honors.

But he found it kind of ridiculous, and the only thing that kept him from bursting out into laughter at the pomposity of it all was the man’s radiant aura—to Leon’s magic senses, it was like the sun itself had found its way into his soul realm and now stood in front of him, listing off its various accolades.

Still, some of his attitude showed, and the man’s hostility returned, but Leon’s fear was gone by then. The Great Black Dragon was one of the most powerful beings in existence, but that introduction, and the way the dragon himself now stood in Leon’s Mind Palace like he owned the place, really irritated Leon like few things ever had.

This place was *his*, it was not the property of this old dragon. But Leon did his best to hold himself in check. He didn’t immediately set himself off on his new guest, such a thing would be terribly rude, and he figured such behavior would play right into the dragon’s hands.

But it was damned difficult to hold back, and only grew harder the longer this man stood in unwelcome territory.

Before he responded, he cast a brief look at the Thunderbird, standing nearby, an unfamiliar look of mild apprehension on her face. As they made eye-contact, though, he saw her subtly smile and nod, then take a quick step back.

And like that, Leon understood what was going on.

He turned back to the Great Black Dragon, still towering over him, aura still resplendent, body still coiled and primed for violence in what now seemed to Leon less like the act of a powerful man who was in control and had the resulting confidence, and more like a salamander posturing before an anaconda, trying to make itself seem bigger and more threatening than it was.

*‘This is some kind of test,’* Leon thought to himself, and his anger grew, banishing the last of his instinctual fear.

He straightened himself up to his full height, let his aura spill out of his body unhindered, and locked his golden eyes upon those of the Great Black Dragon.

“I am Leon Raime, and you stand in my Mind Palace,” he said, and he said no more. This was enough. He had no need for titles and to precede himself with flowery words. He’d gone for years without his true name, and now, no matter what might come in the future, no matter how far he might get, his name would always be more than sufficient for him.

He didn’t back down as the Great Black Dragon stepped closer, enflaming Leon’s anger. He’d never given this man permission to enter his domain, yet here he still was. This was Leon’s place, his home, his lair, the center of all of his power, and here, he would not be cowed by anyone. He stood firm against the

dragon, somehow ignoring completely all the weight of the dragon's aura settling in around his shoulders.

After a long, tense moment, the Great Black Dragon stepped back with a contemptuous look. "Youth," he growled, "always impetuous. And none more so than those born outside the proper rites."

"Rites or no," the Thunderbird countered, "blood is blood, and power is power. This boy is your descendant, by blood and right!"

The Great Black Dragon turned to coldly regard the Thunderbird, before his gaze momentarily softened. "Such naivety was always your—"

"Shut the fuck up!" Leon roared, his anger starting to boil over, and his soul realm went silent, save for a solitary gasp of fear and surprise from Nestor's ruby. He wasn't supposed to speak like this to such powerful and ancient beings, he knew that, but ancestor or no, Leon wasn't going to just allow the Great Black Dragon in here to talk shit to him and then leave like an absentee parent. "You are *unwelcome* here," he growled to the dragon, his voice dropping in pitch until it almost matched that of the dragon's. "I don't care for your power, I don't care if you aided me recently, I don't care for you as a person. *Begone.*"

Leon's eyes darkened for just a moment, flashing a dull orange, and his soul realm shook in response.

The dragon, however, as well as the Thunderbird, barely even responded, aside from turning in his direction. When Leon's soul realm stopped shaking, the dragon smiled derisively, and said, "The bastard whelp thinks himself a true dragon."

"Are not all descendants of yours true dragons?" the Thunderbird retorted.

"All those *trueborn*," the dragon replied.

Leon's eyes flashed again, though he cared not at all for the dragon's words. Rather, he could feel his heart beating ever harder as some new instinct tore through his mind. He had an intruder in his territory. No matter how strong, this could not be accepted.

This instinct grew stronger, and it took Leon to the point of taking a threatening step in the dragon's direction before he forced himself to calm down. Instead, he focused inward. He was supposed to have powers over his soul realm that made his Lordship over this space more than a mere claim, and this interloper had put him into the mood to test them out.

Perhaps it was that newfound will to kick the dragon out, or maybe it was his new power, but after several seconds of trying to force the Great Black Dragon out of his soul realm through sheer willpower, the dragon was suddenly cut off in his dismissive remarks as a plume of the Mists of Chaos appeared around him, surrounding him, and beginning to obscure him from view.

But with a flash of red-orange light from his eyes, the mist vanished, and he turned back toward Leon, his gaze a little softer than it was before. He strode over to Leon, got right into his face, but didn't lay a finger upon him.

"Listen here, bastard," the dragon rumbled, "I have done much for you these past couple days. But as far as I'm concerned, you are unworthy of bearing my power. You are nothing, just a lowborn half-breed



without meaningful name, title, or power. You lack even a hoard. The benefits you receive of my actions are incidental, I did what I did for *me*, not for you. So I will leave you with a warning: *never* push against me again, *never* seek for my power within your blood. You will never wield my power and will never wield my name. Nothing has changed here.”

Leon stood against the dragon, still not giving an inch against him. He felt extremely territorial right now, and he began to feel like the salamander posturing against the anaconda, now. Or maybe an eagle before a dragon.

Still, he flared back at the Great Black Dragon, and said, “I want nothing to do with you. You are a blight upon my lineage, and an eyesore upon my soul realm. You’ve spent the last twenty years silent in my soul realm—perhaps you would be so kind as to spend the next twenty in a similar state? Or, if it’s not too much for a *bastard* to ask, even longer than that?”

The two had drawn so closely together, that their foreheads were practically pressing against each other, though Leon was still forced to look up, and the dragon down, due to their stark height difference.

The tension between them was thick; neither were going to back down. It was only when the Thunderbird began to thunderously roar with laughter that the tension was cranked down a notch.

“You... two...” she said in between almost theatrically overdone guffaws, “are *ridiculous*! You’re acting like children with more pride than sense! This is why you lost to me, you know!”

The Great Black Dragon’s eyes flashed with light again, and he responded, “I am, and shall always remain, *undefeated*!”

“Repeating it won’t make it true, no matter how much emphasis you place upon it!” the Thunderbird retorted. “And you seem a mite dead for an undefeated being!”

Leon rolled his eyes, and pushed past the Great Black Dragon, not bothering to be careful. He thought he got his intent across, but he almost stumbled and ruined the whole thing, for the dragon was as steady as a mountain, and Leon wasn’t in the best state. But he made it past with his dignity mostly intact, until he stood between the dragon and his throne.

The dragon spared him a contemptuous look and said, “I’ve wasted enough time with you two.” To the Thunderbird, he said, “You did not win that time, and you will not impugn my honor by saying that you did!” To Leon, he said, “And you, mongrel! I don’t care what you get up to, but you are not and never will be one of mine!”

With that, the dragon’s form burst into black flame, and rose up into the air, where it grew and grew, only to suddenly dissipate into nothingness.

After several long seconds of staring up into the sky, Leon, confused, asked, “Is that it? He’s just gone?”

“He’s just gone,” the Thunderbird said with a smile of triumph on her face. “Honestly, that went about as well as I could’ve ever hoped for.”

Leon took a few deep breaths, biting back all the caustic and completely unproductive insults he was more than prepared to shout after that dragon.

"That didn't go well at all," Leon murmured as he glared up at the sky, his strange territorial instinct only now dying down. "What the hells was that all about? And was that *really* the Great Black Dragon? He seemed..."

"Petulant? Childish? Close-minded?" the Thunderbird helpfully offered.

"All of the above," Leon replied.

"That's about right," she said. "He was never the most patient of his brothers, or the smartest, or the more charismatic. But he's undoubtedly the most dangerous. Of course, you can't really expect such beings, who were around before humanity, to act in line with how you might expect, can you? He's not human himself, so acting as a human Lord might is hardly the most reasonable thing to expect of him."

Leon shrugged, silently conceding the point to the Ancestor that he held more respect for.

"Despite everything that he just told you, that you lived long enough to be so disrespectful to him is a testament to how he really thinks."

"I don't care how he really thinks," Leon bitterly growled, the territorial instinct dying down, but still very much wracking his mind with indignant anger. "If *that's* the Great Black Dragon, then he can keep his worthless power! I'd rather have nothing at all to do with him!"

"I think the ship for that has sailed," the Thunderbird said as she walked over and wrapped an arm around Leon, giving him an oddly proud look that was so plain that Leon's anger almost entirely dissipated in a matter of seconds.

"Why are you... Why do you say that?" he asked.

"Feeling a little strange?" she asked. "A little defensive? A little angry?"

Leon scrunched up his face in a terrible scowl and glanced into the distance, not looking at anything in particular. But he slowly nodded; he *did* feel those things, though he hadn't had any time at all to figure out why.

"I think that what happened to you after activating that enchantment array might've jostled those restrictions that he placed on you, the ones preventing you from using the power you inherited from him. Going along with the transformation, I think you might've awakened to more than just my instincts, but also some of his."

Leon's scowl deepened slightly. "Is this something I'm going to have to get used to?" he worriedly asked. He knew his flaws—he wasn't the most patient, or the most thoughtful person, and if these draconic instincts were going to push him more towards the behavior of the Great Black Dragon, then he was not going to be happy.

"I don't think so," the Thunderbird said. "I don't think those restrictions are going to be repaired—you're much too old for that, and blood can't be made to 'go to sleep', so to speak. When blood is awakened, it's awake forever. However, I think that after a few days, your body will stabilize with all of its new changes, and you should start feeling a little more normal by then."

"Speaking of..." Leon muttered. "I noticed my soul realm has grown a little."

“Just a bit,” the Thunderbird said with a playful smile. She was in an exceptionally good mood, which Leon guessed might’ve had to do with how the Great Black Dragon was received and sent off. “The transformation was... strangely designed, though I can hardly argue with its results. It stimulated your blood to the point of forcibly transforming you into an image of me. Well, a hybrid image of me and that old grump, but your body was still transformed.”

Leon’s scowl finally dropped, only to be replaced with a look of deep worry. “What...”

“Don’t worry about that, I don’t think it’s a permanent change. If anything, I think that that enchantment can be adapted to allow you to transform as you please!”

Leon glanced at his Ancestor, his worried look morphing into one of surprise, and as he saw that the Thunderbird didn’t seem to be saying this just to mess with him, an expression of excitement began to creep over his face.

“It’ll take some work, but I can say with quite a bit of confidence that this has been nothing but beneficial for you!”

“Can it turn me back immediately?” Leon asked. “I don’t know what’s going on outside, though...” He couldn’t sense much out there, but now that he had some time to stop and think, he could feel his connection with Maia again. He almost reached out to speak with her, but he refrained until he could get a better idea of what was going on within his head, first.

“You’re still in that form, but it should be quite easy for you to turn back,” the Thunderbird said. “Come with

## **Chapter 604: Waking Up**

He rarely dreamed anymore. For him, sleep was a delightful void of thought and a much-needed relief from boredom.

When he did sleep, it was often for long periods of time—tens or hundreds of years would pass before he would wake. And it was always one of the most entertaining parts of his existence, waking up. Oftentimes, it was like stepping into a completely new world. The Empires around his sea would rarely change, but there would usually be great happenings going on in other parts of his realm.

Plus, there was a boy he’d been keeping an eye on, and he was looking forward to finding out how he turned out—if he met a heroic end, if he upset the status quo, anything at all, really.

Unfortunately, he barely felt like he’d laid down before he found himself being shaken awake in his bedchamber, a gorgeous room richly appointed almost entirely in blue. The walls were painted a dark blue, the carpets were a slightly lighter shade of blue, and his bedsheets were blue. The ceiling, thirty feet above him, had been enchanted to resemble the sky at dawn, with a few hints of red and pink at the edges, while the rest was a deep, calming hue of dark blue.

However, all that he saw when his eyes cracked open as he was forcefully dragged back into the waking world was the worried face of his apprentice, still looking like he was barely out of his schooling days despite being almost a full Nexus cycle old. His apprentice’s lips were moving, but he’d been sleeping *very* deeply, and even his mind worked rather sluggishly when he was forced back like this instead of being allowed to wake naturally.

“Hmm...” he groaned as he blinked several times, his eyes opening wider every time. “What’s going on...?” he croaked groggily.

“Master!” his apprentice called out, his anxious voice on the verge of panic. “Master!”

The Grave Warden shook his head clear of sleep, letting his powers fill his body and properly wake himself up.

“What is it?” he asked as he sat up in bed, blinking the sleep out of his eyes.

“One of the crystals is dimming! One of the Primal Gods is attempting to escape!”

The Grave Warden stared at his apprentice for a second, his sleep-addled mind working slower than usual. However, when what his apprentice had just said fully hit him, less than a second later he’d teleported the both of them down to the crystal chamber, and fully dressed himself. The chamber echoed with shrill alarms, and from what he could tell, had been doing so for days—he mentally cringed, wondering just how long it had taken his apprentice to wake him up. Days? Longer?

It wasn’t a large chamber down below the tower, deep within the core of Aeterna, but it was the safest and most heavily warded place on the entire plane. It would take many Primal Beings working in concert to breach the defenses here. And yet, it seemed a simple place—largely empty, almost appearing to be a natural cave save for a wall covered in fist-sized crystals that glowed white, arranged in a grid. However, for those that could sense it, they’d realize that a terrifying amount of magic power was flowing through this room, more than even a tenth-tier mage could control. It would take a post-Apotheosis mage to fully comprehend and control the ocean of magic power that flowed through this chamber, and even then, few would be capable of fully controlling the nearly-endless enchantments that wound their way from here throughout all of Aeterna.

For the Grave Warden, however, controlling the magic flowing through this chamber, even without a single control console in sight, was as easy as breathing.

His eyes and other senses immediately ascertained that there weren’t any faults with the supply of magic to any of the wards and that those same wards were all functioning perfectly well—rather, something was subverting them instead of undoing them completely, working around them and triggering various failsafes and contingencies to achieve a desired result. It wasn’t much of a difference in practice, but he supposed that was why nothing had tripped his alarms earlier. If he’d paid more attention before this, though, then things might not have gone so far.

Regardless of how exactly things were happening, the result was the same; something that could not be killed, even by the most destructive and powerful means that humanity had at their disposal, was being released upon the universe, and the Grave Warden did not believe that humanity as it stood now was a match for such a creature. If it successfully escaped, the Primal God would rise, and all the universe would be at its command.

His eyes instantly found the crystal that was dimming, and he approached in a flash, while his apprentice respectfully stood back and stayed silent. He gently placed a fingertip against the crystal and his mind was filled with all the information within; in less than second, he knew exactly what was wrong, and his blood ran cold.

Krith'is, called Flesh Ripper for its penchant for tearing apart humans and other fleshy-beings and putting them back together in all the wrong ways, was no longer in its cage.

*'Of all the ones to get loose...'* the Grave Warden thought as his heartrate accelerated.

Without missing a beat, space bent around him with nothing more than a wisp of intent and willpower on his part, and he found himself within the vast underground chamber filled with pyramids of black stone beneath the Serpentine Isles—and filled with ocean water, to the Grave Warden's surprise. To his knowledge, only four of the forty-eight tomb-prisons under his watch had been flooded.

*'Five now, it seems,'* he thought to himself.

Some of the ocean-dwellers had managed to find their way down into the cavern. If intelligent creatures found these places, he'd often take them in instead of punishing them for violating such a place, making them as much guardians of his planar graveyard as he was. However, most of the things that had entered this space since it had been breached were not suited to such purpose.

Three caught his attention upon his appearance.

The first and most eye-catching was massive, longer by several times than even the largest mortal sea-faring ship. It had a long almost serpentine body, though colored pink and with the head of a fish. Or, *mostly* fish—it had a prominent hinged jaw full of needle-like teeth that could pierce the scales of even the most powerful of krakens, and eyes that were as black as the deepest abyss.

The Grave Warden was none too fond of these creatures, and with nothing more than a blink of his eyes, turned the ninth-tier snake-fish to stone.

About thirty miles away in another section of the graveyard was another of the creatures that had caught his attention; it was also much bigger than the creatures that dwelled in the shallows, with an eel-like body, black scales to better blend in with the lightless deep, and large, nearly-blind eyes. Its aura was also of the ninth-tier, though newly ascended by the looks of it. It was a species of shark, he believed, though about a hundred feet long and vicious as a monster unleashed from the bowels of the worst hells. Even now, he watched as it feasted upon a school of fat fifth-tier piranha-like fish that had made their way down through the cracks in the cavern ceiling, the shark showing no mercy as it greedily devoured the entire school.

With another blink, this shark was also turned to stone. If it could not be of service, the Grave Warden concluded, then it would have to die for having found this place.

The final creature that had caught his eye was obviously far more intelligent, though far more alien than the other two. It looked almost like a flower, with a long, perilously thin body, and several wide, petal-like fins that protruded from its rear-section, which the Grave Warden knew were specialized not only for pushing the main trunk through the water, but were also hyper-sensitive to the currents of water and magic that glowed through the ocean. It had no eyes, but these fins could sense the world around it just fine. Its front-section meanwhile, had a dozen long root-like tentacles that were perfect for grasping just about anything with enough strength to tear that thing apart, and it had enough finesse with those limbs that it was more than capable of even the finest and more delicate of work.

Its body was bioluminescent, though it didn't glow—rather, the light its body produced shifted to match its environment, allowing it to easily camouflage its body. It wasn't nearly as large as the other two, perhaps only as large as a small whale. It wasn't a predator by nature, preferring to instead feast on the kills of other monsters, and its natural magical talent made it far more adept at evading and escaping other creatures than in killing them. However, at the tenth-tier, this one was more than capable of defending itself with violence, as was evidenced by the gigantic corpse of a black many-tentacled *thing* whose body was so revolting that the Grave Warden had to stifle a gag at the sight of this flower-like fish ripping and tearing it apart.

The final creature noticed his arrival—it was the only creature that did—and quickly dropped its kill and darted down to hide itself among the pyramids, the colors of its body rapidly changing to match its immediate environment. This wasn't nearly enough to escape his attention, but at the least, the Grave Warden left it alone for the time being. If this place needed a more active guardian than the powerful passive defenses he'd included in the rest of the plane, then like those graveyards that had been breached before, he'd assign something to defend it, and this creature seemed like a perfect fit.

With that taken care of in only a matter of seconds, the Grave Warden snapped his fingers and sealed the cracks in the ceiling, once more cutting this place off from the rest of the plane, and finally turned his attention to the graveyard itself, and the prison at its heart. His heart stopped for a moment when he realized that the light of the main pyramid had gone out, indicating that its occupant was no longer there. However, as his senses swept the area and he examined the interior of the pyramid, he calmed down slightly.

But only slightly, for within, he found dust that glowed like platinum—the remains of a Primal God. He was quite familiar with how their bodies fell apart when they died, and he had no shortage of dead god to compare it to with the thousands of other pyramids in the cavern, each one containing remains of other Primal Gods.

But this one... Krith'is had never been able to be killed. All the power of the heroes of yore had fallen upon that monster, and though it was hardly the strongest or the most destructive of the gods, every gash opened, every drop of golden ichor spilled from its wounds, every blast of magic was all wasted, for a moment later, the primal monster would heal and retaliate.

Some insight it had gained from tearing apart humans and any other sentient creature it could get its hands on had given it this power, of that the Grave Warden had no doubt. He shuddered when he remembered the battle that had brought Krith'is to its knees, and the terrible price that humanity had to pay to do so. If the Kings of the Primal Gods and Devils, and the seven Great Dragons had not already been defeated by the time the Flesh Ripper had been captured, then the losses humanity suffered at Krith'is' blood-soaked hands would've likely crippled their revolution.

But somehow, in the brief couple of years since he'd fallen asleep, the monster had met its end...

*'Or maybe it's some kind of ruse?'* the Grave Warden thought, and in a flash of light, he entered the pyramid, being immediately transported to the pocket world within. It was little more than a black featureless void, an abyss perfect for storing something that couldn't be killed.

The Grave Warden examine the corpse-dust more closely. He'd seen more than enough of this stuff in his time to know that this wasn't fake dust, and the Flesh Ripper had been stored alone, as had the few

other still-living Primal Gods in his care, and as far as he could tell, the other graves were full. If this *was* some kind of ruse, then it was incredibly convincing—however, he took some comfort in noting that the prison had never fully opened, preventing Krith’is from physically escaping.

Piecing together everything he knew of the Primal Gods, he imagined that the Krith’is had used its divine form to escape from its prison, but then ran into something powerful enough to break it in its much more fragile state, which then resulted in the death and disintegration of its physical body.

In a flash, the Grave Warden appeared outside in the cavern once again and took to investigating the area much more closely, looking for anything and everything that might prove or disprove his hypothesis. He took in every detail, every disturbed ward, every quiver in the currents of magic, he even cast his gaze upward and examined the Serpentine Isles in greater detail.

He scowled when he realized just how negligent he’d been these past few thousand years. He’d been guarding these graves for so long that it was so easy to fall into complacency, but he’d long ago sworn to fight such instincts with everything he had.

*‘No more sleep for me, not for a long time,’* he thought to himself as he traced the few strands of strange magic he felt, quickly identifying several dozen origins from all over the plane. Evidence of many blood magic rituals, all designed to weaken the wards protecting this place—and this was after the destruction of the islands above had already slightly disturbed the wards, as far as he could tell.

With a few thoughts, the wards all over the plane were repaired and reinforced, from the most distant at the edges of the plane, where a thin border of Mist of Chaos separated the plane from the Void to the hub of all his enchantments within the crystal cave back in the center. He’d have to do much more work to ensure that his reinforcements did their job, but for now, these measures were enough—especially since he could sense that all the other cages were still intact, and their residents accounted for.

At the very least, it seemed his hypothesis was proven correct, for even without its physical body, a being like Krith’is could not have run around in Aeterna without his notice—not in Aeterna, not in *his* place. And yet, the Grave Warden could sense no sign that its divine form had escaped.

*‘So... Krith’is is dead...’* the Grave Warden mused as he glanced back at the central pyramid. He then noticed that one of the angel corpses was on the stairs leading to the top, while another angel was missing.

He also noticed a small fleet of ships slowly sailing around the empty patch of sea where the island above this place used to be, and a demon hovering in the sky, following at a great distance while hiding himself in the clouds.

It was no stretch for the Grave Warden to assume that these people knew what had happened here, and with another silent invocation of his teleportation magic, he appeared in front of the demon.

“Gah! Fuck!” the demon shouted in surprise as he scrambled in the air, quickly assuming a defensive position.

The Grave Warden only smiled. He had to know what had happened here, and the demon would tell him.

—

Leon felt himself twitching as he slowly opened his physical eyes. It hadn't taken much between the Thunderbird and Nestor to help him return to normal, but the process wasn't painless. Still, the thought of just how downtrodden and broken Nestor sounded after everything that had happened over the past day brought a smile to Leon's face, even though he knew that a flood of questions was going to come from the dead man sooner or later.

*'That's fine,' he thought. 'I have my own questions I'll need answering...'*

He lay upon the deck of a Legion ship, and as his eyes opened, he caught the tail-end of his transformation back into his human body as the last of the pitch-black feathers retreated below his skin. He then realized, to his immediate dismay and embarrassment, that he wasn't wearing any clothes. Fortunately, it seemed his body was entirely back to normal, at least when it came to his control over his magic, and it was the easiest thing for him to quickly summon some spare clothes from his soul realm and dress himself.

He also noticed the hordes of people crowded over him, nearly all with looks of worry in their eyes—chief among them was Maia, who knelt at his side, gently cradling his head in her arms. With her were the rest of his retinue, and he could see the white feathers of Anzu in the background loudly chirping and making a fuss as Legion sailors tried to keep the griffin from bowling everyone over to reach Leon.

His limbs felt sluggish and his eyes were heavy, but he felt strong enough to rise.

"Careful, now," Alix said as she slipped under one of his arms. "Whatever the fuck just happened to you, I think you'll be needing some rest."

Leon didn't verbally respond, but he agreed, and he felt Maia quickly position herself under his other arm.

The rest of the Legion sailors and marines on the deck parted before them, giving them more than enough room, while Gaius, Marcus, Alcander, and Anzu followed behind. Many of those who'd crowded around Leon had been dressed like high-ranking Legion knights, but he was in no mood to speak with them about much of anything right now—all he wanted to do was to lie down and rest, even though he'd just woken back up in his physical body. The process for returning himself to his human body had been long and magically intensive, and the Thunderbird hadn't allowed him to relax in the slightest. However, he was encouraged by the fact that she'd indicated that, with a month or two of tuning to his rather unique physiology, it might be possible that he could switch from human to avian at will.

Some much welcome good news, but neither that, nor his ascension to the eighth-tier could erase the fact that his sword was missing, as was Xaphan. His armor was also destroyed, as was his flight suit. His immediate retinue was fine, but Sigebert's fleet had been nearly completely destroyed. The remains of the fleet were sailing extremely slowly, so he assumed the search for survivors was still ongoing.

No matter the case, there was a lot to do, quite a bit of searching that he had in his immediate future, and more than a few questions he'd need answered from both those within his soul realm, and without. There were undoubtedly many questions he'd have to answer, as well.

For now, though, he just wanted to lay down and cuddle up with Maia until strength returned to his body. How long that ought to take, he wasn't sure, but at the very least, he was already starting to feel a little better.



## Chapter 605: Adamant Joy

Leon slept deeply, if briefly. The process of turning back into a human had a great deal of magic power and concentration between him and the Thunderbird, and the process had exacted its toll upon his body. Still, he was an eighth-tier mage, now, and sleep was hardly something he truly needed anymore. After only about two hours of sleep, he was stirring in the bed that Alix and Maia had brought him to.

It was a near-identical copy to the quarters he and his retinue had been assigned on Sigebert's flagship—the cabins of a visiting Paladin or someone else of high rank—but it was also clearly *not* Sigebert's flagship.

Beside him on the bed, Maia had been snuggled up close to him with an arm across his chest. She hadn't been sleeping, so as he opened his eyes and instinctively started to rise, she was right there with him, sitting up in bed.

"Leon," she whispered aloud.

Leon glanced at her, his eyes still bleary with sleep and fatigue. But when his golden eyes met her lake-blues, his face couldn't help but break out into a wide smile, and he pulled her into him and held her close.

Neither moved for several long minutes. They didn't need to speak to confirm each other's physical state, nor did they even specifically need to vocalize their emotions. Maia could feel that Leon was all right, and that he'd ascended to the eighth-tier, while Leon could feel her joy at his waking, and at his ascension. However, while Leon could sense that Maia was all right, after taking some time, Maia pulled away from Leon and locked gazes with him again.

"You seem... different..." she said.

"I... think I am," Leon said as his eyes narrowed in thought and suspicion. He extended a hand above them, and with barely even a thought, fire began to crackle around his fingers. It didn't look any different than usual, not any darker, not any more potent. It did seem that he could summon the flames with greater ease, though if that was due to his ascension or not, he couldn't say. The Thunderbird had told him that his blood from the Black Dragon had awakened, but he supposed that the Great Black Dragon had gone back to suppressing it. It would take further testing on his part to figure out how effective that suppression was, now, but at the very least, he could see that his summoned fire *looked* no different than usual.

"What happened down there?" she asked.

Leon took a deep breath. "Ancestors, I don't even know where to start..."

Eventually, he started at roughly where he'd made the decision to take on Jormun alone, and the strange visions that had assaulted his mind that were the cause. It seemed even clearer to Leon in hindsight that the Primal God had been responsible for that much, especially after it revealed that it had been the Thunderbird look-a-like the entire time.

Then, he largely skipped over the battle between him and Jormun with as few details as possible, but Maia wasn't going to allow that.

“But what about that demon?” she asked. “And that thing it was fighting?”

Leon went silent for another long moment, his eyes wandering the room yet not looking at anything in particular.

“You can trust me...” Maia whispered, and Leon felt his heart clench in response.

It was true, he could trust her with anything. Yet, he wasn’t sure about this last secret of his, the one that he’d hidden from everyone, even Elise. Consorting with demons was taboo in the Bull Kingdom, and warranted instant extra judicial execution if caught doing so. Such things hardly mattered to Maia, but he still hesitated to tell her about his and Xaphan’s relationship.

After almost ten seconds of silence, Maia frowned lightly and said, “You don’t have to—”

“It’s fine,” Leon interrupted. “I suppose this wasn’t something I should be keeping to myself, anyway.”

Slowly at first, but getting easier as he went on, Leon told Maia about how lost he felt immediately following his father’s death, and how just after losing his father, he encountered Xaphan. It had seemed to be the best way forward at the time, making the contract with demon. And it *did* largely work out, with Xaphan’s power even coming in handy multiple times in the past four years. But Xaphan was still a demon, so Leon made it as clear as he could that he didn’t worship him, or make anything even remotely resembling blood sacrifices.

“But the demon is on our side?” Maia asked when Leon was finally finished, after he retold the battle between himself and Jormun, including his summoning of Xaphan and Jormun’s summoning of his angel.

“Yes,” Leon replied unequivocally. “I trust that rude bas—” Leon briefly recalled the Great Black Dragon calling him a bastard, and cut himself off. “—I trust him with my life. Maybe not anyone else’s, but mine? Sure thing. It’s hardly worth that much anyway, so trusting it to a demon is hardly—”

“Don’t finish that sentence!” Maia sternly warned him, and Leon felt a flash of anger rock through their connection.

With a playful, self-deprecating smile, he said, “All right, I won’t. Just trying to lighten the mood a bit.”

Maia made a haughty show of turning away from him. “You’re worth a great deal to me,” she said, and it was like a knife through Leon’s heart.

Quietly, he wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her back into him. “I’m sorry. Bad joke.”

Maia turned back around, a gentle smile on her face. “I forgive you,” she said like a Queen pardoning a man already on the headsman’s block.

Leon smiled back, and continued with his story.

—

It was another hour before he and Maia emerged from their room and into the main cabin, to the great joy of Anzu, and to a lesser extent, the rest of Leon’s retinue. Leon spent a few minutes playing with Anzu and giving him all the head pats before he addressed the others.

"Thanks," he simply said, hoping they understood. They'd followed him this far, even though he was having some serious doubts if he was worthy of following like this.

"Don't mention it," Marcus replied with a wave of his hand. "We hardly did much, anyway. Seems like, uh, you as that bird thing, your lady, and that demon did most of the work, we kind of just sat around feeling useless."

Alcander didn't say anything, but Leon could see from his expression that he was feeling similarly useless.

Gaius, meanwhile, clapped Leon on the shoulder, and said, "Good to see you up and about."

"You too," Leon sincerely replied.

Alix, meanwhile, snuck up behind Leon about as well as she could, and then jumped up and grabbed him in a headlock. He barely even bent over even with all her weight and strength trying to pull him down, but she acted like she was winning, anyway.

"That's for leaving us behind!" she shouted as she thrashed about on his neck and over his shoulders. "And *that's* for coming back as that creepy fucking bird! What was up with that?!"

"I think story time will have to wait, for now," Gaius said, dampening the spirit in the room. "Now that you're up, Leon, there's *a lot* that needs to get done, and I think there's plenty that our... *fleet* would love to have your help with."

Leon nodded, and then made his way back out onto the deck of the ship, followed closely by the others. He had his own things he needed to take care of, too, chief among them finding his sword, and finding Xaphan.

The first thing he did upon stepping foot back out onto the deck, even before taking a long, deep breath of fresh air, was project his magic senses. He largely kept his attention fixed far above the paltry dozen or so ships that remained floating, scanning the skies for Xaphan. He figured the demon would still be flying.

In the time since he'd last been properly conscious and above ground to see it, the sky had cleared up completely. There were a few wispy clouds in the sky, but they were fluffy and pure white, with not a single storm cloud to be seen. It was fairly late, but the sun still shone quite brightly, and the open ocean was a beautiful shade of blue, purple, and red, reflecting the evening sky.

But after a brief pause, Leon realized exactly what was wrong with this picture: they were supposed to be in the same place as the eighth island's remains, but the ocean was completely empty of anything that could remotely resemble a landmass, save for the shadows of those islands dozens of miles away.

"Everything's gone...?" he whispered, vaguely remembering something to that effect from the battle.

"Whatever that big snake did sucked all the land below the water," Alix explained.

"Sucked quite a few Legion personnel down with it," Marcus added.

"How many survivors?" Leon asked.

"Among these ships?" Gaius spoke up. "I'd say about three-and-a-half thousand sailors, maybe half a battalion of marines. Of those ships that were sunk, we haven't seen even a single survivor."

[There are a lot of things that live this far out to sea that have probably eaten their corpses,] Maia added. [The storm would summon them, that serpent would've kept them at bay. Without it around, they feasted.]

"A pleasant thought," Marcus said, turning slightly pale.

"They were probably all dead by that point," Alcander pointed out. "Either drowned in the storm, or finished off by that serpent. Not a lot of drawn-out deaths, I should think."

Marcus grimaced. "Small comfort after all of that."

"Every available comfort ought to be taken after a battle like that," Alcander responded, his tone less uncaring and more exhausted and resigned.

Leon could understand his point of view. Better to focus on the good in any given situation, even if that good is only slightly less-terrible than the rest of it.

Resting his hands upon the guardrail of the deck, Leon noticed several Legion sailors exit the command tower, take a quick look around, and start heading in his direction once they noticed him. He gritted his teeth, just barely refraining from pulled back his lips into an annoyed grin, a threatening baring of his fang—of his *teeth*. Until he had his ducks in a row, he didn't *want* to deal with anyone else's problems, even though he knew he had to.

He still had a few minutes before they arrived, though, so he took some more time to examine their surroundings. His magic senses had grown in power so much that he was rather overwhelmed—he could see everything within a two hundred mile radius of the ship, and the sheer amount of information that poured into his brain was extremely disorienting and more than he could handle.

He refocused the scope of his search, taking his time as he reveled in the power on one hand, but also quite impatient to see some results on the other. By the time the sailors from the command tower had approached, he'd seen neither hide nor hair of Xaphan, and his sword was still nowhere to be found. He was actually rather scared to ask anyone about them, fearing that they might try to convince him both were gone and now out of his reach.

His sword, Leon could at least see their perspective. Even if he knew where it was beneath the waves, he had no clue how to reach it—if even Maia was unwilling to go that far below the waves around here, then he more than hesitated to just jump down there and try to use his water magic to get it back.

Still, he felt empty and restless with it gone, and he had no intention of leaving this place until it was back in hand.

"Uh, Sir Leon?" the lower-ranked of the two Legion sailors asked several awkward seconds after he and his companions approached Leon.

"Drop the 'Sir'," Leon said, still staring out at the sea, trying to find even the slightest hint where his partner or his weapon might be.

“Right,” the sailor said, his voice quivering with nervousness. “The Legate requests your presence. We have some... *visitors*...”

Leon froze for a moment in confusion, and he spared the sailor a quick glance, and then one more at his superior, who nodded in confirmation.

The superior clarified, “That was quite a battle... whatever you and that demon did—” Leon shot the superior a glare of warning, and his words hitched in his throat. “—I mean, there was a ton of magic being thrown around. Even this far away from the centers of power, people noticed. While you were resting, two envoys from the Central Empires arrived, and they’ve asked to speak with all of our representatives. The Legate would like for you and your Lady to be present at the meeting.” He nodded to Maia to make sure Leon knew who he was talking about.

Leon sighed. “There a time frame for this?”

“Uh, no, Si—” the junior sailor said, catching himself right before calling Leon by the knightly style. “The sooner this is taken care of, the better, though. The fleet’s communication stone went down with Sir Sigebert’s ship, so we’re on our own to deal with this. Not even Dame Basina or Sir Theuderic are in any position to help.”

With a quick redirection of his magic senses, Leon smiled as he saw a few Legion scouts at the edge of his range scouting out the waters around the fifth island. If the scouts were only just there, then the other two fleets were still at the fourth island, but they ought to be wrapping things up on their end. The remnants of Sigebert’s fleet would probably meet up with them at the fifth island.

“I’ll head in in a moment,” he said, and Alix, as if she were still his squire, quickly stepped in to take the details of the meeting as Leon turned his attention back to the sea.

[Ancestor,] he whispered into his soul realm, knowing the Thunderbird to still be at the mountain where they’d replicated the Primal God’s enchantment. [I can’t leave without the family blade.]

[Nor should you,] replied the Thunderbird, her resonant voice dripping with arrogance. [I bore that sword since the Primal Age. It has been one of the solidest foundation stones upon which our Clan thrived, one of the most potent weapons that rendered our enemies but ash on the wind!]

[Which is just why I want it back,] Leon quietly replied. [I *can’t* leave without it...] His voice shook, and the Thunderbird almost audibly restrained her arrogance.

[I understand,] she said, her tone turning motherly. [It is of my blood, blood which you share. It is Adamant, and will not suffer at all for being out at sea, and having once been the seat of the Iron Needle, it will not tolerate just anyone taking it in hand.]

[That’s good to know, but how do I get it back?] Leon asked. [Surely there’s a way? Even if I have to carve this entire ship into once giant enchantment to dredge it up from the ocean floor, I’ll do it...]

[It shouldn’t require that much,] the Thunderbird said with amusement. [The blade will long to return to you. You just have to call for it, and it will answer.]

Leon fought back against the urge to immediately roll his eyes.

[You make it sound so easy,] he drily stated.

[Extend your hand,] the Thunderbird instructed, and after a moment of hesitancy for not wanting to appear weird in front of everyone, Leon followed her instruction. Looking weird was the least of his problems, right now. [Good,] the Thunderbird said. [Now, reach out with your heart and mind, and *will* the sword to return. Let my power flow through your hand and show it the perfect place to rest, but show your intent to wield it in battle again!]

Her voice grew in volume until she was practically roaring within his soul realm, and he couldn't help but get a bit caught up in her hype. Lightning danced around his fingers as his companions took a step or two back and asked some questions of him, which he was a little too focused to answer.

He reached out with his intention, silently shouting, though not in any recognizable tongue. The blade was of his Clan, it was as much a part of him as the Thunderbird's power. Neither he nor it would be complete until they were reunited, and he reached out with his longing as well; longing for that reunion of hand and blade.

And after fifteen increasingly desperate seconds, his hand extended, power flowing through his body, his will growing, the silent roar in his head growing louder, a single bolt of golden lightning shot up from the sea and into the clear dusky sky. A moment later, the blade of House Raime exploded out of the sea and slammed into Leon's hand, sending him almost stumbling back a few steps with the force of its arrival, the deck beneath his feet remaining intact only by being Heartwood and not lesser material.

His blade was back, sparking with power, rejoicing in its own way at being reunited with him, the blood in the Adamant singing in tune with the blood in his fingers, lightning crackling around him.

"IT WORKED!" Leon couldn't help but shout in joy as his face practically split in two with his unabashed smile, and the deck began to creak and groan as, in his instinctive celebration, he let his aura go a little too wild.

"Uh, Leon?" Alix interrupted in alarm. "That's pretty spectacular, but maybe rein it in a little?"

Leon glanced around, and was immediately struck with embarrassment over just how many sailors there were on the deck who were almost doubled over under the weight of his aura, and staring at him with accusation in their eyes.

"Ah, uh, sorry about that," Leon said as he clamped down on his emotional outburst. His eyes found their way down to his blade again, though, and the smile stayed plastered across his face. With a flash of light, a scabbard appeared at his waist. Ever since he'd learned how to pull objects into his soul realm, he'd rarely needed one for his sword, but right now, he wasn't about to let it out of his sight. Having it back at his waist for at least a little while would serve as great comfort over the next few hours as he dealt with everything else that was on his plate.

Now in a spectacularly good mood, Leon turned to Alix and said, "All right, where's these envoys? Better to deal with them now before something finds a way to piss me off."

"I don't think we'll reach the conference room without that happening," Alix joked, and Leon reeled back as if physically struck, his eyes and eyebrows curling as if in surprise, though his playful act was ruined by the smile that refused to leave his face.

“You wound me, you truly do,” Leon replied. And with that, with his blade finally back, Leon felt just about whole, and in the rare mood where he was ready to deal with some diplomats. Xaphan was still missing, but Xaphan was a full-grown demon, he didn’t need Leon worrying about him.

## **Chapter 606: Imperial Envoys**

The first thing Leon noticed upon being shown into the room where the envoys were waiting was their auras: the weaker one was, startlingly, of the eighth-tier, while the stronger was powerful enough that Leon couldn’t identify his tier. He momentarily froze in the doorway, stunned by the level of power that had arrived.

The weaker of the two, almost paradoxically, looked like he should’ve been stronger—he was a giant of a man, standing head and shoulders above Leon. He was dark of skin, possessed a built physique that put marble statues to shame, and had deep black eyes that Leon could easily see someone getting lost in. His handsome features were like stone, stoic and unmoving, almost masklike, not even shifting as Leon entered the room.

The other man, however, seemed almost the exact opposite—tall, but not overly so, with a much thinner, lither build. His skin was lighter, though still much tanner than a Bull Kingdom native, and he had some of the warmest, friendliest brown eyes that Leon had ever seen. Other than his aura, though, he didn’t possess much in the way of looks that Leon, at least, thought were particularly attractive, though he lit up with charming glee as Leon overcame his initial shock at sensing their auras and took a few more steps into the lavish conference room.

“Ah!” the stronger one said good-naturedly as he rose from his seat and hurried over to take Leon’s hand in his own, to Leon’s mild displeasure. “Wonderful! Wonderful!” he said so warmly that Leon found himself unable to hold onto his light antipathy at the unwanted physical contact. “So good to see you, my friend! Let’s talk, let’s talk!”

“Uh, do we know each other?” Leon asked as the stronger man almost pulled him further into the room and steered him toward one of the chairs closest to the head of the conference table. The weaker of the two envoys wasn’t sitting, instead choosing to lean against the wall and glower at everyone as they filed in and took their seats. Leon, however, barely noticed his attitude, so captured was he by the stronger.

“No, we’ve never met,” the stronger man said, “but that doesn’t mean we can’t be friends, can it? Can it?”

Leon disagreed, his criteria for considering someone a ‘friend’ was rather high, and someone he just met, even if strong and friendly, wasn’t yet a friend to him. However, out loud, he simply said, “Friends at least know each other’s names. I’m called Leon, born of House Raime, but just ‘Leon’ will do. No titles or styles, if you please.”

“If that’s what pleases you, then so be it! So be it!” the stronger man said, punctuating his sentence with a booming, amiable laugh. “You may call me Ambrose! Likewise, no styles, no titles! No styles! No titles!”

Ambrose, instead of sitting directly at the head of the table, sat directly across from Leon, with the head seat between them. However, because he didn’t sit there, no one else did; even the Legate of the ship,

who entered in Leon's wake, sat further down the table. Maia and the rest of Leon's retinue sat further up, with Maia herself taking a seat directly to Leon's right.

What followed were several long rounds of introductions. The weaker of the two envoys never spoke a word, though Ambrose introduced him as 'Zaff'. The name caught Leon's ear, and he gave the eighth-tier man another once-over.

As he did, he noticed that the man seemed strangely familiar, though not for his appearance, but rather his aura. In fact, the more that Leon stole quick glances at him, the more his stoic and unchanging face seemed almost *literally* masklike, and a quiet suspicion began to grow in his heart, but that suspicion, if assumed to be true, only led to confusion and a torrent of questions flowing through Leon's mind.

The rest of the introductions went by fairly easily, with Ambrose warmly greeting even the weakest of Legion knights who'd entered the room, not only acknowledging even those squires and secretaries who stood by the wall instead of taking seats, but even having short, pleasant exchanges with them over how they were dressed or what he could glean from their aura. Ambrose didn't even blink when Maia refused to speak to him out loud, and instead merely identified herself as 'Naiad' using her mental communication, taking it entirely in stride and only offering her a couple cordial compliments.

By the time Ambrose directed his attention back to Leon, everyone in the room had been thoroughly disarmed by his affable demeanor, and it was like his power and what he represented had been forgotten. However, all of that came roaring back when he said to Leon, "It's simply wonderful to have the opportunity to meet all of you today! Simply wonderful! However, as much as I would love to continue speaking with all of you like this, we must see to the business that brought me here. To business!"

"Just one moment, Ambrose, if you will," Leon interrupted, a little bit of iron in his voice. "You identified yourself and your partner, but didn't say where you were from. Which of the Empires do you represent? Or do you claim to represent them all?"

Ambrose readily replied, "We hail from the Ilian Empire."

The Four Empires bordered a great inland sea, and Leon knew the Ilian Empire to be the empire on the western side. He didn't know much of the Four Empires, and the only dealings he'd ever had with them had been meeting the doctor from the Sacred Golden Empire, the Empire in the north. However, he did know that Heaven's Eye was based in the city of Occulara, which was within the Ilian Empire, giving him some hint as to the power dynamics within the empires. As far as he knew, the Sacred Golden Empire was the agricultural powerhouse of the four, while the Ilian Empire was the richest and most magically advanced.

The Sunlit Empire to the south of the inland sea he knew essentially nothing about, save for it apparently having many lightning mages, which intrigued him, while the Sentinels, the empire to the east of the sea, was even more mysterious.

"I don't mean to be rude," Leon pressed as he leaned forward in his seat, "but do you have anything that might prove your claim?"

"Leon..." Gaius muttered from a few seats down, but Leon quickly silenced him with a stern look. The ship Legate, however, he couldn't quiet so easily, and the Legion knight interjected immediately after.



“The envoy’s credentials checked out, at least as far as we were able to confirm.”

Leon wondered just how much they were able to confirm, given the status of the fleet and their communication issues, but with the way that many of the Legion knights were staring at him with pleading eyes, Leon decided to simply take Ambrose at his word and leaned back in his seat.

So, naturally, he was fairly surprised when Ambrose conjured a metal ring from his soul realm, so large that it was worn around his three middle fingers on his right hand and was wider than his fist. The plate of the ring was adorned with an exceedingly intricate design of some kind of bird of prey whose wings appeared to be on fire.

Leon knew absolutely nothing about Imperial heraldry, so the design was largely lost on him. However, the ring emanated a strong aura of magic, strong enough to have the hair on the back of Leon’s neck standing on end.

Ambrose said, “These rings are given to all who serve the Ilian Emperor. This was given to me by the Ilian Emperor personally. Given personally.”

Leon took a deep breath, then shrugged. He still doubted, but with after a quick glance back over his shoulder at ‘Zaff’, who still silently leaned against the wall, he figured that they should just get on with it.

“All right, Ambrose,” he said, “what has drawn the attention of the Ilian Emperor?”

“The appearance of a Great Horned Serpent,” Ambrose answered. “Such creatures were long considered extinct, having been hunted down and exterminated over fifty thousand years ago. They are exceedingly violent by nature and unfailingly brutal in behavior; they pose enormous threats to all of civilization on Aeterna, and so seeing one appear after so long—and one so large and possessed of ninth-tier strength, at that—has many people back home, and in the other Empires, greatly concerned. Many people, greatly concerned.”

“I can see why,” Leon said.

“There were also other things that drew attention during that fight, such as that black bird, the demon, and Lady Naiad, here,” Ambrose continued, nodding at Maia with a broad smile on his face. “Suffice it to say, His Imperial Majesty wanted to know exactly what was going on out here, and so he sent me. If anything needed to be done to resolve the situation, I was empowered to do so. Situation resolved, no matter what.”

Leon returned the smile, though his was far colder than Ambrose’s. “Sounds like your Emperor took this situation extremely seriously if he gave you permission to do whatever you thought necessary. Many would abuse that power, and few would ever appreciate it, especially those who live in these parts who might not want outside interference...”

“Are you one of those people?” Ambrose asked. “Dislike interference?”

Leon’s lips thinned as he pressed them together for a moment. “Not me, specifically. I’m actually the opposite—I would’ve *loved* to have your support just a few days ago. Would’ve made all of this so much easier to deal with.”

“Then I apologize for not moving sooner,” Ambrose said with a brief lowering of his head. “Apologies.”

Leon sighed. “I apologize as well. I don’t much like dealing with dignitaries and the like, and I fear I’ve let my displeasure poison my demeanor.”

Before Ambrose could respond, Leon launched into another brief explanation of exactly what happened over the past couple of months, starting with the need for the Legion to retrieve Octavius, and ending with the death of the Great Horned Serpent—at least, as it had been explained to him, for the memories of his time as the Black Eagle were still rather fuzzy. He glossed over the appearance of Xaphan—among a few other important details that he didn’t want to spread—unsure how Ambrose would take it, though given who he thought ‘Zaff’ to be, he assumed it probably wouldn’t turn out too bad.

By the time Leon had finished his brief rundown, Ambrose had leaned in onto the table and propped his chin onto his folded hands.

“That’s quite the story,” he said. “Quite the story... Tell me more about this place with the pyramids, if you would. Sounds like a remarkable place, and I’m curious how this ‘Jormun’ discovered it, and about the being you say resided down there...”

Leon went into a little more detail, but he got the strange impression that Ambrose wasn’t quite as into the place itself so much as Jormun and the Primal God within. His eyes wandered a little more when Leon described the immense pyramid-filled cavern, but were locked on him the entire time he spoke about Jormun and his relationship with the Primal God.

“... so it seems to me that it either influenced, or co-opted the serpent cult that existed on these islands, which then allowed it to influence everyone here once its seals were weakened.”

“But,” Ambrose countered, “if it influenced that cult, then why didn’t it break out then? Why not?”

Leon gave him a lost look and emphatically shrugged. “No clue, I wasn’t there. Maybe those Three Heroes had something to do with it, reinforcing the wards, I’ve got nothing. Maybe you’d have more luck going to investigate the site yourself.”

“Maybe I should, maybe I should,” Ambrose mused as he leaned back in his seat. “It sounds like this thing was rather interested in you...”

“If you’re asking me why, I can’t tell you that, either,” Leon said as naturally as if he were telling the truth. “Maybe it was because I’m the strongest of the warriors sent from the Bull Kingdom. Maybe it just wanted another seventh-tier mage to play with.”

“It transformed one seventh-tier mage into a Great Horned Serpent, by the sounds of it,” Ambrose pointed out. “Could it have had similar intentions for you?”

Leon shivered slightly, and then shrugged again, but this time he closed his eyes and sighed as he did, trying to make it look like he was forcing on a tougher façade than he felt, as if he were actually disturbed by Ambrose’s suggestion. “Have no idea,” he said. “Glad I made it out before it could try.”

“How exactly *did* you do that?” Ambrose pressed as he leaned back onto the table and stared into Leon’s eyes. “You were a little light on the details during your explanation, and I would like a little more

elaboration. You also didn't really talk about that bird. Or that demon. Or those angels. I'd like to know more..."

"I can't tell you what I don't know," Leon said, his tone turning frosty. "That demon came out of nowhere, and I had little interaction with it apart from fighting that giant snake with it. And that bird is even more of a mystery. We don't even have its body to examine; it was dragged below the waves with the serpent—its wing had been stuck on the monster's horn, you see... Both are probably kraken food at this point, if not a meal of something even bigger..."

Ambrose stared at Leon, smiling the whole while, his eyes narrowing into a knowing look, and Leon felt like the man could see right through him. However, he knew that if there was one key to lying, it was to stick with his story until given concrete proof. He had no reason to trust Ambrose, even if he did suspect that Zaff was Xaphan, and he wasn't going to just hand over potentially sensitive information to just anyone.

"I'm sorry I can't be of more help to you," Leon said to Ambrose after a few quiet, awkward seconds.

"Are you sure you can't help me?" Ambrose asked. "Are you sure? That bird, at least...? Nothing happened surrounding it? No one transformed into it in the same way that this 'Jormun' was transformed into that serpent?"

Leon's stomach sank into his feet as he realized he'd probably said too much in his explanation, but at this point, he was committed, and even if this man knew exactly what happened, Leon wasn't going to admit it to him.

"I'm sure," Leon simply replied, and Ambrose responded by continuing to stare at him for several more long seconds.

"Very well," the envoy said with a shrug. "I suppose I have what I came for; the bird and the Great Horned Serpent are dead; the ocean nymph seems to be—"

Leon felt a flutter of anger flow through Maia, and Ambrose paused for a moment.

"—Ah, my apologies, My Lady, the *river* nymph isn't a threat. I suppose that just leaves the demon to be found; we can't have something so powerful just running around unaccounted for, can we?"

The Legion knights in the room muttered their agreement, and while she didn't look at him, Leon did feel Maia's attention fixate on him for a moment. He took it the same as if she'd given him a worried look, and he squeezed her hand reassuringly beneath the table. This at-least-ninth-tier envoy didn't seem to be pressing them, so he figured if they just kept their mouths shut, everything would be fine and the envoys would leave in short order.

However, he was hoping he'd get the chance to speak with 'Zaff' before they left—he wanted to know if Xaphan was all right, and the more he thought about, and the more he observed 'Zaff's' aura, the more he was convinced his guess was right.

He briefly tried to mentally communicate with Xaphan through their contract, but he didn't receive a response, and Zaff didn't let any indications slip that he'd heard Leon...

Fortunately, he felt like his theory was essentially proven when Ambrose rose and said, “I ought to get going, but might I ask for a few moments of your time, Leon? My companion would like to have a few private words with you. Might I?”

“Sure...” Leon awkwardly stated, encouraged but surprised that Ambrose would just come out with such a request.

“Wonderful!” Ambrose exclaimed. “Simply marvelous! Well, then I’ll get going first, and leave you with this, Leon.” Ambrose waved his hand and produced a card about the size of both of Leon’s hands put together. It was made of some kind of stiff paper that Leon could feel was lightly enchanted to increase its durability, and written upon the card was what seemed to be an introduction. “I’m always on the lookout for talented mages, you see,” Ambrose explained. “If you ever find yourself in the Ilian Empire, look me up—that letter has my address, and will serve as proof of affiliation if I’m not around and you’re greeted by my servants.”

Leon felt a few hidden strands of killing intent coming from the Legion Legate, but they were quickly clamped down on. He supposed he understood the reaction—Leon was no longer a Legion knight, but there was still lingering attachment among the Legion to him, and yet here was someone whom they couldn’t really compete against blatantly headhunting him.

Leon stashed the letter of introduction into his soul realm, and Ambrose strolled out of the conference room with hardly an ounce of worry etched upon his face. The rest of the Legion knights slowly made to follow suit, and Leon had to hurry his own retinue along to follow them. They protested, but after just asking them to wait outside and giving into Maia’s demand to stay, he was left mostly alone with ‘Zaff’.

As soon as the door was shut and the enchantments blocking their voices from reaching outside, ‘Zaff’ dropped all pretenses and said with the familiar voice of Leon’s demonic partner, “Leon, I need to get back into your soul realm right now, this illusion is starting to fade!”

“Xaphan?” Leon asked, and ‘Zaff’ responded by letting his aura spill forth without any deceptions.

Leon smiled as he recognized his friend—as he recognized Xaphan’s unmistakable aura. Xaphan wasn’t a friend, he told himself. He was just a partner and an important weapon in Leon’s arsenal.

With a nod from Leon, ‘Zaff’s’ body began to immolate right there in front of Leon and Maia, shrank down into a bead of fire no bigger than a finger, and rushed into Leon’s chest.

There was some concern within Leon that this was a trick, but he felt the power shared between him and Xaphan flutter, and he knew his demonic partner had returned.

[Ahhh,] Xaphan muttered as Leon watched him settle back into his pavilion. [Good to sit back down, even in this rustic-ass place. Seriously, Leon, that old Mind Palace you had was so much classier, you ought to tear this shit place down and go back to the old one.]

Leon’s jaw immediately clenched so tightly shut that he felt like he was at risk of cracking several of his teeth.

*‘Yep, that’s Xaphan,’* he thought.

## **Chapter 607: Cataloguing Loot**

Xaphan was back in his soul realm, and his sword was back on his hip. He was with Maia, and his small group of followers were in good health. As far as Leon was concerned, the only thing his life truly lacked right now was Elise; everything else was just as it should be.

However, there was still business to deal with.

[So, demon,] Leon said as he leaned back in his chair, [what in the hells was all that about?] As he asked his question, Leon squeezed Maia's hand again, giving her some comfort despite essentially locking her out of the conversation with Xaphan's return to his soul realm. [Was that guy really who he said he was?]

[Fuck no,] Xaphan grumbled. [That was the fucking Grave Warden himself! He came here to investigate why one of his charges was trying to escape!]

Leon froze, though not for long. [*That* was the Grave Warden?] he asked, still fuzzy on just what that title meant. He also expected someone as purportedly important as the Grave Warden would act more... dignified? Majestic? Would act more like a man of his station and would be above using such simple ruses and deceptions. More personally, Leon thought someone like that would be too prideful to even pretend to be someone else's subordinate.

In that respect, Leon thought someone like the Grave Warden would act more like an inhuman, emotionless deity far above humanity, or would act more like Xaphan, completely without thought for manners or decorum.

[Don't judge such beings by their appearances,] Xaphan warned. [A person doesn't live even a fraction as long as that man has without being... *odd*, and either mentally strong or twisted in ways that would allow one to weather all of that time with some modicum of sanity intact. That makes him strange and unpredictable—best to keep your distance, if you want my opinion.]

[That's a good idea, I think,] Leon thoughtfully replied as he toyed with the Grave Warden's letter of introduction. [Do you know what he wants with me?] He suspected it was because of his lineage, and the Grave Warden maybe not wanting him to become a new hegemon of this plane, as Jason Keraunos had tried to do so many millennia ago... but as Xaphan had just said, the mind of something as ancient as the Grave Warden likely couldn't be so easily predicted.

[When we spoke, he asked about you and your power,] Xaphan said. [Not once did he ask about your intentions or goals. Just how strong you were, and what you've done in the past. I gave him few answers, but even in return for that, he offered to help us reunite.]

[Thanks for your discretion,] Leon said. [I'm almost surprised, though, I wasn't sure if you were going to return...]

[You still owe me power and a safe haven, human,] Xaphan frostily replied. [Our contract is not yet dissolved, and so we must endure each other for a while, yet.]

Leon smiled, and he put the Grave Warden out of his mind. Someone with that kind of power wasn't someone he could truly fight against, nor could he ever prepare for him. So, Leon decided not to ever call upon him, and stashed his letter of introduction in a tiny out-of-the-way corner of his soul realm's

vault. He'd be better off planning for things that he *could* deal with, such as Heaven's Eye, the Four Empires, and the remains of his Clan's ancient facilities that seemed to have yet to be discovered.

There were also slightly more immediate concerns, such as the items that he'd discovered just before transforming into the Black Eagle; Jormun's hammer, his onyx bracelet, and the most intriguing of all, the sealed book. Those all warranted some in-depth examination.

However, before even all of that, he had some responsibility to the Legion to take care of: assisting with any search and rescue, and helping to lead them back to Theuderic and Basina. None of that was particularly intensive, but it would serve to help give him some time to think, and he already had a few ideas that he wanted to flesh out a little bit more...

—

The disappearance of 'Zaff' was taken largely in stride. Given that he seemed to represent the Ilian Empire, everyone readily accepted Leon's explanation that after their short conversation about Leon's specific fighting style—a lie that Leon told them to cover his reunion with Xaphan—the man had vanished.

Following that was finishing up the fruitless search for any survivors. The remains of the fleet sailed fairly far away from the annihilated eighth island looking for any members of the Royal Legion who might've survived the battle, but found not even a single corpse.

Leon was a little disappointed. Sigebert had proven himself quite honorable in the end, and it was a terrible loss to the Bull Kingdom to have lost such a man. They'd even lost the corpse of Octavius when Sigebert's flagship went down, so they couldn't even bring that back with them to the Bull King; only word of the Second Prince's death.

As they searched for survivors, though, Leon's mind turned away from the concerns of the Bull Kingdom and more toward his future. He had a good retinue already, with his family, along with Alix, Marcus, and Alcander. However, while he and Maia were exceptionally powerful, everyone else was not. Alix, Marcus, and Alcander had made their own disappointment in their performance during this expedition known, and as they slowly began sailing back toward the inhabited Serpentine Isles, they doubled down on their training. Leon even participated in the hopes of limbering up and starting to get a feel for the limits of his new status as an eighth-tier mage.

Even Maia seemed to pay more attention to their training, whereas usually she couldn't even be bothered to be present. However, the great magical walls she'd found herself unable to smash through ever since the civil war ended seemed to have affected her a little bit, and Leon could feel her flexing her magic in an almost nervous tic in a way that she hadn't before. She didn't seem ready to talk about it, yet, though, so he left her be until they could return to the Bull Kingdom.

All of that still left Leon with one conclusion: he needed more people on his side. He had no intention of heading to the Nexus alone, he needed a strong support group to aid him in his attempts to build his Clan back up from the bottom in the way he wanted, and his current retinue was just not sufficient for that task. He needed new recruits, and he already had at least one potential option...

—

Leon absent-mindedly stared at the wall across the cabin from him, his mind lost in strategy. Gaius, sitting on the other side of the game board, slowly deliberated his next move as he moved his hand from his right over to his left flank, and then back again, over and over.

Leon could understand his indecision—he'd moved his pieces against Gaius' quite heavily on both flanks, while keeping his much lighter center covered by his archers. Gaius *could* push down the center, but that would cost him quite a few pieces and leave his flanks vulnerable. It was a much safer bet for him to focus on countering Leon's charge on the flanks.

The two hadn't spoken much since the game began. The rest of Leon's retinue were either training on the deck, or in Maia's case, reading in her and Leon's room. The remnants of the fleet were slowly sailing back toward the fifth island, but their going was slow since most of the ships had taken some form of damage, and fixing all of it without the benefits of a drydock was out of the question. They could only limp their way back home with those that had survived the push into the shattered islands.

This left Leon and the rest with plenty of down time. Gaius, too, even though he was a Legion knight, but had technically been one of Sigebert's assistants, and with Sigebert gone, he was stuck in limbo, waiting for a new assignment and helping out where he could.

Leon knew that the young nobleman wasn't content with sitting on his laurels, and so he had a proposition for him. When they'd first met, Leon had despised Gaius; the things the nobleman had said to him were truly vile and beyond insulting to a man who had just lost his father. But during the course of their interactions over the following few years, Leon had developed first a grudging respect, and then some genuine admiration for Gaius. Even after everything he'd suffered through, all of the humiliations and indignities, all of the defeats, he was still trying to be an honorable man doing what he thought was right. Leon may not have appreciated what Gaius' nightmare looked like within the Serpent's temple, but the fact of the matter was that other than Maia, Gaius had been the only one brave enough to join him in venturing down into that place.

With more time to think and ponder over everything, Leon had come to greatly appreciate Gaius' presence. He might've felt a little differently if Gaius had still pined for Valeria, but with some down time to stop and think, Leon believed Gaius when he said that he was over her.

"I have a question for you, Gaius," Leon said as Gaius committed to the defense of his right flank.

"Go for it," Gaius said as he sat back in his chair, only to be forced to lean forward again when Leon made his next move immediately instead of taking some time with his turn.

"What are your plans after we get back to the Kingdom?" Leon asked as he slid one of his cavalry pieces across the board and pushed on the left.

"Can't say I know for certain," Gaius dejectedly admitted as he took much less time deliberating and maneuvered an archer to counter Leon's cavalry charge. "My family is on the out, as are most families. I suppose I'll continue to serve in the Legions for a few years and take the time to figure things out. With the fall of the landed class, the Legions are going to have a *lot* more power in the Kingdom in the coming centuries. On the other hand, I could resign after those years and join my family in whatever they plan to do next. House Tullius will still be wealthy, but without titles and their associated land, we could easily burn through that wealth trying to stay afloat."

Leon used his next turn to have some light infantry screen his cavalry charge. "You don't sound overly eager about either of those options," he observed.

"I'm not," Gaius admitted as he swooped in with a heavy infantry piece and took two of Leon's light infantry.

Leon hardly cared, paying more attention to Gaius rather than the game. He continued to advance his cavalry despite losing some of its cover. "Have you ever considered leaving the Bull Kingdom?" he asked.

Gaius paused as he was about to use his archers to attack Leon's cavalry. "Not really," he said. "The Bull Kingdom is where my family is. It's where the most support I could ever ask for is based."

"A reasonable reason," Leon cheekily said. "I ask because I don't think it's any surprise for you to hear that I'm not long for the Bull Kingdom."

"I didn't think you were going to stick around," Gaius replied. "Even before your real name was revealed, I couldn't see you as a Paladin. Even now that I know who you really are, I can't see you sticking around."

Leon nodded and smiled. "My intentions are to head south. My fiancée is Lady Elise, you know?"

Gaius nodded.

"With her and her mother's support, and that of my own personal power, I think Heaven's Eye would accept me at fairly generous terms. I intend to continue my journey through the magical tiers within the Four Empires, but even then, my goals lie a little higher, in the world above. Have you ever heard of the Nexus?"

"I've as much as anyone," Gaius said. "Everyone knows the Star That Never Moves, but other than a few stories, I can't say I know much about the place."

"It's the domain of the Gods," Leon whispered as he leaned forward a bit, a look of growing excitement stretching out over his face. "That's where my destiny lies. That's where I intend to go and build my family."

"I wish you luck," Gaius said as he took a quick drink from the wine cup next to him, raising it slightly in a subdued toast to Leon's ambition. "Sounds like it'll be a hell of a journey."

"I want you to come with," Leon bluntly stated, and Gaius just about choked on his wine. "I need people I can trust where I'm going. You may not have that much power compared to even the strength of the Four Empires right now, but power can always come in time. Trust, at least when it comes to me, is hard-earned, but you've earned it in spades. Come with me."

Gaius dabbed himself off with a napkin, the front of his shirt now slightly stained from spilled wine. He carefully placed the wine cup back on the table and cleared his throat a few times, though more out of anxiety and surprise than anything else.

While Gaius sat in his chair, looking like his brain had almost locked up, Leon said, "You don't have to give me an answer right away. Just know that the offer is made in good faith. Whenever you feel like giving it to me, feel free to do so. Just know that if you wait too long, I might have left before you made your decision..."



"Right..." Gaius muttered, his eyes wide with shock.

After that, neither spoke that much for the remainder of their game. Despite having started to swing the balance in his favor before Leon made his offer, Gaius found himself being thoroughly trounced, but he hardly cared. His mind was on far more important things. On far *greater* things.

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Leon blinked awake in his soul realm. His physical body lay in his bed, Maia curled up next to him, a smile of satisfaction on her face as she tried to mesh her naked body up against his in her sleep. They'd just finished several long rounds of vigorous sex, but even they had their limits, and once they were reached, they'd both drifted off to sleep.

Leon had woken first, but in the interest of letting his river nymph lover sleep a bit more, Leon had cast his consciousness into his soul realm to investigate something else that needed seeing to: Jormun's items that he'd looted from the cave.

The enchantment within that cave had largely captured his and the everyone else within his soul realm's attention, but those items deserved some as well.

To that end, Leon brought out all three items and laid them out on the table with Nestor's ruby. First came the hammer.

"You said this was a weapon of one of Jason Keraunos' vassals, right?" Leon asked Nestor. "A Despot or something?"

"A Strategos," Nestor corrected. "A Strategos is essentially the political rank that someone who's just achieved Apotheosis can expect to receive if they're someone else's subordinate. In this case, the man who wielded this hammer was from a long line of lightning mages descended from a Blood-Thunder Jaguar."

"Blood-Thunder Jaguar?" Leon asked in disbelief. "Who gave that thing its name? A thirteen-year-old?"

"No, he chose it himself," Nestor replied with the vocal equivalent of a shrug. "Taste is subjective, who cares what it named itself."

Leon did the physical shrug that Nestor couldn't, and the dead man continued.

"It's a powerful weapon by your standards, and I suppose, even by mine I would say it's quite a good weapon to wield."

"It's a weapon that controls earth, though, and correct me if I'm mistaken but I don't think a Blood-Thunder Jaguar has much command over that element..."

"No, he and those of his Bloodline held no particular command over earth that other lightning mages within my father's court did, but they *did* loot this weapon from another Clan that did. Which one escapes my memory at the moment, but it hardly matters. Even in the hands of a mage only lightly skilled in earth magic, it's still quite a potent weapon."

"That, I can't argue with." Jormun wasn't an earth mage, but Leon knew *very* well that in his hands, this hammer had been a force to be reckoned with. "What about this bracelet?"

“Our Clan used items like this to command war beasts,” Nestor said.

“Makes sense,” Leon replied, remembering that during the battle of the fourth island, Jormun’s krakens had arrived right after he’d brandished this bracelet.

“It uses darkness magic to entrance the mind of unintelligent creatures—it wouldn’t work on even the simplest-minded human, or on some of the more intelligent beasts that populate our universe, but most beasts would find themselves completely under your thrall should you use this bracelet on them.”

“And how is it used?” Leon asked, his eyes lighting up with glee at the potential this bracelet showed.

Nestor was quiet for a moment as his weak magic senses swept over the onyx bracelet, taking in every detail, including the six dull, lifeless, black gemstones that adorned it.

“You’d have to take a drop of blood of the beast you wish to enthrall and drop it on these gemstones,” he explained. “At least, that’s how it *should* work, I can’t be sure, it seems lightly damaged.”

“It was down in that chamber, so I assume Jormun took it out when he transformed into that serpent,” Leon said, his voice quiet as he thought about it. “I could see his transformation having damaged this thing, given how damn *big* he was in his monstrous form.”

“That would make sense,” Nestor said. “Be careful using this thing. Each of these gems *should* work at least once more, but after that... You’d better be sure that you *want* whatever beast you’re going to be tying to this bracelet, because I don’t think whatever gem you use on it will be capable of binding to another.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Leon wasn’t too fond of the idea of dominating monsters just because he could, or running experiments to see what kind of monsters the bracelet could dominate, so he took this limitation as almost a boon. He wouldn’t be tempted to use that capability without thought. “Should I be worried that others might possess other bracelets like these?”

“These weren’t terribly common in my time, but I’m sure more than just this one survived our Clan’s downfall,” Nestor mused. “If you’re worried about that griffin of yours, though, I’d say that it’s far too self-aware and intelligent for this magic to work on it. Like I said, *simple*-minded creatures. Even those krakens that that pirate was using was probably pushing the limits of the bracelet and might even provide another answer for why it’s damaged.”

“Good to know,” Leon said as he turned his attention to the last item, the book covered in magical seals. He could identify many of the seals, but undoing them was another matter entirely—they were so complex and tied into one another that he thought it was probably beyond his capabilities to unravel. Fortunately, he had a master of enchantment here with him...

“That book I can’t unlock,” Nestor stated, crushing Leon’s hopes immediately. The hammer and bracelet were exciting, but he knew what they were and what they did; the book was mysterious, and he’d always enjoyed reading well enough, so it had held an allure all its own. To hear that Nestor couldn’t open it was even more crushing than Leon would’ve guess it would be.

“Why not?” he asked, barely managing to sound like he wasn’t whining.

“Because it’s an enchantment of my own design,” Nestor explained. “Without the key phrase spoken aloud, there is no way to open this book. However, I think I know what it is...”

Nestor paused for a moment, but Leon’s patience ran out fairly quickly. “... Oh?

### **Chapter 608: Further Evaluations**

Cataloguing the items he’d found in the ‘transformation cave’, as Leon had taken to referring to it in his head, was only part of what he needed to do to put his soul realm in order. He also had a gigantic pile of gold that had once been the massive serpent colossus to deal with, as well as the two emeralds that had been set into its eye sockets. The emeralds were set aside for Gaius, but before handing them off, Leon wanted to take some time to study them, for they hummed with magic power.

However, after giving them a thorough examination with Nestor, he found that they were little more than magical batteries. He felt a little sad parting ways with them, for he could think of a few things he could do with such massive batteries—even if they were on the verge of depletion following the colossus’ destruction—but he fully intended to keep his word; these emeralds were Gaius’, not his.

The golden remains of the colossus’ frame were far more intriguing, though. Many of its enchantments were still intact, though depowered and old, and served as great inspiration for Leon’s studies. The gold alone represented an enormous amount of wealth, enough to ransom a King, but with its enchantments, Leon didn’t intend to sell the ripped and rent hulk anytime soon, if ever.

The colossus’ ivory horn was another story, for it held no magic power, and possessed only one enchantment: it could glow in the dark. It was still one solid piece of ivory, and though Leon couldn’t even begin to identify what poor creature had lost its horn for the colossus’ decoration, he guessed it was still worth a fair amount of silver.

Leon was a little disappointed in the lack of use in the horn, but he supposed the colossus wasn’t so much a dedicated guardian of that temple as it had been something to awe aspirants and pilgrims. It was powerful, but possessed little in the way of combat enchantments other than the fact that it was a massive golem made almost entirely out of gold.

After evaluating the colossus, he turned his attention to something far more heartbreaking: his armor and his flight suit. With his new eighth-tier power and the promise that the transformation enchantment held, he felt like he *might* be able to fly without a flight suit, but that was beside the point—with the aid of enchantments, he’d be able to fly much more efficiently, making longer and faster flights easier. His blood hummed in delight at the thought of soaring through the skies under his power, and after that transformation, his instincts demanded that he liberate himself from the tyranny of gravity as soon as was possible.

As much as he would love to indulge that, though, he knew that his armor had to come first. Once again, it had been beaten and broken and rendered useless. Some parts, like those covering his legs and left arm, were fine, but his cuirass had been ruined by the shade of Artorias, while his right gauntlet had been ripped asunder when he’d caught his hand in the formation of a teleportation portal. His helmet, meanwhile, was utterly lost to him, with whatever remained after his fight with Jormun having been thrown away before he was cast down into the pit.

It pained him, but as he stared at the extent of the damage and as he remembered just how much of a pain it had been to have repaired and re-enchanted the first time, he slowly came to the conclusion that he'd need to commission a whole new set of armor. His Magmic Steel armor had served him extraordinarily well, and he would honor its remains, but he needed something new, something that he could work with much easier.

He needed something that wasn't highly specialized for fire and lightning enchantments, as his armor had been, which was one of the reasons why he'd needed so many silver bands attached within. If he could enchant the metal of whatever new armor he wound up with directly, then it would be much more durable and efficient than using attached silver bands. He could even attach in new weapons or other effects much more easily. If he advanced his knowledge of wind magic enough, he could implement his designs for his second generation flight suit into his armor, removing the need to switch between the two if the need arose. He'd even be able to incorporate flying into his fighting style with much more confidence and reliability.

Leon had to stop himself from salivating at that thought and instead focus on the present. He wasn't sure how much longer he wanted to stay within the Bull Kingdom, and he was torn between getting his new armor made now or later. He'd undoubtedly be able to get better armor made in Imperial lands, but he didn't know how long it would take to travel there, and he couldn't possibly predict what hardships might crop up along the way. He may *need* new armor sooner rather than later, but he also balked at the idea of spending his silver on something that would so soon be outclassed.

He supposed he could simply buy something fairly cheap and spend some time enchanting it into something reasonably sufficient, but that was also an unappealing idea. He never considered himself a vain person, but right now, 'sufficient', despite its literal definition, just wasn't going to be enough.

*'Is that the blood of the Great Black Dragon coming through?'* Leon wondered after a while of trying and failing to come up with something that he could conclusively decide upon.

For the time being, he decided to wait until he could consult with Emilie or anyone else who knew the Empires and the routes to reach them before he made a decision.

As he thought it over, his eyes drifted, and eventually landed upon the distant mountain where the mausoleum he'd built for the stone giants lay. It was about time to return their dead to them, he felt a little more ready to admit his failure to them. His heart sank when he thought of Lapis and the other stone giants who'd followed him out of obligation to his bloodline, only to meet their ends under what he considered his failed leadership.

He wasn't looking forward to going there and admitting his failure, but it had to happen eventually.

For the next few hours, Leon spent his time in his soul realm drawing a few sketches for a new enchantment scheme for any armor he might commission in the future. He couldn't do much without actually having the armor and knowing how much space he had to work with, but he could at least get started on the basics.

He only stopped when he looked up from his work and noticed that the Thunderbird, who'd been doing little else other than analyzing the transformation enchantment on the distant mountain where it had been copied, seemed to be taking a break. He set aside his work and flew on over.

"How's it going?" he asked as he lighted down softly on the mountaintop.

"Quite well," she said as she shifted into her human form. "It's markedly different compared to what I'd been working on myself."

Leon cocked an eyebrow, remembering that the Thunderbird had promised to look into ways to help him stimulate his blood and achieve something similar to that transformation. It had only been a couple years since then, though, so he hadn't thought she'd made much progress.

"How so?" he asked as he let his eyes wander up and down the enchantment, taking in the countless runes that made it up, admiring how it formed long streams of light in the air.

"It requires an immense amount of power to pull off, for one," the Thunderbird said with some disappointment, "but I can't really argue too much with its results—it certainly sets out to do what it was designed to do."

"But...?" Leon asked, sensing the hesitant pause in his Ancestor's voice.

"*But* it does so in an almost callously barbaric fashion," the Thunderbird replied, a smile adorning her bronze face, yet there was little warmth in it. "Your human mind was suppressed under the influence of new instincts, and you experienced immense pain during your transformation. These alone make this enchantment, without modification, unsuitable for use. There isn't much point to having the ability to transform your shape if you and your transformed self are essentially two separate entities that share no memories. If you transform in battle, your *superior* form might choose to simply fly away, or attack your comrades. Useless. Counter-productive."

Leon nodded. The prospect of freely transforming into a bird in the way the Thunderbird did was exciting in ways that he couldn't fully articulate, but if it required going through what he did in the transformation cave every time, it would be a power he'd never invoke.

"Is there a way to prevent that?" he asked.

"Of course there is!" the Thunderbird boomed, her voice like a crack of thunder. "Most of what I was working on was to mitigate or eliminate those very flaws!"

"Is there anything obvious?" Leon asked as he slowly walked through the arches of light formed by the millions of floating runes.

"There are a few things I've already done," the Thunderbird proudly stated. "Nothing great enough to make this thing usable, yet, but progress has been made. This thing worked by stimulating blood far more than was necessary."

"Or maybe it *was* necessary," Leon countered. "This enchantment wasn't designed for me, remember? It was designed for Jormun, whose family had gone so long without awakening their blood that they'd lost the ability to do so. My blood, however, was already awake—at least, the part that I inherited from you was. It didn't need as much stimulation..."

"And yet, that serpent didn't seem entirely in control of itself," the Thunderbird replied. "It didn't show off much human intelligence."

“Not showing it doesn’t mean it didn’t possess it,” Leon responded, then frowned and shrugged. “I suppose we’ll never know, though. Not like we can question Jormun about what he experienced. Either way, for me, this blood stimulation was too much, so we can safely tone it down without losing anything critical for the enchantment to work?”

“That’s one thing I’ve already started to tweak,” the Thunderbird said as she gestured toward one part of the enchantment. Leon followed her gesture, but the enchantment was so complex that he couldn’t even begin to pick out the specifics of what she’d done.

Still, he nodded, for even if he couldn’t see what she’d done, he trusted that she wasn’t lying, and he was suitably impressed.

However, there *was* something he was curious about what she’d brought up. “You were working on the transformation with the Great Black Dragon?” he asked. She’d said so before, when he’d confronted her about how she’d kept that part of his lineage secret, but it took on new meaning now that he had a face to picture in his mind. The Great Black Dragon was no longer just an idea in his head, he was an actual person.

“I was, and while he was hardly the most cooperative, he did provide valuable reference material.”

“I thought he didn’t want to acknowledge me at all,” he said. He tried to control his tone, but he couldn’t help some bitterness escaping into his voice.

“He didn’t,” the Thunderbird confirmed. “However, what he *says* and what he *does* aren’t always that similar. He *said* he didn’t care what happened to you, and that you were undeserving of even the lightest of acknowledgments from him. And yet, he aided me when I asked for help, and he smote the Primal God when it entered your soul realm—I don’t think that God ever thought that that proud bastard would have such a reaction when it saw that your blood was suppressed!” The Thunderbird threw her head back and laughed, but Leon wasn’t quite so mirthful.

“He was quite emphatic that I was nothing to him,” he pointed out.

“He also did the very thing he swore he would never do,” the Thunderbird shot back. “He acknowledged you. Even if it was to throw a few barbed words around, he still acknowledged you. By the way, how are you feeling?”

Leon frowned in confusion, then shrugged. “Fine, I guess?”

“You weren’t acting entirely fine when that old bastard was here,” she said. “Felt to me like you were still experiencing some draconic instincts that were flaring up with another dragon in your territory...”

Leon scowled. “I just didn’t want him here. He was arrogant and treated my soul realm like it was his own. I just wanted him gone...”

“But I’m sure those instincts played a big part in that.”

Leon shrugged again. “I’m feeling fine,” he repeated.

“Then maybe all of that’s quieted down. I assume that flying lizard has gone back to suppressing your power as much as is now possible, but... I think he cares about you more than he lets on. Probably more

than *he* wants to. He doesn't like that he has to share you with me, so he claims that he's written you off entirely."

"He has," Leon stated.

"I wouldn't go that far," the Thunderbird replied. "I think if I never showed myself to you, he might've done so at some point."

Leon's scowl drew deeper. He remembered several times in some of his darkest moments when he saw visions of black fire, and of the Great Black Dragon within.

The Thunderbird continued, "He doesn't act like a civilized man. He *isn't* a civilized man. He's wild, selfish, and arrogant. He predates civilization, and never took to it once it came around. He does what he wants and he doesn't like to share. But I think, for all of that, for all his protestations, that he does on some level care about you, even if he only cares that you still bear his power and have inherited at least a part of his legacy, and thus you reflect upon him.

"Regardless, I think it's best if we add in some new parts of this enchantment so that it doesn't try to stimulate that side of you..."

Leon raised an eyebrow in silent question as he glanced back at his Ancestor.

"This thing was designed to stimulate *all* of your blood, and perhaps some of why you experienced so much pain was because of these two sides of you at war within your body to see which would come out dominant. I'd say mine won out, in the end, just as it *always does*..." The Thunderbird glanced off into the Mists, a gloating smile on her face, and a chuckle managed to escape Leon's lips.

"How much work would that entail?" Leon asked.

"I don't know," the Thunderbird admitted. "At the very least, it should help to limit the scale of this enchantment, to focus only on my Bloodline rather than going for both mine and his, and that ought to help with the much bigger problem that you have with this: the power."

Leon nodded. It had taken essentially all of the power from the power crystal that he'd looted from Nestor's lab to activate the thing in the transformation cave, and he couldn't just conjure a similar amount of power. If this transformation was ever to become practical to use, then it needed some serious refining to make more magically efficient.

"It also funneled a great deal of power into you to fuel your transformation," the Thunderbird mused aloud. "We'd need to stop that, too, otherwise you'd injure yourself; you'd have to transform using your own power if you've any hope of using this consistently without being torn apart. I suspect that would also help to limit the scale of this..."

The Thunderbird drifted off into technical babble that Leon was surprised to find he was able to follow fairly well—it seemed his lessons with Nestor were starting to pay off, even if he lacked the skills to actually implement any of the Thunderbird's ideas.

So, as she returned to working on that, Leon turned his attention to the last bit of soul realm business he had to take care of: fully evaluating and fixing the damage done by the Primal God and his soul realm's tremendous growth.

Most of the damage had already been fixed not long after Leon returned to his human body, but he still needed to do one last pass to fix the broken mountains and frayed edges of his soul realm. And he found quite a few cracks and rents that he'd missed in his first pass that he quickly closed with a bit of applied Mist of Chaos—though that hardly meant his soul realm had been completely fixed. It didn't end at the edges of the island, after all.

Once that was finished, he was left with an island that was about twenty miles in radius within his soul realm, which was now ten times as big. There was an immense amount of empty space between the edge of his little island, hovering there in empty space, and the edges of the mist. So, he got to work filling all of that in, too.

It was tedious, and he took many breaks, and as a result, when he felt Maia starting to stir next to his physical body, he'd barely even started on expanding the land he had to work with. Still, he gladly took the opportunity to stop making flat earth and dirt out of mist and returned to the physical world.

He'd have quite a bit of time after returning to the Bull Kingdom. He still had a few responsibilities to the fleet on his plate, but once this expedition managed to limp all the way back to the Kingdom, he'd finally have time to devote his full attention to his personal matters.

Not the least of which was Valeria. Just the thought of her instilled a feeling of deep dread within Leon. He knew how she felt about him; she'd confessed as much on their way north after the southern campaign of the civil war. He'd made his desires known to her as well, but whether or not she was actually willing to enter a relationship with him was...

Well, he figured he'd see when he'd see, and that for now, it was best not to worry. Whatever her answer, he'd find out soon enough.

### **Chapter 609: Making His Own Way Back**

Basina and Theuderic stared at Leon in disbelief, Leon having just wrapped up an abbreviated report of what had happened after Sigebert's fleet separated from the other two on the third island.

They were in the Earl's manor on the fifth island. The town surrounding it had less than five thousand residents, and the manor itself wasn't huge, so the Legion fleets were having some trouble finding places to dock. Legion engineers were swarming over the cliffs along the shore, building additional stone docks for the fleet to use, but the remnants of Sigebert's fleet had little trouble finding space. They were just so few, now.

Once they'd docked at the fifth island, Leon and the rest of the fleet's remaining command staff made their way to the manor to make their reports. Leon's retinue was with him until the meeting started, when only Maia was allowed to stay at his side. The Legate in charge of the sole remaining dreadnought of Sigebert's fleet was there as well, along with several of the Tribunes who captained the fleet's war galleys.

All of them backed up Leon's story, leaving little room for Basina and Theuderic to disbelieve Leon's story, even though Leon could see they *very* much wanted to. Their faces were stony by the nature of being older commanders who'd been in the Legion for decades apiece, but there were a few twitches here and there that Leon could pick out, putting their inner thoughts on display.



Leon had just dumped a *lot* on their plates, and their first instincts were clearly to wrack their brains in an attempt to either downplay or toss out Leon's report.

To an extent, he didn't blame them—he would doubt such a story, too, if he hadn't lived through it. A pirate trying to raise an ancient god was much less believable than a fallen Islander noble fighting for the emancipation of his people from the Bull Kingdom, and much harder to deal with.

But it *had* been dealt with, so Leon had, perhaps foolishly, gone into the meeting hall somewhat optimistic that neither of the Fleet Legates would have that much to complain about. He'd even been low-key looking forward to looking them in the eye and telling them, with the rest of Sigebert's remaining command staff there to back him up, that he'd been right all along.

That they were so obviously trying to figure out a way to not believe him was throwing a bit of a cobra into his horse race, so to speak.

"That's... *quite* the story," Basina eventually said after an uncomfortably long silence, looking surprisingly tired as she slumped back into her chair and pressed her fingers into her eyes, rubbing them vigorously before leaning forward and staring at Leon. "Are you sure it's accurate?"

A flash of anger tore through Leon, and he had to fight the urge to sneer. His patience for this was practically nonexistent after everything that had happened over the past week. They hadn't believed him before, and as a result, he'd only had one fleet at his back when he'd gone to stop Jormun.

"Yes, I'm sure it's accurate," Leon said through gritted teeth. It was a struggle not to release any killing intent, but he felt like his attitude was made clear, for Basina's eyes narrowed in displeasure.

"Whatever the case," the Legate from Sigebert's last dreadnought interjected, "Sir Sigebert is dead, and the fleet is ravaged. We killed the man responsible for it and confirmed Prince Octavius' death at his hands. Our mission is complete, and we're ready to return to the Kingdom. There's not much else for us to do here with so few of us left, anyway."

"There's still plenty for you to do," Basina disagreed. "These Isles aren't as stable as I would like, and having a few extra ships and a pair of seventh-tier mages around to help pick up the slack would—"

"We don't answer to you, *with respect*," Leon growled, his annoyance growing even further. They still thought that he was a seventh-tier mage, and he'd lied to them all about Maia's power level, but that hardly mattered. If he'd been honest, maybe Basina wouldn't be so shameless as to be trying to coerce him into helping with her mission, but he wasn't in an honest mood.

"*With respect*, I'm still the commander of this task force, and I won't have insubordination!" Basina replied, her voice starting to harden in the face of Leon's challenge. "I maintain *strict* discipline within my ranks!"

Leon stared back at her, debating with himself over what he should say to communicate his intentions as clearly as he could. He wasn't a knight anymore, and his patience for these games had run out. Now, however, Basina was staring at him like he was just a tool to her, or lower. Like he *owed* her his service and obedience. Like he was privileged just to be there.

The thing that struck Leon as most strange, though, was the fact that Basina wasn't from a noble family. She was a knight, and so was noble by appointment, but she was common-born, so he didn't know

where this was coming from. Maybe she thought that since he was just a mercenary, technically speaking, that she could order him around. Or maybe she was just letting her power go to her head.

But he wasn't having it. She didn't believe him, and he had no obligations to her. He'd accomplished the mission that he'd been tasked with as best as he was able—he couldn't bring Octavius back, as the King had requested, but he'd confirmed the Prince's death and revenged the Kingdom upon the Prince's killer. He was under no further obligations to this task force.

He quickly realized that he wasn't in the mood for fancy words.

"Fuck off, I don't need this," he growled as he stood. Basina's face contorted in surprise and rapidly-growing anger, but a threatening glare and a hint of killing intent from Leon had her frozen in her seat, the look slowly vanishing from her face.

Without another word, Leon turned around and left, with Maia right behind him. He left the rest of the room sitting in stunned silence.

Once on the other side, Leon paused as the rest of his retinue rose to greet him and took a deep, cleansing breath. As far as he was concerned, the Legion could believe whatever the hells it wanted to, he was done with whatever politicking their higher-ups were involved in. Whatever the reason for Basina's refusal to believe him, he was done with her.

"What's going on?" Marcus asked as he, Alcander, and Alix joined Leon and Maia by the door.

"We're done with these fucking people," Leon said, the scorn and derision in his voice not even slightly hidden. "Come on, let's head back to the ship."

"Uh, right...?" Marcus said as he and the others fell in behind Leon.

Leon confidently strode out of the Earl's manor feeling like he'd just lost a huge amount of weight. It was much the same feeling he'd felt after resigning from the Legion following the civil war, and this time, he knew that there would be no returning to the fold. He wasn't just done with Basina, he was done with all of the Legion. He'd give the King his report personally, but beyond that, he was done with the Kingdom as a whole, even if he and Elise decided to stick around in the capital for a little while longer. It would take nothing short of another Primal God rising from its prison to threaten the Kingdom for him to lift a finger in their aid.

"Make sure you're packed and ready to leave on a moment's notice," Leon said as they exited the manor. "I *might* have crushed a few toes in there, and we might not be entirely welcome on that ship anymore. Hells, they might not even be sending that ship back to the Kingdom, either, in which case we'll need to find another way back."

"I have so many questions..." Marcus grumbled, but he asked none of them and Leon didn't give any answers of his own accord.

Alix, however, had more important questions of her own. "If we're not going home with the Legion, how are we to cross the ocean?"

Leon shrugged. "We'll figure it out. The Islanders are a sea-faring people, there have to be some around who can give us a ride back east. If not, there's always the possibility that we can just steal a Legion ship."

"That would be dangerous," Alix pointed out, though her tone didn't suggest that she was against the idea.

"Not for us," Leon nonchalantly replied. "I doubt they'll seriously pursue, and even if they did, we have our ways of outpacing them..." He gave a meaningful look to Maia, silently asking her if she could do as Jormun had done and speed up any ship they took if the need arose. Just as silently, she nodded her confirmation that she could.

That was all Leon needed to know. Still, he didn't take any ride home on a Legion ship for granted, and as they walked through the tightly-packed, unpaved streets of the town, surrounded by short two or three-story buildings painted in various pastel colors, his magic senses drifted from the Legion ships to the civilian sectors of the harbor, looking for ships that seemed promising. Naturally, the Legion was dominating all available dock space, but that didn't mean that there were no civilian ships at all to find. In fact, it was quite the opposite, for the fifth island had little in the way of agriculture, and survived almost entirely on fishing and trading in jungle wood.

This meant that even with the Legion fleets here, there were still quite a few civilian ships around, too. Even if there weren't any that could reach the mainland, there had to be at least a couple that could reach Kraterok. If Leon had to, he'd island-hop all the way back to the Bull Kingdom.

*'Hells, if I have to, I'll build a whole lot of flight suits and we can just go back that way,'* he cynically thought, though he didn't seriously think that he and his weaker comrades would be able to make that journey.

Once they reached the harbor, he started looking around as they picked their way toward their dreadnought. For the most part, he only saw Legion marines and sailors going about their business of occupying the town and expanding the docks to accommodate more Legion ships, but he also saw a fair number of what looked like Islander sailors and fisherman around, too, though most of them were stuck arguing with Legion personnel regarding dock space, from what Leon could tell.

However, as they drew closer to the dreadnought, he saw someone that he'd almost entirely forgotten about after his interrogation—Leon had actually thought that Sigebert hadn't released him yet, and that he'd thusly died on Sigebert's flagship when Jormun as the Great Horned Serpent had destroyed it.

He saw a dark-skinned man wearing off-white robes made of fine material and a golden overcoat decorated with bright pink and red flowers engaged in a heated argument with an Islander who looked like a ship captain. At the dark-skinned man's waist was a large, ornate, curved sword, and tucked beneath one arm was a conical helmet intricately decorated with geometric patterns.

Anshu Bodhi Rahulani, the fifth-tier pirate from the Indra Raj that he'd captured during the battle on the fourth island.

Leon stopped, almost causing Maia to run into him from behind.

[What is it?] she asked, her question echoed by Alix and Marcus as they almost ran into Maia, in turn.

“Over there,” Leon said, nodding in Anshu’s direction. “Meet me on the ship, I think I want to go talk to him.”

“You sure about that?” Marcus asked as he gave Leon a slightly reproachful look. “Going around without an escort isn’t nearly as impressive as going *with* one...”

“It’s more important for all of you to get packed,” Leon replied.

“What are we going to pack?” Alcander asked, his tone light and sarcastic. “All of our stuff went down with Sigebert’s ship!”

Leon frowned, but he sent them off anyway. At the very least, they had a few changes of clothes given to them by the Legion, and Anzu had to be prepared to be moved, and he wanted everyone ready to leave the dreadnought immediately. He thought it so likely that they’d have to contact a civilian ship that he wasn’t even waiting around for the Legion to *maybe* apologize to them and give them a lift back east. Once his retinue was off heading back to the dreadnought, he started picking his way through the crowded docks toward Anshu.

He wasn’t sure what he wanted to say to the man, but Leon wanted to talk to him anyway. Anshu was a man from the other side of the plane, and as a former pirate, Leon guessed he was fairly well-traveled. He was also a fifth-tier mage, to boot—hardly that powerful compared to Leon or Maia at this point, but by the standards of the plane, he was still a strong mage who could find lucrative employment just about anywhere he went.

And Leon wanted to offer him lucrative employment. He needed men and women who knew the plane, and he needed people who could help and advise him on his journey to the Central Empires. He wasn’t sure if he could specifically trust Anshu given his piratical activities and some of the personal beliefs he’d shared during the interrogation, but those aside, he’d seemed to Leon to be a man of certain honor and conviction. He clearly hadn’t enjoyed his time as a pirate and had joined Jormun in return for some unspecified favor that the pirate had rendered him, possibly regarding his exile from the Indra Raj.

As he got closer, Leon was able to overhear Anshu’s argument with the ship captain, and he slowed down to listen in a bit. It sounded like Anshu was trying to barter his way onto the man’s ship, but the captain wasn’t having it; he already had enough crew and so was turning down Anshu’s offer to pay for his time aboard the ship with labor—he wanted either coin or some other material payment. It sounded like he’d taken a bit of a shine to Anshu’s sword, but Anshu wasn’t even entertaining the possibility of parting with it just for a ride, and he had no coin to give the man instead.

After a few loud exchanges, Leon approached the two from behind Anshu.

“Good day to the two of you,” he loudly said as casually as he could as he slid in next to them close enough that he made it clear he wasn’t just passing by.

“The fuck you want, eh?” the captain demanded, his Islander accent fairly thick but not incoherent. Anshu just stared at Leon in mild surprise.

“Just wondering which of these ships is yours, and where you might be heading,” Leon said with as natural of a smile as he could muster.

“This one here,” the captain growled as he pointed a thumb over his shoulder at a fairly sizable ship—it was long and thin, and looked like it was being loaded up with jungle timber. “Heading to Kraterok.”

“Isn’t that just wonderful, I was hoping to catch a ride that way, myself,” Leon mentioned as he reached into his soul realm for a dramatically large bag of silver and began to casually toss the bag up and down, letting the coins within jingle pleasantly. “Is there some arrangement that I could make for myself and my comrades?”

The captain looked like he just about answered affirmatively, but then his eyes drifted back in Anshu’s direction. “This mudskin one of yours?” he asked.

Anshu almost drew his blade for that insult, and Leon was impressed with his self-control that he didn’t; the captain was only fourth-tier, and Leon guessed that he would go down fairly quickly against the much more visibly-armed Indradian.

After blinking a moment to control his own repulsed reaction, Leon turned to Anshu and asked, “Heading to Kraterok, too?”

Anshu slowly nodded as his look of fury slowly faded.

“I can pay for him, as well,” Leon said to the captain. “How much?”

Perhaps it was because the captain was clearly more comfortable dealing with the lighter-skinned Leon—regardless of the reason, Leon was still making more progress than he’d been only a moment ago—but Anshu let Leon do most of the haggling, remaining silent for the remainder of the exchange. Leon managed to bring the price down from fifteen hundred silvers per head to only eight hundred with a little dramatic display of lightning magic, and he was informed that the ship would leave the following morning. Any accommodations for his group, especially Anzu, such as food and drink, would have to be provided by Leon personally.

Once that was over, the captain returned to his duties of packing the ship with timber, and Leon and Anshu were left alone.

“... Thank you,” Anshu hesitantly said after a moment of silence. “I don’t know how much longer I would’ve had to languish in this damn place without your assistance.”

“I’m sure you would’ve gotten off the island somehow,” Leon said with a smile. “In this part of the world, I don’t think a fifth-tier mage would have that much difficulty being kept anywhere they don’t want to be...”

“Are you implying that I should’ve attacked that man?” Anshu asked, his tone sounding rather offended. Without waiting for Leon to respond, he continued, “I would rather stay here indefinitely among these provincial oafs than sully my honor so!”

“An interesting view from someone I pulled out of a sinking pirate ship,” Leon said with a wry grin. Anshu turned and glared at him, but didn’t speak to defend himself. “I’d like to talk with you, if you have a few minutes,” Leon continued. “I’ve an offer for you that I think you’ll want to hear...”

## **Chapter 610: Making a Pitch**

Finding a private space within the occupied town wasn't easy, but after about fifteen minutes of wandering, Leon and Anshu found a fairly deserted cliffside platform that gave a fantastic view of the sea. It was about as open as such a cramped town could afford, and Leon could confirm with his magic senses that there weren't any people listening in.

Not that he particularly cared if anyone did, he just wanted the privacy. Still, as he took a position leaning against the stone guardrail and stared out over the tops of the buildings and cliffs at the open ocean, he knew that he probably didn't have long before the Legion moved onto this point, as well—it offered too great of a vantage point for monitoring the ocean to ignore.

Still, Leon took a moment to get comfortable and to enjoy the ambiance of this place—few people, pleasant weather, the sun setting behind them, dying the ocean a bright, calming red-orange.

Anshu, on the other hand, did not get all that comfortable, and after several seconds of silence following their arrival at this place, he asked, "So, what's this offer that you thought I wanted to hear?"

"Before I make the offer," Leon said in a relaxed tone, his eyes slowly turning between the ocean and Anshu with no hurry at all, "how about you confirm something for me? I don't want to get in your way if you have other plans, so can you tell me in broad details what your future plans are?"

Anshu frowned, and for a moment, Leon thought he might refuse. However, the Indradian shook his head and said, "I'm just trying to get back to the mainland. I don't want to be stuck here on these islands for months or years."

"Do you have family you're trying to get back to? Or a Lord? Or an employer?"

"No family worth mentioning," Anshu said, and Leon remembered that his family had been purged by the Indra Raj's monarch because one of his family members seduced the Rajah's wife or something like that. Anshu didn't say that with any audible or visible pain, though, so Leon wasn't going to question it. "I also don't have anyone else to answer to. My crew went down with my ship, and they were mostly new hires, anyway. I was never able to get my hands on good people who wanted to stick around on my shit ship."

"Why's that?" Leon asked.

Anshu shrugged. "Better opportunities were elsewhere. I think it's not a surprise for you to hear that I don't like pirates. I wasn't a pirate, I was just one of Jormun's allies because of our personal history. I didn't raid civilian ships or villages, and I wasn't a rich merchant. Neither of those lend themselves well to having a permanent crew."

"How long has it been since you were forced to leave the Raj?" Leon inquired.

Anshu shrugged again, visibly losing patience with Leon's questioning. Leon guessed if he hadn't paid for Anshu to ride with them to Kraterok, then the man would've left after Leon's first question.

"Decades," the Indradian said, offering no further clarification.

"You can't have spent all that time without making at least *some* friends," Leon stated. "Do you owe any of them loyalty?"

"I have few friends" Anshu admitted, his eyes narrowing in what Leon hoped was a realization of what this was. "Being always on the move doesn't make it easy to make good friends. I know a great many people, though, and have some friendly acquaintances all over the plane."

"In the ports of the Halcyon Federation?" Leon asked.

Anshu nodded.

"How about in Samar?"

"I've never traveled so far north before," Anshu said, to Leon's mild disappointment.

"How about Eskellion, then?"

"I know some people, but those people aren't the friendliest, especially to wayfaring captains. I can't say I know that many people who would be happy to see me, but I don't have any enemies there, at least."

Leon nodded in acknowledgment. "How extensive are your contacts, then? I don't want to have to ask for every damn corner of the world."

Anshu explained, "I can find friendly berth in just about every port from the Halcyon Federation all the way to the Pepper Islands in the far south. The Free Cities of the Tam I know well and can find a place to rest and resupply wherever I find myself. I've been to the Pegasi States before and know a couple people, but for the most part, they're preoccupied with Imperial business and don't have much time for outsiders unless they're bearing significant amounts of Indradian spices. If need be, I could easily find my way from the Hills of Dawn in the Halcyon Federation all the way to the fortress-city of Argos, the naval gateway to the Four

Empires."

Leon smiled. "I trust you know why I'm asking you these things?"

"This is an interview, is it not?" Anshu asked.

"It is. I find myself in need of strong, knowledgeable, and well-traveled companions. And you fit the bill for all three. If you don't want or can't take to the seas again under your own banner, then I would like to offer mine—join my retinue, and I will ensure that you are well-paid for your services, and always have a place to sleep and rest within my home and camp. Is that of interest to you?"

"It might be..." Anshu replied. "I have to say that I'm not too thrilled at the idea of giving up the freedoms I've enjoyed these past few decades. It's hard to go from captaining my own ship to sailing under the wing of someone who doesn't even look old enough to grow a proper beard."

Anshu stroked his spectacular black moustache as he said that, almost provoking some feelings of jealousy in Leon, but he didn't let those feelings get out of control, for it was true, Leon's facial hair was quite thin and atrocious. Leon often neglected his hair when out on long campaigns, but he always carried a razor to take care of his patchy facial hair whenever his patience for how it had grown ran out. Even now, as he stood speaking with Anshu, his hair was thick and overgrown, but his face was smooth and clean-shaven.

“Hard, but not impossible?” Leon responded, outwardly unfazed by Anshu’s statement. “Young though I am, I also happen to be an eighth-tier mage. Is following one of my power shameful?”

That statement finally provoked a reaction—Anshu first turned from gazing out at the sea to staring at Leon in abject surprise, which morphed over the course of several seconds into one of disbelief.

“If it’s true, no, it isn’t,” Anshu said, his tone indicating that he didn’t think it was true.

“Believe it or not, that’s up to you,” Leon shot back. “The fact of the matter is that I’m stronger than you—enough that you couldn’t even touch me if you tried. Hells, I even invite you to try.”

Leon backed away from the stone guardrail to the center of the overlook platform. There, he and Anshu had enough room to spar a bit, so long as neither used too much flashy magic. It didn’t seem like the buildings around were residential, either, but Leon didn’t want too much collateral damage if Anshu decided to take him up on his offer.

Which it seemed the Indradian intended to do. He smiled as Leon stood in the center of the platform, his arms slightly raised in obvious invitation to Anshu, but Anshu’s smile was thin and almost apprehensive. As Leon had said, even if Anshu didn’t believe that he was an eighth-tier mage, it was undeniable that he was still stronger than the Indradian.

However, after a few moments of thought, Anshu seemed to commit, for his aura spiked in intensity, and his fists began to glow with silver light. He didn’t go for the saber at his waist, which Leon appreciated, but he *was* clearly intending to use his magic. And it seemed that Leon’s initial impression of him following Anshu’s capture was correct: he was a light mage.

Anshu charged with terrific speed. He was a fifth-tier mage, and with light magic, he moved almost too fast for a mortal eye to track.

But Leon’s eyes weren’t mortal, and as his silver-blue lightning filled his body, Anshu practically moved in slow motion.

Anshu began with a quick right hook at Leon’s face. A quick lean and turn of Leon’s head had Anshu’s fist hit nothing but air, but the Indradian was undaunted and stepped forward into a follow-up left uppercut. That, too, missed completely, and for the next few minutes, Anshu aimed punch after punch at Leon, all to no avail.

Their short sparing session was ended when Leon, in his only move other than to dodge, swept Anshu’s leg and sent him tumbling to the ground.

“This doesn’t prove my claim, I know,” Leon said as he helped Anshu back to his feet, their short spar over, “but it does prove that I’m at least strong enough to be completely out of your league, doesn’t it?”

Anshu had thrown nothing but fists, his magic never leaving his body and his sword never leaving its scabbard, but Leon thought him a fairly old man, one with enough experience to realize the truth of Leon’s words.

“It does...” Anshu stated, though he sounded almost reluctant to do so.



Leon nodded, a shallow smile on his face. “Take some time to think things over; I’m not the sort to demand immediate answers. Just let me know your decision by the time we reach Kraterok. And remember, you’re a fifth-tier mage, and I’ll pay handsomely for that kind of skill and talent...”

Leon began to walk back into the town, leaving Anshu there on the overlook. As he walked, Leon kept an eye on the man for several more minutes, watching as Anshu stared first up at the sky, then returning to the guardrail where he stared out at the sea. His mouth moved slightly, but even with his magic senses, Leon couldn’t hear what he was saying, if he was saying anything at all.

*‘Perhaps a prayer?’* he wondered. But after those initial few minutes, he turned his attention away from the Indradian. He’d only gone over to Anshu during that short argument with the ship captain to make that offer to the Indradian, but during that exchange, he’d also committed to leaving the Legion here at the fifth island. Even if the Legion commanders here admitted their biases and mistakes, he was done with them. He wasn’t going to travel back on their ships unless there was no other choice.

He sighed as he found himself back at the docks, hoping no one would be too upset that he’d made this decision so flippantly. That ship carrying timber hardly looked that comfortable, it would likely not be the most enjoyable journey back to Kraterok that might’ve been available...

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If anyone in Leon’s retinue had expected the Legion to try and get them to stick around, they were disappointed; there wasn’t a single Legion knight that tried to stop them as they departed the dreadnought. However, to be fair, Leon knew many of them who might’ve tried, like Gaius, were still in the Earl’s manor discussing their strategic situation. As it was, it didn’t seem like the remnants of Sigebert’s fleet were going to be able to leave for home quite so easily.

To an extent, Leon could understand—Basina probably wanted the extra personnel to help secure this island, and since it was the last one she had to secure, it made sense to grab these extra hands and then have everyone go home together. There’d be greater security that way, too.

But even though he could understand her reasoning, he wasn’t going to wait around, and so it seemed that leaving on the timber transport was the fastest way back.

He was a little regretful that he didn’t have another chance to speak with Gaius, but he assumed that when the fleets returned, Gaius would seek him out if he decided to take Leon’s offer. So, Leon put all of that out of his mind. He’d made his offers to Gaius and Anshu, and now he just had to play the waiting game.

To pass the time until the morning when they could leave, Leon had his retinue head up to the small overlook a few hours after leaving Anshu there alone. Anshu wasn’t there anymore, but Leon wasn’t expecting him to be. Instead, the overlook was deserted; the perfect size for a bit of training.

The biggest thing Leon wanted to do was to help Alix, Marcus, and Alcander ascend. They were all three still only fourth-tier—a perfectly respectable, and even quite high, tier to have for their ages, but given how strong their enemies had been these past couple of years, fourth-tier just wasn’t sufficient. He recognized that letting them focus entirely on combat training during this expedition was likely a mistake, though not one that would’ve changed anything had it not been made—even if they’d focused

on growing their raw power, the gulf between them and Jormun's heavy hitters wasn't something that could've been crossed in only a couple of months.

So, once they arrived at the overlook, Leon spoke with them for a while to figure out just where they were intending on going. At this point, they only had to figure out how to change their element-less magic power into elemental magic, and they'd be counted as fifth-tier mages, and their combat capabilities would skyrocket.

Alix, perhaps unsurprisingly given how long she'd followed Leon, was interested in walking the path of a lightning mage. That brought a smile to Leon's face, and he knew that he could definitely help her in that regard.

Alcander, too, said that he wanted to pursue something that Leon had experience in: fire magic. Leon was easily able to give both him and Alix strong pointers for how to develop their magic further.

Marcus' intended path was not one that Leon had much experience in, unfortunately. He wanted to become a light mage, and not one that focused on healing. Rather, he was interested mostly in the speed and offensive benefits. Leon couldn't speak much on practicing light magic, but he had Nestor to consult on Marcus' behalf, along with all the books from his family's archives. It wasn't too much trouble to have the Librarian golem find a few books on light magic—none that were particularly dangerous to hand out, and of which he had several copies—that he could give to Marcus.

All of that only ate up about an hour, though. Alix and Alcander began to meditate and practice what Leon had explained to them, while Marcus sat down to study, and Anzu laid down to sleep. Maia laid down on top of Anzu, ostensibly to sleep the night away, but Leon could tell that even though she'd laid down and her eyes were closed, she was still awake and restless. He was tempted to go and ask about that restlessness, but he could also feel that she wanted to be left alone for a little while.

He did his best to send his own feelings through their connection, his trust and love, to make sure that she knew that whenever she was ready to talk, he'd be there to listen. For the night, however, it seemed like he was on his own.

With little else to do, Leon sat next to Anzu and cast his consciousness into his soul realm.

He exchanged a few barbs with Xaphan and Nestor, but he wasn't there for them. Rather, he had some more important things to see to—namely, repairs to his soul realm. He'd done much to fix the foundations of the island that had been damaged by the Primal God, but that didn't mean that his soul realm as a whole was fixed. Combined with the damage his soul realm had sustained during its uncontrolled expansion, he didn't think he'd be able to grow it anymore for years, let alone think about ascending to the ninth-tier.

Unfortunately, there wasn't much more that he could do himself to help his soul realm heal. He wasn't that debilitated by these injuries, they were mostly just hindering his growth, but it was still annoying beyond words. But those thoughts he pushed out of his head. After everything that had happened during the expedition, he supposed he was lucky to still be alive.

So, he flew out to a distant mountain near the edge of his island and began to pull in the Mists of Chaos, using them to grow the island and to solidify the island's foundation. He wasn't sure how much it would help if he had to endure such attacks again, but he made the underlying rock within the floating island

much stronger and denser, hoping that the denser the rock would be, the more resistant to damage it would be in the future.

As he worked, he also did a bit of expanding of the island. He didn't add mountains or anything else of the sort, just expanding the island as a flat plain out from where his mountains ended. His Mind Palace was a recreation of his childhood home, but he didn't want his entire soul realm to consist entirely of mountains and the one forest. He wanted plains, rivers, deserts, and oceans, too. He wanted his soul realm to be a world unto itself, or at least, as much of a world as a soul realm could be.

He thought of Khosrow as he worked. He didn't much care for the man as the Thunderbird and Justin Isynos had described him—a hero to the human race he may be, but he was also the man who killed the Thunderbird and, by Justin's account at least, was the primary reason that people from the Nexus hated those with Inherited Bloodlines. His policies seemed to be the reason why his mother was attacked and his father was assassinated.

Still, as much as Leon disliked him, he'd been struck by the idea that he'd managed to bring his soul realm out into the physical world. That was such an expression of power that Leon could barely imagine it, but there was a large part of him that wanted to see if he could pull off the same feat, and if he was ever to succeed in doing so, then he wanted his soul realm to be a place that people could actually live. A place that... maybe, just *maybe*, could be a home for him and his family one day.