

## Storm King 611

### Chapter 611: New Retainer; New Obligations

The time for Leon's retinue to leave came soon enough, and not a single member of the Legion came to stop them, not even when they brazenly marched through the docks like they were parade grounds. They took their places on the timber transport ship, and once everyone was on board, the ship departed.

The space they had was cramped and relatively uncomfortable, but Leon could see that the remaining dreadnought from Sigebert's fleet wasn't being prepped to move, so any lingering doubts he had over their course of action faded into nothing. It seemed that Basina had gotten her way and the remains of Sigebert's fleet weren't going to be allowed to return to the Bull Kingdom just yet.

It was an uncomfortable trip. There was little in the way of privacy since everyone, crew included, all slept and ate in the same room, and the captain of the ship was rather insistent that Leon's people stay away from the timber that had been secured on the deck. Leon tried to reason with him, saying that no one wanted his wood, but the captain didn't want to hear it. Leon was only able to extract a *very* reluctant promise to let him and Anzu above the deck once a day for a few hours so that he didn't have to deal with a stir-crazy fifth-tier griffin.

If Leon hadn't been able to use his magic senses to keep an eye on the captain, the rest of the crew when they went about their duties, and the ship's course, he might've been concerned the captain planned something untoward. As it was, all he and his retinue had to endure were a few strange looks every now and then—the crew otherwise left them alone.

They largely spent their time training. Leon did his best to keep them focused on one thing and one thing only: ascension to the fifth-tier.

Anshu was there, as well, but he kept to himself. He didn't say or do that much, spending his time much the same as the rest of Leon's retinue—either reading a couple books that he'd stashed away in his soul realm, or quietly meditating. From the way his magic swirled about him, Leon could tell that while he wasn't close to forming his magic body and ascending to the sixth-tier, he hadn't just started, either.

And so, about a week and a half passed, with Leon and his companions stuffed in the cramped crew quarters of the ship, eating nothing but the travel rations that Leon had stored in his soul realm, doing their best not to count the seconds until they could leave the ship.

Leon tried to stay as positive as he could, but after only three days—at which point they'd only just passed the fourth island—he was already weighing the logistics of taking Anzu and flying to Kraterok. He never seriously considered it, but how much longer the journey was going to take was constantly on his mind, let alone the possibility of returning to the Bull Kingdom in similar conditions.

But, finally, *finally*, the ship pulled into the harbor at Kraterok. There were still a few Legion ships around, but for the most part, it seemed like the city had gone back to whatever 'normal' had been before Jormun had showed up. Leon could sense a few Legion marines here and there, but it seemed like whoever had been installed as the interim Earl was the one keeping the peace.

Leon and his retinue stumbled off the ship at the earliest opportunity, the captain even seeming somewhat taken aback as he thundered down below deck, shouting for everyone to get off his ship, only to find that Leon and his companions were already trying to push their way past him to get the hell off his damn boat and back onto dry land.

After some brief, almost comical celebrations, Alix, Alcander, and Marcus all went off to find some place where everyone could spend a few nights, because there was no way any of them were going to get on another ship bound for the Bull Kingdom before they could rest up and get some privacy, first.

Leon, however, didn't accompany them. Instead, Anshu lightly grabbed his arm and asked to speak privately, which Leon agreed to, only allowing Anzu and Maia to accompany them. Anshu seemed a bit leery of Maia, but agreed after what seemed like several long seconds of intense contemplation.

Despite the size of the city and the Legion occupation, it was decidedly much easier to find a private spot for them to talk than it was in the Earl's seat on the fifth island. Huge swathes of the city were still uninhabited after so many died defending it from the Legion, or from those who'd left before the battle and had yet to return. After only about ten minutes of walking, Leon led his small entourage to a deserted neighborhood that lacked even scavengers—perhaps the tiny townhouses and cheap apartments had already been picked clean, or perhaps the local peacekeeping forces had kept looting to a minimum; regardless, it was a place where they could talk in peace.

"So," Leon said as he led the group on a slow walk through the deserted street, the sun above shining, the faded pastel paints on the buildings almost sparkling in the beauty of the early afternoon, "have you come to a decision, yet?"

"I have," Anshu gravely stated. "I have nothing left. My family is gone, my ship is gone, my crew is gone. All of my worldly possessions I'm either wearing or are stored in a small pile within my soul realm. I am a man with just about nothing left to lose, other than a few heirlooms and his own life. I don't even have money."

"You *do* have magic, though," Leon pointed out.

"I suppose I do have that, too," Anshu conceded. "But my point remains. I have just about nothing left of my own, and I don't have the magic power to carve out my own place in the world. I can only seek shelter under someone stronger than I am, someone with more connections and more resources."

Leon smiled as he let Anshu continue; at this point, he felt like he already knew what the Indradian was going to say.

"I would accept your offer of employment, Leon Raime. Assuming, of course, that you don't try to take advantage of my current circumstances to try and force me into a restrictive contract, or the like."

Leon laughed and said, "No, I will pay you a fair wage. I have quite a few financial resources at my disposal..."

The two haggled for a few minutes, but eventually settled on a wage of about twenty thousand silvers per month. It was a staggering sum of money, but it was less even than a knight of similar power within the Legion would be paid, and Leon had six hundred million silvers to play with.

Or, perhaps a little less, since he'd probably spent about a million or two on all of his expenses over the years, and on paying those already in his retinue. However, once he returned to the Bull Kingdom, he fully intended to have a talk with Elise about how best to make that money work for them instead of just sitting in a big pile in a Heaven's Eye account gathering dust.

Anshu didn't look happy when the negotiation was over, but neither did he look particularly aggrieved. It was a fair enough wage, and Leon had also promised hazard pay, bonuses for tier ascension, and the right to renegotiate his wage at every tier ascension, so there wasn't much to complain about. He even had the right to leave the contract for just about any reason, if he so chose—Leon wasn't looking for slaves or indentured servants, he needed people who *wanted* to stay with him, for whatever reason he could give them.

"There is one more thing..." the Indradian said as the negotiations wound down.

"What is it?" Leon asked, wondering what else the man might need. His salary was already more than enough to satisfy all of his material needs, and most of his wants, too, and he already had a good weapon and armor, so Leon wasn't sure what else he may want out of this.

"Do you have any intention of passing by the Raj?" Anshu asked.

"Maybe..." Leon said with a frown of thought. He didn't know quite how he'd reach the Central Empires, and while the Indra Raj was quite out of the way, he could envision sailing down that way to be one possible route. "Hard to say, I have no idea what might come in the next few months, let alone the next few years. Why do you ask?"

Anshu sighed, looking almost like he was working up to making a big request. Or maybe working up his nerve to make some kind of decision...

"I do have *some* business in the Raj. Business I never thought I would actually get around to, but if you haven't lied to me and you *are* an eighth-tier mage, then finishing this last bit of business might just be possible."

"What kind of 'business' are we talking about here?" Leon asked. The way Anshu had said 'business' led him to believe that he had some enemies he wanted to take care of, and asking Leon to make those enemies his own was... not *unreasonable* given the demands Leon knew he'd be making of Anshu in the future, but neither were they particularly welcome. "Looking to visit some violence upon someone? Vengeance, maybe?"

"Vengeance would be one way of putting it," Anshu whispered, his even, serious tone wavering with concealed hatred just enough for Leon to pick up on it. "My cousin who was responsible for my family's exile was caught and put to death very soon after the Rajah caught him in bed with one of his daughters. His death was justified, and I hold no grudge. However, much of the rest of my family was put to death, as well, either by the Rajah's executioner, or by the circumstances of our fall. My father and brothers were beheaded, my uncles stripped of their titles and wealth and exiled along with their families. As far as I know, all of them met violent ends at the hands of my family's enemies once they no longer had the political tools to keep the vultures at bay."

Leon's eyes narrowed slightly. "I thought you told me after you were captured that your family had been exiled?"

Anshu shrugged. "I lied. I didn't want to get too into my family history during an interrogation."

Leon considered making a big deal out of that lie, but after a second of thought, he decided not to. He'd lied plenty, both directly and through omission, while he was a knight in the Bull Kingdom. With a shrug, Leon asked, "Are these enemies you speak of the targets of your ire?"

"Yes," Anshu said without hesitation. "I was hoping for some assistance in dealing with them, if possible."

Leon's thoughtful frown deepened slightly. He didn't revenge himself upon Justin Isynos, but he understood Anshu's hope. But he didn't immediately agree.

"These people, are they powerful? Do they include the Rajah?" Leon asked. The Raj was the most powerful nation outside of the Central Empires, and he imagined that its ruler was powerful enough to command that kind of respect. Making such an enemy was... problematic, especially so when it was just to recruit a single fifth-tier mage that he didn't know that well.

"They are, and the Rajah is... not included," Anshu hesitantly confirmed, though it seemed he struggled mightily to reach that conclusion. Leon decided to quietly contemplate the chances that Anshu would change his mind as they spent more time together. "Great nobles and landowners within the Raj. Rich and strong. But not so great that they can stand against someone of the eighth-tier... Only the power of the Rajah himself could protect them against you."

"Still, taking out some powerful nobles might make an enemy out of the entire Raj," Leon pointed out. "I can't imagine there's any monarch anywhere who would take too kindly to a foreigner infiltrating their realm and assassinating their great men and women. They would strike back." Leon noticed Anshu's eyes slightly tighten when he mentioned 'great women', but the Indradian didn't say anything about it.

"I don't ask lightly, nor do I expect you to agree," Anshu said. "As far as I'm concerned, our contract was decided once our salary negotiations were over. If you refuse, then I will accept it."

Leon nodded, though his frown remained. "I will... take it under consideration. For now, my business will take priority."

"I understand," Anshu replied. "I will be your retainer. Your enemies are mine, but mine need not be yours."

Leon felt a little bad, but he had to take of his business first and foremost. He wasn't paying Anshu for the privilege of tagging along on someone else's revenge quest. However, though Anshu *said* that he would accept it if Leon refused, based on the man's subtle body language—the occasional curling of his fingers into a fist, the way his eyes refused to meet Leon's when he spoke of his desire—Leon understood that Anshu's would be only a temporary employment if he did not help the man take care of this business.

The two went quiet for a short few seconds, neither of them quite knowing what to say. The tension was only broken when Maia spoke to the both of them mentally—though her question was directed at Anshu, [You are from the Indra Raj. Are you familiar with the Free Cities of the Tam?]

Anshu glanced at her, his eyes momentarily narrowing into a nasty glare. For that moment, Leon thought the man was going to refuse to answer, just as he had the knightess that Sigebert had sent to

interrogate him following his capture. However, as Maia glared back at him, her aura on full display, and with Leon taking a step in Maia's direction and standing next to her in solidarity, Anshu blinked and responded.

"I am quite familiar with them," he tersely said.

"What can you tell us about them, then?" Leon asked as he pointedly took one of Maia's hands into his own. The river nymph subtly, but noticeably, leaned into him. The two made it clear enough by their body language that if Anshu had any reservations about speaking with a woman, then they were better checked at the door.

Anshu began slowly and hesitantly, but sped up and spoke with more passion as he spoke more of the region of the world that had once been his home.

"The Free Cities of the Tam are a number of independent trade cities on the southern coast of Aeterna. They lie just beyond the Raj's southern border, on the far side of the White Tiger Mountains. Most of the jungle stops on our side of the mountains, leaving the Tam to be relatively arid, but with exceedingly fertile farmland. The merchants of the Tam are extremely rich, trading in the many spices that grow in their lands to all corners of the world. Many Rajah's have attempted to exert their dominance over the coast, but no matter how far they've pushed, they rarely manage to make their control last for more than a single generation. The Free Cities of the Tam owe no foreign monarch their allegiance these days, and will often squabble and bicker amongst themselves over shipping lanes and trade zones, but will usually band together as one if any of them are threatened by an external force.

"Despite all of this, if you were to take a man out of the Tam and a man out of the Raj, you'd hardly be able to spot a difference between them. We worship the same gods, speak the same language, dress the same, and look the same. They just don't acknowledge our Rajah or his laws, and are known for their... *improper* culture and excessive greed."

The way Anshu's eyes darted toward Maia when he spoke of 'improper culture', Leon wondered if there was more equality between the genders in the Tam—the Indradian had repeatedly said that there was a wide disparity within the Raj between men and women, and he supposed that could lead to quite the culture clash even amongst two peoples that were apparently otherwise indistinguishable.

"There something about the Free Cities that interests you?" Leon asked as he glanced at his river nymph lover.

Maia nodded. [My father was from there. My mother stole him from his palace and took him north, where he fathered me and my sisters.]

"From... his palace?" Anshu asked, the light of recognition shining from his eyes. "Was your father from Chola?"

Maia nodded.

"He wasn't... he wasn't Ellalan, was he?"

Again, Maia nodded, and Anshu stumbled backward as if physically struck.

"That name mean something to you?" Leon asked as his eyes flit from Maia to Anshu.

“Ellalan was a Prince of Chola, the most powerful of the Tam states,” Anshu explained, his voice hoarse as if he’d just spent hours screaming at the top of his lungs, the respect in his tone evident even though he spoke of someone who wasn’t from the Raj. “He was a brilliant military leader. Two hundred years ago, the previous Rajah attempted to subjugate the Tam as so many of his ancestors had, and Ellalan was the man who stopped him. He led a comparatively small Tam host that shadowed the Raj’s army, picking at it bit by bit and forcing them into more favorable terrain. Finally, Ellalan smashed the Raj’s army while they were crossing a river, forcing an end to the campaign. The Free Cities of the Tam remained free because of Ellalan, and many thought he would rise to become a great King of the region, uniting them against all potential foreign enemies, only for him to disappear several years later.

“That such a man was taken by a nymph and dragged to the other side of the world...” Anshu looked almost beside himself with shock, but as his eyes flickered back toward Maia, Leon noticed that he looked at the river nymph with marginally less antipathy and distrust.

[I would like to see the home of my father, if possible,] Maia stated, her face completely impassive, as if what had sent Anshu reeling had been nothing more than a dinner recipe. Still, for all that she appeared rather distant and disinterested, Leon’s desire to visit that end of the world skyrocketed. His lady wanted to go there, and it wasn’t like he had much of a reason to say no.

“Then I’ll be sure to make some time,” Leon said.

After that, none of them had much left to say, and so they went and found the rest of Leon’s retinue at the inn they’d holed up in, Anshu now one of Leon’s subordinates. They needed a few more days of rest, but Leon eventually managed to snag a few bunks on one of the first tribute ships being sent back to the Bull Kingdom from the Isles for him and his people.

It would be a long and uncomfortable journey, but it was time for them to return to the Kingdom. Their time there was going to be limited, but they still had much to do before it became time to finally leave for good, and head south.

## **Chapter 612: Home, Again**

The arrival of Leon’s retinue back in the Bull Kingdom came without any fanfare. They’d hitched a ride on a tribute ship, not with the Legion armada, so those who awaited them at the docks of one of the southern trade cities were not cheering throngs grateful that their task force returned home victorious, but rather a number of low-ranking Legion knights and a handful of dry, boring bureaucrats there to inspect the tribute.

There was no reason for them to stay on the ship while the Legion went about their inspection, so as soon as the customs paperwork had been completed—and it went *very* quickly once the bureaucrats realized who Leon was—Leon led his retinue outside.

It had taken more than a month to reach the Bull Kingdom. The tribute ship was faster than a Legion dreadnought, but not by much, and it was much less stable and secure—just about everyone had gotten seasick at one point or another, and Leon found himself sharing the technique that Xaphan had given him long ago for dealing with such sickness with the rest of his retinue. Still, even with that helping them, Marcus and Alcander practically fell to their knees once they’d stepped out onto the docks, and

Leon wondered if they were going to try and kiss the stone bricks in celebration of their return. Alix and Anshu maintained slightly more dignity, but Leon could tell both were happy to be back on solid ground.

Anzu, on the other hand, leaped about with unabashed, almost child-like glee. He hadn't been able to get much exercise while the ship was sailing, with the captain of the tribute ship being even less accommodating for Leon than the ship captain from the fifth island to Kraterok had been.

Leon was tempted to join in Anzu's celebrations, and he vowed that he was never going to travel by boat if travel by land was an option. It had been so uncomfortable of a journey that he hadn't even managed to get any enchanting work done.

The retinue hadn't left the dock before one of the Legion bureaucrats, a young-seeming fifth-tier man, disembarked from the ship and approached.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, Sir Leon," he said as he approached, looking practically beside himself with anxiety and fear as if he were afraid that Leon would smite him for the disturbance.

"Drop the 'Sir'," Leon sternly ordered. Once the knight hurriedly nodded, Leon's tone softened and he asked, "What do you need?"

"Uh, Si- I mean, um, Leon... His Majesty sent us orders to watch for your return. A ship has been prepared to take you back to the capital as soon as possible."

Leon didn't bother hiding his scowl. "Did he say why he wanted you to watch for me?"

"Only that he hopes you can report to him as soon as possible..."

Leon banished his scowl with some effort, and after a few more short exchanges, the knight shared with him where the transport ship was located.

To call it a mere 'transport ship', however, was to not do the ship that much justice—it was far more of a yacht, sleek and practically sparkling with magic. On both sides of the beautiful ship had been prominently painted a golden bull, signifying that this was one of the Royal Family's personal ships.

Once the crew of the yacht learned that Leon had arrived, they hurried him and his retinue aboard, and then set out with all haste up the Naga River toward the capital. Leon wasn't too happy to find himself so soon on another boat, and neither were most of his retinue, but every second brought him closer to Elise, Valeria, and their home, so he was able to bear it.

Fortunately, the yacht ride north was much more comfortable than the previous two ship rides had been, with every one of them getting their own personal cabin and plenty of private space. Leon was somewhat concerned about the crew and kept his magic senses trained on them for much of the journey, but it seemed they weren't anything more than the personal servants and guards of the Royal Family who weren't trying to spy on him or his people.

During the northward cruise, Leon learned from the yacht captain that his orders were to carry Leon directly to the Royal Palace upon arrival back at the capital, but with some intimidation, coercion, and light bribery, Leon managed to have him schedule one stop before heading to the capitol island.

Their arrival in the capital came with a little more fanfare than their arrival back in the Kingdom, though that wasn't saying much. Two small Legion escort ships were waiting for them in Calabria, and once they

reached the capital's city limits, one of the escorts suddenly sped up and proceeded on to the capitol island. Leon was told that this was to inform the Bull King of their arrival.

But as far as he was concerned, the Bull King could wait. He had a much more important reunion to see to. To that end, as the ship sailed up the Naga River, Leon let his magic senses loose until he saw what he was looking for: his home, the relatively small villa that he and Elise had bought a few years ago. It had a dock on the Naga River, but Leon didn't even wait for the yacht to get closer; he, almost without telling anyone, simply got on Anzu and prepared to fly off, only waiting long enough for Maia to climb on behind him.

Then, with only a quick barked instruction at the yacht's commanding knight to meet him at his villa, Leon, Maia, and Anzu took off from the yacht's deck and soared through the sky.

Wind magic propelled them on at great speed, as if Anzu could pick up on Leon and Maia's anxiety and need to return to their home. Neither could see within the villa thanks to the defensive wards Leon had woven into its structure, but there were enough servants and others around that Leon felt confident that Elise and Valeria were inside.

And then his belief was at least partially confirmed when he saw Valeria wander out into the backyard, dressed in simple, loose training attire and wielding a short practice spear. She looked like a star had come loose from the sky and landed at his home—her silver hair glittered in the light of the afternoon sun, her body almost glowed with strength and health, her sapphire eyes were narrowed with deadly focus, and her fifth-tier aura soared with power and vigor.

Leon didn't think he'd ever been more physically attracted to her than that moment. She was more angelic than even the angels he'd encountered, and his hands unconsciously tightened their grip on Anzu's saddle in longing. He wanted to land right in front of her, leap off of Anzu, and take her into his arms. He wanted to do so much more than that, but with a deep breath and more than a little regret, he tempered those feelings. They still had to work things out between them, but the simple fact that she was at his home had him hopeful for their future.

While his eyes were locked on Valeria, it seemed that some of the servants noticed him and Maia flying in on Anzu and had run inside, for the only possible person that could distract him from Valeria right now was led out into the villa's front courtyard by one of the Heaven's Eye gardeners, who then pointed right up at them.

And there she was, her hair shining like fire, her eyes glimmering like the finest of emeralds, her hands rising to cover the smile of absolute joy that had come to her lips as she laid eyes upon them. Even from as far away as he was, Leon could hear her sobbing and laughing at the same time as they approached as quickly as Anzu could carry them.

Anzu flew over the noble district like white lightning, but as fast as he was, Leon was barely able to wait long enough for him to land. As soon as Anzu was close enough, Leon slid out of the griffin's saddle and let his momentum carry him the rest of the way. As soon as his boots touched the grass just past his front gate, he was sprinting for Elise, lightning surging through his muscles to propel him even faster. She, too, started to run forward, but with Leon's lightning magic, she barely got in two steps before his arms were around her and he was lifting her into the air with a joyous cry. He spun her around and sealed her lips with his.



Their kiss was long and passionate, filled with longing and unfulfilled desire. Elise's hands roamed Leon's body, while his were almost frustratingly preoccupied with holding her aloft. They only parted when Anzu landed and Maia rushed over to join them—the gardener had made himself scarce as soon as he could, leaving the three about as alone as they could be in front of the villa where many others were working.

Eventually, though, they had to part, but they did so slowly. First, their lips unsealed, but Leon and Elise still pressed their foreheads together as Maia embraced Elise from behind. Then, they leaned back a bit so that they could look the other in the eye.

"You couldn't have sent word that you were coming?" Elise sarcastically asked as her face split with an enormous grin.

"We traveled as fast as we could without abandoning everyone else," Leon whispered as he leaned forward and kissed her on the cheek.

[Faster than a messenger, even,] Maia said as she kissed Elise on the other cheek.

Only then did Leon and Elise start to properly separate, though Maia remained locked around Elise.

"It's... about time you came home," Elise said as she took a deep, steadying breath, the heat in her eyes that had ignited upon seeing Leon and Maia remaining, though. "You are... *back*, right?"

"Yes," Leon replied. "Though, I have some business with the King, first. There won't be anymore journeys like this—at least, not for a *long* while. I can only speak for myself, but I want to stay home for a while with you two."

[I agree,] Maia said as she subtly began to steer Elise back inside, to the red-head's delight.

"Get that business done, then," Elise impatiently said. "You two have been with each other for months, but I've had none but my own fingers to comfort me!" She then disentangled herself from Maia just enough to lean over and whisper her pent-up desires into Leon's ear, "I *need* you. If you don't come home and fuck me until I see stars as soon as you possibly can, then we're going to have a problem..."

It took a titanic amount of willpower for Leon not to immediately tear her clothes off right then and there and carry her to their bedroom, but he somehow managed to refrain. "I'm going to say hi to Valeria, and then I'll be off. I'll not stay long with the King."

[You'd better not,] Maia said, speaking for both herself and Elise as she practically lifted Elise off her feet and began to carry her toward the bedroom.

Leon was left standing in the atrium with a smile and a look of longing as he fought to contain himself. He could hear Maia already starting to pull Elise's clothes off, and Elise's shrieks of bliss, and in that moment, there was nothing he wanted more than to join them.

However, a moment later, he bit the insides of his cheeks and turned away. There'd be more than enough time for that later. He calmed himself down and then walked out to the backyard, where Valeria was quietly performing some moving meditations—her eyes were closed and her movements were slow and flowed like water. She was using her training spear more like a dancer's baton than a weapon, and Leon found himself completely entranced with the sight.

Valeria's hair was like a river of silver flowing behind her, lustrous and unconstrained. Her clothes were loose, but showed enough of her body line than in Leon's electrified state, she seemed a goddess of beauty.

He wanted to go over to her, but any words he might've said in greeting evacuated his mind as soon as his eyes landed upon her. He could only stand there, entranced, as she moved.

And then she froze, her sparkling blue eyes opening slowly and turning in his direction.

A smile broke out across her face as she saw him standing in the doorway looking at her. It was a loving smile, devoid of any lust or antipathy, and Leon felt almost ashamed of his attraction to such a vision of beauty.

But then the moment was over; she gave him a quick wave, and he came back to his senses.

"Hey there!" he called out as he slowly walked over to her. "Naiad and I are back..."

"Bringing word of victory, I hope," Valeria replied. "I'm... sorry I couldn't go with you. I know that I should've been there as your retainer, but I—"

"No need to finish that," Leon said with a wave of his hand, as if her expressed regret was something he could physically disperse. "Family should always come first, no matter what. Speaking of, how's your father?" He tried to keep his voice neutral and curious, but he strained a little as he asked his question.

Valeria seemed to pick up on it—if Justin had died, then Leon wouldn't have cared that much. His only emotional investment in keeping Justin alive was the impact his death might have on her. Her face fell a bit, but then perked back up.

"He's doing fine," she said. "Heaven's Eye has skilled healers seeing to him. He's already healed enough to start recovering his magical strength."

Leon wasn't sure how he felt about that. He was an eighth-tier mage, now, but that ascension had come at a price that prevented him from making further progress—at least, for the foreseeable future. Justin had already ascended to the eighth-tier once, and Leon could easily see the man ascending much faster now that he was doing so again.

And he couldn't help but wonder what Justin would do if he were to surpass Leon in raw power. It would certainly cast some doubt in Leon's mind over whether the man might stick to his agreement not to interfere in Leon and Valeria's business. He might even try to fulfill his original plan and attack Leon in the hopes of killing him and being able to return home to Lord Kamran.

"That's... good to hear?" Leon responded, unable to keep the question from coming out a bit.

"It is," Valeria said without batting an eye.

Leon nodded, suddenly feeling incredibly awkward, all the passion he'd felt at returning home dissipating in a matter of seconds. The two stood there for ten painfully seconds before either said another word.

"So, anyway," Leon said, breaking the silent tension, "I have to report in at the Royal Palace. Shouldn't take too long. You've been staying here, yes?"

“These past few weeks, I have,” Valeria replied. “Elise was kind enough to give me one of your spare rooms. Said it’s mine as long as I want it.”

Leon smiled and nodded again. “Then let’s talk again tomorrow. I’m sure we’ll have much to say, but for now...”

“There are other people who need your attention?” Valeria asked, finishing his statement, to which Leon nodded once more, this one with his fair share of awkwardness and regret. So, she took a few quick steps forward and suddenly pressed her lips against his in a soft and rather chaste kiss, stunning him so much that she’d pulled back before he could even physically respond. “I look forward to having that talk, then,” she stated as she gave him a promising grin and walked several dozen feet back into the yard.

She returned to her moving meditations, and Leon could see the tip of her training spear sparkle as snowflakes began to fall from it. He had to go, but he also wanted to stay and watch for a little while longer. Maybe even have that talk right now instead of later.

But then, the yacht that had ferried him and his retinue came into view, quickly steering itself in the direction of his villa’s dock. The members of his retinue were all on the deck, getting ready to themselves disembark.

So, Leon took one more deep, steadying breath, and then sought out the person in charge of the Heaven’s Eye servants around to inform him of the incoming guests. Then, he and Anzu returned to the yacht after making sure that his retinue were being properly seen to.

He had a King to see.

—

King Julius awaited him in a small private meeting room buried within the main building of the Royal Palace complex—out of the way enough to be relatively deserted, yet more than decorated and ostentatious enough to be fit for a King to meet with another powerful mage.

The Bronze and Penitent Paladins both stood guard outside the door—the rebellion in the Western Territories that had drawn the former away during Octavius’ escape apparently having been already wrapped up. Each gave Leon a nod of greeting, but neither spoke a word or so much as blinked at Leon’s changed aura.

Leon returned their greetings and then walked into the room.

There, he found the King. Julius looked to be in much better health now even than when Leon had left. His frame was filling out with respectable amounts of muscle, his eyes were sharp and bright, and there was an energy to his movements that indicated he was past the worst parts of his recovery and already starting to approach his peak once more.

“Leon Raime,” the King growled as Leon was shown in. The room was fairly small, with only enough space for a few chairs, a table, and a hearth, but the walls were completely covered with sound-dampening curtains, and Leon could sense a great deal of magic flowing through the walls, making this one of the most heavily-defended rooms within the palace. “You’re back, and without any of the fleets...”

"I wanted to return as soon as possible," Leon said with a shrug.

"I can understand that," the King said. "But is that something that you should be so flippant about? Dame Basina sent word back to me a couple weeks ago accusing you of all sorts of misconduct, including desertion. And here you are all-but admitting to it..."

### **Chapter 613: Three Becomes Four**

"You think I'm a deserter?" Leon asked, the corners of his lips turning up in amusement. The King was staring at him with an expression of such seriousness that he almost took Julius' words at face value and assumed hostility.

The King was silent for a long moment, and he took a few slow, ominous steps toward him.

Then, the older man smiled and exclaimed, "Absolutely not!"

The two chuckled a bit, and the King waved Leon further into the room, both of them taking seats in the plush armchairs around the small table.

As they sat, Leon asked, "So, has Dame Basina made any more slanderous accusations against me?"

"Many," Julius replied, "though I'll not repeat them. Nearly all of them would've earned you the death penalty if a trial were held, and you convicted..."

"... but I'm no longer a member of the Royal Legions," Leon finished.

"Precisely. Your job was finished, as was that of Sir Sigebert. Dame Basina had no place ordering you to remain. Speaking of which, how about you tell me a story?"

Leon launched into the story of the campaign as he remembered it, though he expunged quite a few details that were a little more personal to him. His transformation he ascribed to a temporary curse applied by the 'Serpent', and Xaphan was only a summoned ally of Jormun's that eventually turned on the pirate. By the time he was finished with his report, the King knew all the details that Leon felt he needed to.

"That's... quite the story," the King said, his somewhat more light attitude taking a hit when Leon spoke of the mass sacrifice on the second island, and dissipating entirely around the time Leon reached the part where he and Sigebert found Octavius' body.

"That's what everyone says," Leon drily replied, though he didn't say anything else, instead letting the King process everything that he'd been told.

After almost a whole minute, the King murmured, "Sir Sigebert had kept me up-to-date on most of that, but your fleet fell out of contact around the time you left the inhabited areas of the Isles behind. Sigebert was a fantastic Legate. He could've been a Consul, in time. And all of those in his fleet were brilliant servants of my Kingdom. They will all be missed."

Leon silently nodded, unsure of what he could add to that. He didn't quite agree with the King's assessment of Sigebert, but he at least held some positive opinion of the man after he agreed to set everything else aside to go after Jormun.

The King sighed, and after a few more seconds, he said, “By the way, Leon, congratulations on your ascension. Eighth-tier is... well... it’s no small feat. And for a man like you... so young... There’s no way I can convince you to stay here, is there?”

Leon bitterly smiled and shook his head in the negative.

“That’s unfortunate for me,” the King said. “But, I suppose it’s the best choice for you. Not even twenty-one and you’re eighth-tier... This Kingdom is too small for you. You’ll need to find one that’s bigger or build one of your own.”

“I intend to do just that,” Leon whispered. “I don’t know when, but I’ll be heading for the Central Empires within the next few years. Hells, maybe I’ll even head out tomorrow, I can’t say for certain. But even once I get there, none of them will be my final destination. My goals are a little higher...”

The King laughed and clasped Leon on the shoulder. “Shoot for the stars, young Raime. I have no doubts that your aim will be true. And know that no matter what happens, you will find a friend with me, and with my descendants.”

He couldn’t speak for his descendants, Leon knew that, but he appreciated the sentiment anyway. He nodded to the King, and soon enough, he was on his way back to his villa. Unlike his departure following his resignation from the Legion, he didn’t feel ecstatic or free. He just felt kind of bittersweet.

The Bull Kingdom had been his home for years, now. It had been the home of his Ancestors for who-knew-how-many generations. He couldn’t say that his time in the Bull Kingdom had been that great overall, but there had been many good parts.

He’d met Elise here. He’d made friends here, some of whom he would never see again—they were doing their own things, and it had been a long time since he’d last seen them.

Most of all, his memories of Trajan would always be treasured. Trajan had been like a second father to him, even though they’d known each other less than two years.

And he was now set to leave this place behind for greater things. He couldn’t deny that it was a prospect that terrified him. So much was uncertain, so much wasn’t even strictly necessary. He could easily turn right around, head back to the King, and with one request, live his life for hundreds of years in peace and comfort within the Bull Kingdom.

But that wasn’t what he wanted. He wanted to venture down south to the Four Empires, and then ascend to the Nexus. He *needed* to find his mother and destroy Lord Kamran. He needed to build his family into a new Thunderbird Clan, and he wanted his kids and his descendants to have the best lives they possibly could, and to ensure that, he needed as much power as he could muster, even it meant taking the risk of leaving someplace that seemed reasonably safe. He couldn’t ever let his family be taken away from him as his father and Trajan had been, and he could easily see someone stronger than Justin eventually being sent here, and he rested on his laurels, he and his family would be massacred.

Even if the Bull Kingdom *could* give him the peace and serenity that the King offered—and given how the last almost five years had gone, Leon had his doubts—this place was not where his future lay.

It was time to leave.

—

When Leon and Anzu returned to his villa, he'd only been gone for about two hours. And yet, he found Elise and Maia in bed, passed out, their bodies so tangled with each other that if they shared the same skin tone, he thought he might have trouble figuring out where his lovers ended and the other began.

He didn't disturb them. The rest of his retinue was waiting around for him, with Marcus, Alcander, and Alix quietly training under Valeria's supervision; Anzu was led back to his stable to be pampered by three Heaven's Eye beastmasters; and Anshu leaned against the villa wall on the back patio, quietly watching small ships going to and fro on the river.

Anshu hadn't been particularly open to the rest of his retinue on the return journey, keeping everyone at arm's length and only talking to people when he absolutely had to. It didn't surprise Leon that he was still being aloof. However, Leon knew that there was a lot he needed to do for the Indradian—the man had little in the way of spare clothes, he didn't have a place to stay, he had no money, and he was stuck in a Kingdom with a completely foreign culture to what he'd grown up with.

So, after making his greetings and encouraging the others to keep training under Valeria, Leon pulled Anshu inside and sat him down with one of the Heaven's Eye servants that Elise had working on the villa. The man was essentially Elise's assistant—or so he described his job—so he was happy to help Leon with getting arrangements made for his newest retainer. The contract Leon had with Anshu was formalized, Leon gave him two months' salary right away for the month-long journey from Kraterok and the current month, and had the assistant get some accommodations set up for him. That would take a day or two, though, so Leon lent Anshu one of his guest rooms until a more long-term solution could be found.

Once all that was done, the sun was beginning to set, so everyone else halted their training and came out to the living room. Marcus and Alcander checked in with Leon, then left for their own homes. Alix, having resigned from the Legion when she signed on with Leon and subsequently having been gone from the Kingdom for months, was technically homeless, though, so she wound up in Leon's last available guest room.

And that left Leon alone with Valeria.

They sat at Leon's dinner table, awkwardly *not* staring at each other, until Valeria finally broke their silent stalemate.

"You, uh... were quite talkative until now..." She didn't look at Leon as she spoke, instead finding some fascination in one of the flowers that Elise used to mark the invisible line between the dining area and the leisure area.

Leon thought he understood what she meant: he'd fairly taken charge in sending his retinue off and getting them situated, and that involved more talking than he was generally used to, which was part of why the silence between him and Valeria was just so awkward.

But he knew why he went silent, and after everything that had happened during these past almost-five years, he wasn't going to dance around it anymore.

"I care more about what you think of me than I do for their opinions," he frankly admitted, "so I'm more careful about what I say. I don't want to say the wrong thing and make you think less of me."

A hint of red flushed into Valeria's pale cheeks, and she suddenly found another flower *very* interesting.

"I... you too," she sputtered.

Leon gently smiled and leaned back in his chair. He admired her. Her strength; her skill with a blade; her power; her dignity; her drive; her beauty. All of it, the whole package and each individual aspect of her. He admired it all.

"Want to go hit something?" he asked. The training over the past couple of hours or so had mostly been meditations rather than physically exercising or participating in combat training, so it wasn't like she was just going back to what she'd been doing for a while.

"Ancestors yes!" she exclaimed as she stood up so fast she almost knocked over her chair.

The two made their way to Leon's training room, and there they chose their training weapons of choice—a short glaive for Valeria, and a hand-and-a-half sword for Leon. Then, without a word, they faced off against each other.

It was by no means a fair match-up. She was still in the early stages of the fifth-tier, while he was well into the eighth. If this were a serious match, she would lose hands-down without serious extenuating circumstances.

But that wasn't the point. Neither of them summoned their magic and kept their spar at the purely physical level. Neither their strength nor their speed was enhanced with magic, and that did a great deal to even out their little unspoken competition.

They started fairly slow, with Leon taking a more passive role and letting Valeria launch a few probing strikes. Despite his family's fighting style relying mostly on quick, aggressive strikes, his defense was largely flawless during these opening moves, with his footwork keeping a good distance between them and his swordplay deflecting her every strike.

Valeria was clearly wary of Leon's passivity, but as it became clearer and clearer that he wasn't going to start attacking her, she grew bolder. Her strikes became more frequent, and it was only when she started to let her own defenses lapse that Leon struck.

A quick stab to rake across her ribs was his intention, but he overestimated how committed she had been to her strike, and she managed to pull back and twist out of the way, letting Leon's training blade taste nothing but the cloth of her light blue tunic.

They smiled at each other as they each took a few quick steps back, letting the other fall back into their ready stances. Their eyes locked onto the other, their breathing intensified, and all the world around fell away. As far as either one was concerned, the world outside of the training room simply didn't exist anymore. In their little world, only the other existed.

Their attention reached a boiling point, and they lunged at each other in unison. The large blade of Valeria's glaive glimmered as she filled it with just enough magic power to activate its stunning enchantment; the blade shone like a shard of ice that caught the light of the sun. Leon's blade shone just as bright, like a bolt of lightning frozen in time.

Strike.

Dodge.

Parry.

Riposte.

Slash.

Deflection.

Block.

Block.

Their world was darkness, and the only lights within were their weapons and the other's eyes. The gold and sapphire never wavered from each other, not even as the pale white of the weapons clashed against each other again and again.

For more than an hour, Leon and Valeria sparred. Neither spoke a single word the entire time. In the state they were in, words were superfluous—their attention was wholly focused upon the other, and they knew that they were all the other was thinking about. Every little detail about themselves, the other saw, and they liked what they could see.

Both completely lost their sense of time with the other filling their attention. But, eventually, the spell had to break, and the final move came when Valeria rushed in with a vicious slash, which Leon blocked as he'd done many times before. However, her glaive caught on his sword's guard, locking their weapons together, and their immediate responses of trying to pull apart only resulted in them pulling the other closer.

And there, they froze, their dance ended. Their gazes were still locked together, their noses practically touching. Their training weapons were forgotten, and their heads began to slightly tilt, then grow even closer.

Their lips brushed against each other, and it was like a dam burst. Leon dropped his sword, and Valeria did the same with her glaive, the weapons falling to the floor like unwanted waste. Leon wrapped his arms around Valeria's waist and pulled her closer as he pressed his lips against hers. She practically threw herself into his embrace as she wrapped her arms around his neck, returning his kiss with passion.

Leon's tongue pressed in past Valeria's lips, and after a moment of seeming confusion, she opened her mouth to meet his with hers. Her hands roamed the back of his head, tousling and tangling his overgrown hair, while his hands wandered her back, starting by rising to her ribs, and then falling down to grasp her hips.

Both pressed themselves against the other as they kissed. Neither broke for long seconds, each communicating in the only way the other needed.

Valeria moaned with need, but then pulled back. Leon didn't think he'd ever been quite so attracted to her as he was in that moment, even when he'd seen her earlier on his approach, but he didn't follow her. Instead, he watched her as she pulled back, his eyes full of heat, almost a reflection of hers in gold instead of blue.



She'd practically draped herself over him, but as she pulled back, she withdrew both her legs and arms from his body. His hands remained at her waist, though, and she didn't seem to mind at all, especially since her hands remained on his shoulders. Her eyes were still fixed solely upon his, too, and, like he was staring into a mirror, Leon could see a smile of pleasure and arousal playing across her lips.

There the two stood for several more seconds, communicating completely without words. They could understand their attraction clearer than ever before, and they knew without a shadow of a doubt that it was reciprocated. After what they had just shared, there was no need for speech. They wanted each other, and they could have each other.

It was Valeria who spoke first, her voice trembling with desire, yet tinged with sadness and regret.

"I... I'm not ready to go farther," she said in a breathy whisper.

Leon's smile didn't even twitch. "Then we won't," he said.

They swallowed in unison, burying the needs their bodies were screaming at them to satisfy, each understanding without being told that those needs, while not about to be immediately satisfied, would be soon enough.

For now, though, they parted, quickly cleaning up the mess they'd made in the training room. Sweat was everywhere, and it seemed that in their dance, they'd accidentally knocked several of the other weapons to the floor.

Once cleaning that was done, they walked back out into the living room, and paused.

"It's all right to tell the others," Valeria whispered, pride edging into her voice. "I... I'm not going to have the same relationship with you as they do..."

Leon reached to her, taking her hand in his and giving her a reassuring squeeze. "I can't say I'm not disappointed..." She playfully hit him on the shoulder as he gave her a sarcastic grin. "... but I understand. Ours isn't the most common..."

Leon paused for a moment as he contemplated what he was about to say. He remembered what Marcus and Alcander were doing when he summoned them before setting out for the Serpentine Isles, he thought about the laws that allowed nobles to have harems essentially without limit, and he immediately decided to walk back the sentiment he was about to share.

"Well, I suppose the relationship I have with Elise and Naiad *might* be fairly common among the nobles, but I'll never expect you to share yourself with them as they do with each other, and I know they don't have the same expectations of you. So long as we all understand what each one of us wants, and what we're willing to provide, then what we have will work."

Valeria softly smiled. "Thank you," she said, and she pushed herself up onto her toes and kissed his cheek, then kissed his lips.

As she fell back to her feet, Leon's head followed her, and when their kiss broke, as he pressed his forehead against hers.

"Whatever you need, whether that's time, or anything else, I'll give it."

"I know," she softly, lovingly whispered, and then she finally pulled away from him.

And immediately, her face scrunched up in disgust as the stench of their sweat from the past few hours hit her, with Leon's similar reaction following only a moment later. Their intimate moments finally over, they separated to return to their respective rooms and wash themselves.

Leon bathed quickly, and when he made his way into his bedroom, he found his bed to be a hot mess—even moreso than it had been when he'd returned from the Royal Palace, indicating that Maia and Elise had woken at some point and just continued where they'd left off. The sheets had been practically ripped off the mattress and the many pillows scattered about the room. Maia had clearly been tied down at one point, if the silk ropes draped about her were any indication, and both she and Elise were asleep again in another naked tangle of limbs.

Leon smiled as he undressed and joined his two sleeping lovers on the bed. He snuggled close, got comfortable, and then took a deep breath as he thought about the family he had.

Elise. Maia. And now, Valeria. It might be difficult, and there'd likely be hard times ahead, but they could make this work.

Tomorrow, the four of them would begin their future together.

#### **Chapter 614: No More Secrets**

"Look at all of this, how did you let it get this bad?" Elise exclaimed as she ran her hands through Leon's hair. Next to her were a few glasses of water, a few combs, a razor, and a pair of scissors.

They were sitting around at a counter in their kitchen with Maia and Valeria, who were treating the sight before them almost like a play as they watched Elise slowly lose her mind over the state of Leon's hair.

He didn't think it was that bad, actually. Sure, he hadn't gotten it cut since after the civil war ended and before leaving for the Northern Vales almost half a year ago, and while he had a fairly thick head of hair, it wasn't like he needed to pull it back into a ponytail or braid, yet.

It seemed Elise disagreed, though, because as she ran her fingers through his hair in preparation for seeing to it with a comb, she just made more and more noises of disapproval, though he could also tell that she wasn't being completely serious. In fact, she didn't even intend to cut Leon's hair herself until a conversation between her and Valeria that morning turned toward his somewhat unkempt appearance, and their mutual agreement that he was in dire need of a haircut.

At the very least, though, Leon knew that his hair was clean and seen to well enough—he may not keep up with keeping it cut that often, but he didn't slack on bathing when the option was open to him. And the option was rarely *not* open to him, given that he at least had enough skill in water magic to summon a good shower whenever was necessary.

"I feel like I'm exploring a wild jungle," Elise teasingly said.

"The power to get rid of it is in your hands," Leon pointedly replied as he tilted his head to look back her through the corner of his eye.

"Stay still," she shot back, playfully slapping him on the shoulder. She then reached for the comb and some of the water and got to work. "You should stop going to wherever you've been getting your hair cut. They never do a good job."

Leon shrugged, but kept his head still.

"They really don't," Valeria added. "They always cut it *way* too short. I think you look better with somewhat longer hair."

Leon cocked an eyebrow at her in confusion. "If you like it longer, why did you support me getting it cut?" Just as he finished asking that question, Elise finished dampening his hair and reached for the scissors.

"Just seeing you be uncomfortable is reason enough," Valeria replied with a wink.

Leon just gave her an unamused look and laid back into Elise's control, remaining quiet as she cut away.

"So," he said, changing the subject, "now that we're all here, I think there are some thing we should talk about."

"Just 'some'?" Elise asked. "How about we start with what you did with Val that led to you getting back to our bed so late?"

Maia didn't say anything herself, but she leaned in and stared at Leon expectantly when Elise asked her question.

Leon glanced back to Valeria, and when she told him that she wasn't going to say anything with nothing more than a teasing smile, he sighed and said, "We sparred. It was... good. Quite exciting. Very fun."

"Is that a—" Elise began before Leon cut her off.

"And then we kissed. And it was good. Quite exciting. Very fun."

It was Leon's turn to wink at Valeria, and though it wasn't something he did often, he felt like he got his playful revenge for her teasing when she put on a fake-aggrieved expression. The silver-haired woman even cried out in mock-outrage, sitting up straight as she put her hands on her hips.

But when her eyes drifted from Leon to Elise, and then over to Maia, the playfulness in her expression fell away, to be replaced with hints of dread and anxiety.

"That's... not a problem, is it?" she hesitantly asked.

"A 'problem'?" Elise asked in disbelief, her hands freezing partway through snipping through another lock of Leon's hair. Her face was confused and almost disbelieving, but then it softened, and she set down the comb and scissors and she hurried over to where Valeria was sitting. "Of course it isn't! This is wonderful! Have you two had sex, yet?"

Valeria's face flushed bright red, and only grew brighter when Maia wordlessly approached from her other side. The river nymph still didn't say anything, but she leaned on the counter next to Valeria, cocked her head questioningly, and waited for a reply.

Valeria's eyes then turned to Leon in a silent plea for aid, and Leon said, "No, we haven't, and I think maybe we ought to leave those questions for another time?"

Elise frowned at Leon, but when she turned back to Valeria and saw her silver-haired friend's uncomfortable expression, she just smiled and nodded, returning to Leon to finish the cut.

"So be it," she said with resignation. "But Valeria, don't ever think you're going behind our backs! You're a part of our family!"

Maia nodded her agreement, and while Valeria didn't say anything in response, her expression of mortification dropped slightly in favor of a something more thankful, though the red in her cheeks didn't go away.

Leon, feeling at least some of the embarrassment she felt, decided to immediately change the topic.

"So, what's been happening here?" he asked.

Elise paused for a fraction of a second, her hesitation making it clear that not everything was all right. Since she hadn't said anything before now, Leon assumed that it wasn't that important, but he still couldn't help but tense up, tilt his head, and repeat his question a shade more urgently.

"It's nothing," Elise replied, failing to assuage Leon's anxiety. "It's just that... the higher-ups from Occulara have sent some investigators north. They left a month ago, so they'll be here in the next couple of months."

"What are they investigating?" Leon asked, a hint of killing intent roiling off his body before he clamped down on his instinctive protectiveness.

"My mother," Elise quietly responded. "She procured the final ingredients for His Majesty's recovery potion, helping him to wake up and end the civil war before you reached the capital..."

Leon listened, still tense. He and Emilie weren't particularly close, especially since he didn't much trust her ability not to talk in front of strangers, but as much as Elise oft claimed she wasn't fond of her mother, Leon could tell that that wasn't the case. On a more practical note, Emilie was essentially his ticket to Heaven's Eye, and if anything happened to her, it could upset what few solid plans he had.

"You know that Heaven's Eye is bound to remain apolitical, right?" Elise asked.

"Yes," Leon affirmed.

"It's not always an easy policy to follow. We've had administrators and Tower Lords break that policy before, for reasons both selfish and selfless. Allowances are often made for the later, and for situations where remaining apolitical was impossible. But for those who break the rules for their own personal gain, or when the situation did not call for the rule to be broken, then the higher-ups, sometimes even the Director himself, might get involved to punish the perpetrators. My mother has already been relieved of most of her duties for the duration of the investigation, with my uncle in Teira taking them up, for the time being. The investigators, once they arrive will determine if my mother acted in good faith or not, and if what she did was warranted."

"Wasn't Heaven's Eye contracted to get those ingredients?" Leon asked. "Surely simply fulfilling the requests of that contract isn't something she can be punished for, is it?"

"That depends," Elise replied. "As you said, she was only fulfilling the terms of the contract, but when a Tower Lord calls in personal favors from all over the plane to get her hands on extremely rare and valuable materials, delaying the delivery of those materials to people who put in orders before the Bull Kingdom, then powerful people tend to take notice. Some, especially those who put in those orders, might take offense.

"Those ingredients that my mother procured weren't hers to take, and she then used them to end a war. A war, I will remind you, you were about to win!"

Leon lightly grimaced. "We were *winning*. I wouldn't say that we were 'about to win'. Things can always change, and if the forces that Octavius had sent north—"

"None of that matters," Elise interrupted. "At least, it doesn't quite as much as it should. Enough questions have been raised that there's a good chance my mother will be recalled back to Occulara and have her position as a Tower Lord formally revoked."

"How bad would that be?" Leon seriously asked. "Does Heaven's Eye kill its own?"

"No," Elise replied. "But Heaven's Eye is the largest banking and merchant guild on the entire plane. They have no competitors on the international stage worth mentioning. More than half of all assets owned by *every single person* who lives on Aeterna is financed or financially secured through Heaven's Eye. I'd say nearly three quarters of all inhabitants on this plane use Heaven's Eye as their bank. If they need to punish someone, they don't need to resort to violence, they can make someone's life *extremely* difficult *very* easily, as I think you might remember from what we did to Tiberias' family."

Leon scowled, remembering the man who thought himself entitled to Elise, and his scowl deepened when he started to truly contemplate how serious this situation was.

Elise continued, "My mother isn't wholly dependent on Heaven's Eye—she has *some* assets that they can't touch, but they're only enough to ensure a moderately comfortable lifestyle. If they decide to punish her, it could mean taking just about everything she has away. I think if that happened, you might be richer than her by several times."

"Wow," Leon said in amazement. He'd grown used to the idea of Elise and her mother being incalculably rich. He was rich, too, thanks to the foresight of his Ancestors, but he wasn't even close to the level of wealth he thought they had.

"Yeah, so things aren't looking great on that front."

Valeria, who'd been listening, inquired, "But there's a chance that might not happen?"

"There's a chance," Elise conceded. "As Leon said, we *were* fulfilling a contract, and it stopped a war and the deaths of thousands. Even if found guilty of violating Heaven's Eye doctrine, my mother might not be punished. *Might*."

A momentary silence filled the kitchen as everyone quietly absorbed what Elise had just said, only the regular sounds of her dealing with Leon's unruly mop resounding through the kitchen.

Leon was the first to break that silence. "... Is there anything we can do?" he asked.

Elise paused for a moment to embrace Leon's head. "No, love, this isn't a solution that I think *anyone* can help with. All we can do is hope that my mother isn't found guilty. As it is, though, I think it's *extremely* likely that her position as Tower Lord will be revoked. Heaven's Eye survives based on its reputation—even with all its power, it can't compete with the Four Empires, and if the Empires see the Guild getting its hands dirty in politics, they might take more drastic actions against us. Heaven's Eye won't risk its position just for my mother, even if she *is* found innocent..."

"That's... well, that sucks," Leon commiserated as Elise went back to finishing up on his hair. "How's Emilie doing?"

"About as well as you might expect," Elise said, her tone lightening up a bit. "She actually *likes* the reduced responsibilities. Gives her more time with her husbands and concubines."

Leon chuckled in understanding.

"I don't suppose there's a way for us to join Heaven's Eye, is there?" he asked.

"Are you asking seriously?" Elise responded.

"I am."

Elise paused again and strolled out from behind Leon to look him in the eye. "That would be a big step, I think."

"I'm not saying I want to go and join them right this very second, it's more of a 'in a few months or years' kind of thing. You three know that I want to go to the Four Empires, yes?"

The three ladies nodded their heads, and Valeria added, "And we won't be letting you go alone!"

"I'd never expect you to," Leon said with a smile. "But it makes what I'm planning more important. I don't want us to go down there—risk my family and friends going down there—without some kind of powerful institutional support. Having Heaven's Eye on our side would alleviate my concerns greatly."

"The Four Empires are *incredibly* powerful, and so is Heaven's Eye," Elise said as her eyes drifted southward in thought. "But neither are so powerful that they won't accept a new seventh-tier mage into their ranks for generous compensation..."

"Eighth-tier," Leon corrected, a smile blooming on his face that was both moderately embarrassed and moderately proud. He hadn't told Valeria his power the day before, and Elise had been too submerged in Maia for the information to be shared, so he had the pleasure of informing them now. Valeria froze in shock, while it took Elise a couple of seconds for what Leon had just tersely admitted to sink in.

"... Eighth... tier...?" she whispered, her eyes quickly flitting between Leon and Maia, seeking confirmation that Leon wasn't talking about their river nymph lover. Maia just nodded in Leon's direction, and Elise lit up like the dawn. "Eighth-tier?!" she shouted again, this time much more ecstatically.

"Yes," Leon confirmed, and Elise jumped into his arms, kissing him, and pressing her body against his. It took him—and, he assumed, *her*—quite a bit of self-control not to tear off each other's clothing and take each other right there in the kitchen with Maia and Valeria watching, but after a couple seconds, they managed to pry themselves apart, though Elise positively glowed with joy and desire.

"How did *that* happen?" Valeria asked, her tone both happy and incredulous at the same time. "I thought you weren't even close to the eighth-tier, yet."

"I wasn't," Leon confirmed as Elise skipped back behind him to finish the haircut. As she worked, Leon launched into what felt like his hundredth explanation of everything that had happened during the campaign. Unlike more of his other explanations, though, he left out no detail. Not even Xaphan. And as he spoke of Xaphan, he felt Elise slowing down in the trim, while Valeria began giving him strange looks as she realized he wasn't joking.

"... I was alone," Leon explained as he dove into his tangent of what had happened at Xaphan's prison, explaining to them the same things he'd told to Maia when he'd let her in on his last secret. "I had no one. My father had just died, and I was traveling to a place I'd only been to once when I was twelve, and even then, my father and I had avoided all signs of civilization on the way down. I was scared and looking for any kind of support I could get. I thought that taking the risk of having a contract with a demon was worth it. A trump card I could use if things went sideways. Support I could rely on that wasn't connected to those who might've wanted to do my family harm..."

"But didn't your family imprison it?" Valeria asked, her expression lightening somewhat, giving Leon the impression she wasn't judging him too harshly. But Elise's hands had stopped, and she'd gone quiet, and he was rather terrified to turning to look at her.

"I never said it was a particularly good plan, and it *was* a risk, no matter what I might've thought at the time," Leon admitted. "But I was desperate, terrified, and only sixteen."

He quickly finished his tangent, and then paused as everyone absorbed his confession. Just as he did when he told Maia, he made *damn* sure to note that he wasn't a demon *worshipper*, and he'd never once made a blood sacrifice to Xaphan, then highlighted all the good that having Xaphan on his side had done for him.

By the end, Elise had come back around to face him, her expression grave, her eyes narrow in displeasure.

"How long were you planning to keep that secret?" she asked.

"As long as I still felt ashamed about it," Leon said. "As long as I still lacked the courage to admit it."

Elise sighed, and Valeria said, "I don't mind. I mean, I don't much like that it was kept a secret, but I can understand why it was. Especially a secret from me..."

Leon reached over, and he had to stretch a bit, but he briefly grasped her hand and smiled at her.

Elise seemed more troubled, so when he turned back to her, Leon just sat there, awaiting her judgment.

"I... I don't like that it was kept secret, either," she slowly said, enunciating her words as if she were apprehensive of what she might say if she let herself loose. "I... *understand*, too... but I still don't like it. I think... I think... I guess that it's... *fine*." Her gaze sharpened as she glared back at Leon. "There're no more surprises like this, are there?"

“Not one,” Leon unhesitatingly replied. “With that in the open, I have no more secrets—not from you three. At least, no secrets I’m consciously keeping—I’m no storyteller, and I’m sure I’ve forgotten to tell you three at least *something*...”

Elise sighed, and said, “I want to be involved in your life, Leon. I can understand why you might keep secrets when they’re dangerous, but I want you to know that you can trust me with anything. And I trust you with this... demon. If you say it’s not a threat, then I’ll believe you.”

She quietly went back to finishing up his haircut, and Valeria added, “Partnerships with demons aren’t exactly commonplace within the Nexus, but neither are they unheard of. I don’t mind that you have a demon on your side. What as his name, again?”

“Xaphan,” Leon replied.

“Xaphan...?” Valeria whispered. “Wait a minute, wasn’t he one of the previous Lords of Flame?”

Leon blinked in surprise that she recognized the name, and he felt Xaphan’s attention within his soul realm suddenly snap to Valeria as an undeniable sense of pride began to flow along their contractual connection.

“Yes, he claims that he’s one of the Lords,” Leon said in amazement. “Honestly, I hardly believe him, he’s not exactly ‘lordly’, if you know what I—”

Suddenly, Leon felt Xaphan’s power surge through their contract, enter his body, and erupt from his nose, sending a tiny burst of demonfire shooting out through his nostril. It was a weak thing, doing no damage at all to him, but tickling his nose and making him violently sneeze.

He groaned in shock and disbelief, and all three ladies stared at him with similar emotions gracing their features.

As Xaphan’s raucous laughter filled his ears, Leon just said, “See? I guess now that you all know about him, I can look forward to him screwing with me without restraint. *Wondrous*.”

From behind him, Elise chuckled and said, “I’d like you to tell me more about this ‘Lord of Flame’ business... If it means what its name implies, then having some other powerful being on your side is something to celebrate, isn’t it?”

The four settled in to discuss what they knew of demons, and when their conversation was over, Leon felt like he’d gotten a giant weight off his shoulders. It felt good to finally have no more secrets he was consciously keeping from those he loved.

## **Chapter 615: Resting and Making Plans**

Following Leon’s return to the capital, he spent a week relaxing at home. He didn’t go anywhere and didn’t do anything productive. He just needed to rest as much as he could. He didn’t even train with the Thunderbird or Nestor. He just enjoyed his time at home, reading during his free time and spending nearly every other waking moment with either Elise, Maia, Valeria, or some combination of the three.

What little work he did during that time was mostly relegating to ensuring that he stayed in contact with the rest of his retinue and finishing the arrangements for Alix and Anshu to get their own accommodations. Anshu seemed grateful that he wasn’t needed for much, yet, and so spent much of his



time using the money he'd been paid by Leon to replace his clothing and other accoutrements he'd lost when his ship had been sunk.

Alix seemed to have taken quite well to Marcus and Alcander, despite the wide gulf between her birth and theirs—for nobles, the latter two were welcoming towards her, and the three took to training together during that week.

Leon might've let his break last longer than a week—it wasn't like he had many immediate responsibilities, after all—but seven days was about all he could stand before he started getting so antsy that Elise, Valeria, and Maia all demanded that he get back to work before he drove them up a wall.

So, to that end, Leon started taking charge of his retinue's training. He wasn't sure how much good he could do for them, but he was resolved to do what he could. He had them all meet at his home at least once a day for at least six hours, and he made sure they all spent their time productively training.

This benefitted him greatly, for in trying to put his directions into words, he found himself understanding the mysteries of his own magics better. Not to mention everyone had their own perspectives on how magic worked and what the best flow of training for themselves might be. It wasn't as directly beneficial as studying enchantments, but even just supervising the training of his weaker retainers helped Leon to grow in its own way.

After a week of this, Leon found himself quite surprised to have Maia join in their training. But once she explained why she wanted to join in the training, he understood completely.

Humans had to adapt their bodies to use and generate magic power. Beings that were not human did not have to do this. This meant that much like how Anzu reached the fifth-tier just by growing up, Maia had not trained at all to reach her eighth-tier equivalent status. Her powers were intrinsic to being a Naiad, a Queen of river nymphs. This made inhuman creatures generally stronger than most humans, but humans had little standing in the way of their growth. Inhuman beings usually had to work much harder than humans to surpass their physiological limits when it came to magic power.

That in itself was one of the biggest hurdles that Leon knew ancient Ascended and Divine Beasts had to overcome with having children with humans—instead of having a child that had both their beast parent's intrinsic strength and humanity's growth potential, they had children that were both intrinsically weak, like their human parent, and lacked growth potential, like their beast parent.

Unfortunately, the ability for Ascended and Divine Beasts to transform into humans did not alleviate this issue, and it was only after they discovered how to awaken blood that it was finally solved, letting their powers be at least partially inherited by their descendants without crippling them with their beastly weaknesses.

In Maia's case, she'd grown to the human equivalent of the eighth-tier and hadn't grown much since—not that her lifestyle prior to that had required much growth. It wasn't until the end of the civil war that Maia had started encountering beings that her power was generally insufficient to counter, and the fact that their enemies were growing stronger and increasingly better equipped all while her power remained static frightened her.

Now that Leon had reached roughly the same level as her, she reasoned that his enemies were going to continue to grow in strength, as well. Already, they were strong enough that she was having trouble or

outright failing to deal with them, and so she felt that she needed to join in the training before she found herself left behind. As a river nymph, it was already going to be difficult to maintain her lead, let alone try to catch up if the enemies of her and Leon's family started to well and truly pass them by in power.

Leon was only too happy to have her join in, and even asked her to share with him some of her knowledge of water magic. As a descendant of the Thunderbird, he had some minor affinity for the element, and he wanted to expand his skills a bit.

Anshu required much less than the others from Leon, given that he was already a fifth-tier mage—not that Leon could've helped him much, anyway, given that his chosen element was light. However, Leon still gave him some of the tips he'd learned from trying to form his own magic body, which Anshu was grateful for. Apparently, there weren't there many people who were willing to talk about their own experiences ascending the tiers with anyone outside of their family and committed acolytes, and the books that recorded such information were rare and expensive, so having someone around who could give him a first-hand account of what they had experienced when going from the fifth to the sixth-tier wasn't something he'd ever thought he'd receive.

Leon almost joked that he wanted to renegotiate Anshu's contract now that he knew he was providing a service for the man that he couldn't get anywhere else and that was eminently useful to him, but he decided against it. He had a second fifth-tier mage in his retinue, he wasn't going to endanger that when he wasn't yet familiar enough with the man to be making jokes.

Valeria, meanwhile, spent her time either reading some of the water manuals from the Raime archives that Leon lent to her, or talking to Maia about the element. Once again, there wasn't much Leon could do to help her since she was already more powerful with her chosen ice magic than he was. He was able to share a few little tidbits from the Thunderbird, but otherwise, it was Maia who was giving her the most instruction—not that Maia gave her much at all, so Valeria largely trained on her own.

But training only accounted for six hours out of the day, and there were plenty more to be filled.

Leon once more threw himself into his enchanting studies, spending at least four hours every day within his enchanting workshop, sketching new enchantments, honing his skill and muscle memory for drawing the modern runes. Nestor gave him much instruction during these hours, and he could almost feel his skills and knowledge rising at a tremendous pace now that he had time to dedicate to the art.

However, he felt it was too soon to test his growing skills with anything more than a few small spell scrolls. His big projects—his armor and replacement flight suit—he'd decided to put on the back burner until he could figure out how exactly he wanted to handle them.

For one, he'd yet to test his theory, but he felt like with his eighth-tier power, he might now have the power to sustain flight on his own, without the aid of enchantments. For two, he wanted his armor to be of much higher quality than his original Magmic Steel and Skyflax suit had been. That suit of armor had been fantastic when he'd been facing down fourth, fifth, and sixth-tier enemies, but given that even with his enchantments, it had been rendered unusable twice in barely more than six months was his main motivation. When he got to work on something new, he wanted it to last long enough that he wouldn't have to arrange repairs less than a year later.

Of course, he had five relatively powerful people now relying on him to pay them, and while he had an enormous amount of wealth, it wasn't enough to sustain such great expenses for the long term.

And so, he'd gone to Elise. He'd been hoping that Emilie might also participate in the meeting, or at least someone that both ladies trusted who was good with numbers, but Elise was the first and most important person that he could think of to bring these problems up with.

She sat down with him, Maia, and Valeria, and the four went over all of their combined assets. For Maia, those were too minimal to count, and while Valeria had more, neither of them could contribute much financially to their situation.

For Leon and Elise, though, they had to make some in-depth plans regarding how to sustain their lifestyle, especially now that Emilie was in serious danger of losing her position. Elise had her own assets, of course, but once she laid them out, Leon realized that she only had about a hundred million silvers to her name. Most of her and Emilie's wealth had been derived from their positions within Heaven's Eye and being able to leverage the Guild's resources, and so Elise didn't have much—speaking *very* relatively—saved up in her own name.

Since she and Leon were engaged, they both decided to pool together half of their financial resources, which would be personally managed by Elise. The rest of their separate finances would be left to managers within Heaven's Eye. Leon thought this a little risky, but Elise assured him that even if Heaven's Eye decided to punish Emilie, that those assets would be safe from seizure.

The biggest problem, though, was how exactly to grow those assets. They could live extremely comfortable lives for hundreds of years on that money, but with their plans to move south to the Central Empires, which was a region of the plane that was *far* more costly to live, not only was it not going to be enough for Leon's plans to expand his retinue, it also greatly limited their ability to make long-term investments until they actually arrived in Imperial lands.

What followed during that conversation was Elise using a lot of financial words and futures speculations that Leon was largely left blinking in confusion. When she asked him for his opinion of what to do with all of it, he had few answers other than, "I hit things with sharp metal. And sometimes I zap them with lightning."

Elise wasn't thrilled with his response, and when she made her displeasure known, Leon shook himself awake and got serious. He needed to have a way to help support their family and his retinue if things fell through with Heaven's Eye.

And in that, he knew exactly what he could do.

"I'm an enchanter," he said.

"As am I, though my skill is hardly much to brag about," Valeria added.

And like that, Elise made the decision to purchase some bulk enchanting supplies, and Leon and Valeria got to work pumping out healing spells, which were always in need, and other more utilitarian spells that Elise could quickly sell.

It wasn't quite indicative of how life would be without Heaven's Eye since Elise used her connections to sell what they made, but in a trial run that lasted a week, the three collectively made about four

hundred thousand silvers just on the spells. Leon also made a few of his trick weapons with some left over silver bracelets, which added another four hundred thousand to their stockpile, all for a paltry initial investment of about ten thousand silvers.

They weren't quite ready to commit to that course of action, so after that week was over, Leon, Valeria, and Elise returned to their more normal routines. It had been a hellish week of focusing almost every available second on enchantments, but it was good to know that they all had a reliable source of income if the worst came to pass. They'd never be able to sustain such a pace, but Leon also had some ideas for other, more expensive and lucrative enchantments that would require more expensive materials.

Money still concerned Leon, but he had no more trouble sleeping wondering just how he was going to pay for a larger retinue with the wages that stronger mages would demand. Given how zealously Elise soon took to their finances, he guessed he hadn't been the only one worrying about it.

More somberly, Leon wanted to make an expedition east. He had a mausoleum of stone giants to return, and he didn't want to wait too awfully long before finally bringing them home. Nestor, of course, disparaged that attitude, decrying the stone giants as little more than automatons that were simply responding to loyalties built into them.

Leon honestly didn't care why they were so loyal, and on the one occasion he'd brought it up to Nestor, he didn't even bother to argue against the dead man's point. Whatever their reason for joining him, he wasn't going to just abandon them without doing them at least the smallest courtesy of returning their dead. Nestor was frustrated and judgmental, but Leon ignored him.

However, he wasn't quite ready to leave, just yet. He'd only just returned home, and he wanted to spend some time with his family before leaving again, even if only for a week or two.

In that vein, it wasn't long before he and Elise made their way to Emilie's palace. Out of respect for her troubles, Leon wasn't intending to bring up his intent to leave the Bull Kingdom for the Four Empires just yet, but when Emilie asked what his future plans were, he told her.

She was supportive, though she was also quite frank in saying that, at least for the moment, she couldn't help Leon enter Heaven's Eye, not until their investigation into her was over. She, at least, was more confident of her chances to beat the charges levied against her than Elise was.

Still, the next day, instead of training with the others, Leon sat down with Anshu and Elise to plan out some possible contingencies to reach the Central Empires. Due to his nautical experience, Anshu more strongly advocated for the naval route, even though that might take much longer. They had a few Heaven's Eye maps, but for such distant lands, accuracy was not guaranteed—still, going by the strictly naval route, it didn't look promising.

The most direct way was to sail out of the western mouth of the Gulf of Discord, then go straight south, following the coast. There were thousands of miles of coast that way, though, and Anshu claimed that much of it was largely hostile. Pirates and marauders camped along the swampy coasts of the Ilumerian Wetlands about halfway down the coast, making their home in the Bay of the Drowned. Worse, the Indra Raj held suzerainty over most of the Pepper Islands at the southwestern tip of the continent, meaning that Anshu couldn't guarantee that he could get them through without trouble. If they did get through, though, it would be a much safer journey through the waters patrolled by the ships of the Free

Cities of the Tam, the Pegasi States, and then the Imperial navies. Going east, they would eventually pass through the Veins of Vigilance and enter the Argonaut Sea, where the city of Argos stood as the gateway into the Sunlit Empire.

All told, that journey would take at least a year by Anshu's reckoning.

Their other possible route was to go north, sailing around the northern coast of the continent toward the Talfar and Han Kingdoms. However, the main problem with that was the northern coast was dominated by the Frozen Mountains, and so there were no safe harbors to be found. The freezing conditions made it a dangerous journey, and even if they made it, they would find themselves in the middle of the contested lands between Talfar and the Han. And even if they got through there without trouble, they would still find themselves within the Sakura Archipelago, where Han fleets competed against the constantly-feuding Seven Clans of Yamato, and the silver ships of the Unconquered attacked everyone they could find, Heaven's Eye or not.

The Sacred Golden Empire maintained a few distant outposts along the southern coast of the archipelago, though, so if they made it to one of those, it would be a straight shot right into the agricultural heartland of Imperial territory.

Leon liked neither of these options. From Anshu's descriptions, both routes sounded like they would be quite violent journeys, and to this, Anshu agreed. If he were to travel alone, or even with just his retinue, Leon might've found them a little more palatable, but with Elise and whatever noncombatants she might bring, those routes were saved for plans Y and Z.

He needed something better for his plan B.

That was when Elise brought up their more land-based options.

The first was to take a ship east to the Bull's Horns, then further up the Tyrrhenian River. Once they followed the river as far south as it went, they could organize a caravan heading further south into the Illumerian Wetlands.

The Wetlands themselves were so sparsely populated that they lacked any large, centralized states, with many dangerous predators inhabiting the region's interior. However, the human settlements were mostly located along the region's innumerable waterways, so sailing through the Wetlands to reach the western reaches of the Ilian Empire was usually quite safe.

More traditional journeys north were not usually made this way since the dangerous Illumerian Wetlands and the Screeching Desert south of the Talfar heartlands largely cut off the countries in the northwest from the rest of the continent, but unlike the Desert, enough people lived in the Wetlands to make it a viable route to take, with enough cities and towns to make it a comfortable enough journey. Only a few disparate and fiercely independent tribes called the Screeching Desert home, and they were usually hostile to outsiders—let alone the monsters and other things that lived among those searing sands.

Their other option was heading east into Talfar, skirting around the north of the Screeching Desert, hopefully passing the border into the Han Kingdom without trouble, and then heading south on a ship that sailed the Neilos River, which just about split the Sacred Golden Empire in half.

This, Elise informed Leon, was actually the more common route Heaven's Eye took to and from this corner of the plane until tensions began to flare between the Talfar and Han Kingdoms. Now, their war made the Illumerian Wetlands route, with all its inherent discomforts and flaws, the most-traveled route.

Leon agreed with Elise that this was probably their best route, but no matter what, their chances of safely reaching Imperial Lands would be greatly increased if they could go under the banner of Heaven's Eye. It would take a few months for the investigators to arrive, and their investigation would likely take months on its own, so Leon made his peace with the fact that he'd be in the Bull Kingdom at least for another half a year.

Though, if he were honest with himself, he wanted at least that much time to rest, relax, and just spend time with his family and friends without worries or responsibilities. It had been more than a year since he'd been able to just relax at home with Elise without time restraints, with the civil war, his expedition north back to the Northern Vales, and the Serpentine Isles constantly interrupting him.

Now, he had the luxury to take some time to relax with those who mattered to him, and he was going to take full advantage of that privilege.

## **Chapter 616: Testing Power**

"So, how's it going in here?" Leon asked as he reached the bottom of the pit where the Thunderbird had inscribed the transformation enchantment within his soul realm.

"Much progress has been made," she replied as she transformed into her human body and touched down on the stone floor. "I've excised numerous redundancies, and managed to remove the biggest hurdle in the entire enchantment: the part that caused your soul realm to grow unsustainably. The power requirements are still a problem, but I think if given a few more weeks, I should be able to reduce that even further."

Leon stared at his Ancestor in amazement, then his eyes began to wander the pit. Indeed, though his eyes weren't quite up to the task of analyzing the enchantment in its entirety, he could see that it had already been radically simplified. And in just a few more weeks, he might be able to transform again...

"I had a question about that," he said. "You said after that fight with Jormun and his Primal God patron that the Great Black Dragons power had likely been awakened within me... But I don't feel any different, and my fire is still just normal."

"Are you asking if I was wrong?" the Thunderbird sweetly inquired, though her smile promised only death if Leon answered positively.

So, Leon took a moment to temper his response.

"... No," he hesitantly replied. "But I can't help but wonder..."

"That elitist jackass has gone back to suppressing your bloodline," the Thunderbird nonchalantly explained. "It looks like he's being more efficient about it than I thought he would be, but not nearly as much as I feared he *could* be. Tell me, have you been feeling territorial? Greedy? Do you crave solitude more than anything? Does the sight of other human males conjure competitiveness within you? Do you act any more belligerently than you did before all of that happened?"

“Uh, no to most of that, I think...” Leon replied as he awkwardly rubbed the back of his neck and stared at anything that *wasn't* the Thunderbird. “Though, I suppose money’s been on my mind a little more than usual.”

“Would you say it’s an unusual fixation, to the point that the acquisition of more money is taking priority over everything?” his Ancestor asked.

“No,” Leon quickly replied.

“Then, at the very least, it’s easy to see that your draconic instincts have been suppressed. I suppose that might mean that your power is being suppressed, as well. But as I said back when I made that first claim—your blood, once awakened, isn’t so easily forced into dormancy. Besides, the inheritance has been settled—that scaly bastard can’t completely subvert the power that is in your blood. Maybe your fire isn’t black, and maybe your eyes can’t annihilate everything you see, but I’d warrant that your fire magic is stronger than usual. Have you tested it out much?”

“No, no I haven’t,” Leon replied.

“Then, how about instead of training with me today, you go and do that?” the Thunderbird suggested in a way that made it clear it *wasn't* a suggestion. “I have divine works to study, and I was in the zone when you arrived. I’d like to get more work done today, if you please...”

Recognizing that he was being dismissed, Leon narrowed his eyes in irritation, but accepted it, nonetheless. The Thunderbird was working on something for him, after all, and while he didn’t like the idea of being kicked out of his own soul realm, he couldn’t deny that some practice and testing of his power was needed. For the most part, his personal training had been restricted to lightning and some instruction of his retinue.

With a sigh and bitten tongue preventing him from making any further remarks, Leon returned to his Mind Palace. On his way back to the physical world, he stopped by Nestor’s table, where the imprisoned man was busy studying the sealed tome that Leon had taken from the transformation site that he presumed Jormun had stolen from somewhere far to the southeast.

“Making any progress?” he asked Nestor.

“Some,” Nestor replied in a manner quite similar to the Thunderbird. “I made these locking enchantments to be unbreakable, even by me. But I was younger and less experienced back then, and even though I have no arms with which to take notes, I think I can get this open.”

Leon frowned and nodded. “This is all modern runework, isn’t it?” he asked.

“Yes, as you can plainly see if you use your own damn eyes,” Nestor snipped back.

Leon rolled his eyes and smacked the ruby off the table, with a cry of pain and shock from Nestor. He could take disrespect from the Thunderbird—she was his Ancestor and the progenitor of his line and his power—but he wasn’t going to take it from the man who’d invaded his soul realm and tried to steal his body.

“Might want to watch your tongue,” Leon warned as he picked up Nestor’s ruby and placed it back on the table.

Nestor's ruby glowed as if representing his impotent anger, and as if his teeth were gritted in humiliation and displeasure, Nestor replied, "*Noted.*"

Leon then took a seat next to the table, closed his eyes for a moment to suppress his irritation, and then said, "How about we start again, with both of us being a little less shitty?"

A long silence followed, and Nestor eventually replied with, "Yes... yes, this is all modern runework. Why do you want to know?"

"Ancient runes are more powerful, aren't they? Couldn't a simple 'unlocking' rune or something be drawn and have the journal open?"

"That's always a possibility," Nestor replied. "But, as it's always a possibility, I'd made some contingencies for such a thing. A brute force attack like that won't work. You have to either have the key, or—"

"... Or what?"

"*Or you're out of luck,*" Nestor finished, his tone strained and filled with frustration.

Leon grunted in acknowledgment, then genuinely thanked the dead man, who seemed unsure of if Leon were joking around or not. Leon didn't stick around to explain himself and returned to his physical body to start working on feeling out the limits of his power.

He made his way outside, and then doused the backyard with water—he *was* about to be playing with fire—and then went and stood on the stone patio just outside of his backdoor.

He stood there for several long minutes, letting his fire magic surge through and fill his body. He paid as much attention to its flow as he could, and he noted that it *did* seem to come to him faster than before, but he couldn't say definitively that it was due to his bloodline or just a mistake on his part from not using fire as much as he could.

Next, he summoned fire outside of his body by raising his hand and filling his palm with flame. Then he raised his other hand and filled it with the traditional bright, crackling pride of dragons, too.

There were a few things he noticed as he held the fire in his hands, and he began to run through other things that occurred to him to test. He spent hours outside exercising his control of fire magic, only having to stop twice to put out secondary fires that started in his backyard.

By the end of his tests, he was left with the conclusion that his control of fire magic *was* different. The fire was simultaneously fiercer and tamer. It responded more readily to his will, which he tested with forming shapes out of the flames. He was a long way from the way that Xaphan used his fire to create facsimiles of living creatures, but it was a good first step, and one that seemed to come almost naturally. However, for as pliable as his fire was, now, he could also tell that he needed much less power for his fire to have the same destructive capabilities as before. It wasn't quite enough for it to compete with his lightning for the right to be his primary combat power, but it was still incredible.

He was also largely able to rule out his ascension as the reason for his changed fire, for the power requirements for his other magic hadn't changed—the only thing had really changed with his ascension



was that the amount of power he could store within his soul realm was astronomically greater. Merely ascending to the eighth-tier couldn't explain why his fire was so much more responsive to his intent.

But having caused his draconic blood to awaken, at least partially, *would*. With a little more testing, he felt more confident that his fire magic was more powerful and more responsive, but it would still take him far more practice to get the most out of it that he could. When he finished with his testing, he also thought he could almost *feel* the Great Black Dragon's suppression. He didn't think he could ever describe it in words, but he it was kind of like he felt his blood was being constricted somehow, like there was some magical pressure there that he was becoming more and more aware of.

If he could somehow push back against that pressure...

Leon wasn't sure how to do that, but he tried anyway, just following his instincts. He summoned his power and tried to resist the vague, almost ephemeral suppression he felt, but much like a baby trying to walk, he failed, and he realized that it would take quite a bit of power, grit, and practice to properly fight back against it, let alone remove it completely.

And that wasn't even speaking to what the Great Black Dragon himself might do in response. The suppression itself already proved that the Divine Beast had a significant degree of control over Leon's body, so it wasn't inconceivable to Leon that if he managed to resist the suppression, the dragon might do something more drastic.

However, a counter argument that occurred to him was that he'd apparently used that power before once or twice before during moments of extreme emotional volatility, and he couldn't remember the suppression increasing at all immediately following those moments, or any other side-effects that he could ascribe to the Great Black Dragon punishing him for using that power...

He'd have to test that out in the coming weeks and months, but he felt like the dragon's threat to keep him from invoking the power he'd inherited was fairly toothless. Now that he could perceive it, he intended to work at undoing that suppression, and the Great Black Dragon could eat shit as far as he was concerned. If the power was in his blood—if it was as much a part of him as the Thunderbird's power—then he was going to use it, the dragon be damned.

Once he was done running his fire magic through every test that he could think of, he decided to move onto something that was a little more personally enticing. For a long time, he'd been stricken by the idea of flight. Maybe it was his Thunderbird and dragon blood giving him some of his Ancestor's instincts, or maybe it was just childlike wonder, he couldn't say, but flight was a power that he craved more than just about anything else that his magic could do for him.

Anzu could carry him into the air, but that wasn't enough. He needed to do it himself, to know that the only reason that he soared through the firmament was because of his power, and not because he was directing something else to keep him aloft. Even his flight suit, while delightful and had sated him in some ways, still left him wanting.

What little he could remember of his time in his avian form definitely scratched that itch, though, and now that he was eighth-tier, he thought he'd give something he tried earlier in the transformation cave a few more tries.

Until this point, he'd needed the aid of his flight suit to fly under his own power. He just wasn't proficient enough with wind magic or powerful enough to lift himself off the ground reliably, but now that he was an eighth-tier mage, he thought he might as well give it another shot. Or two.

Or maybe a hundred.

He'd only intended it to be something to cap off his magical training, a couple of jumps to try and at least glide back to the ground after leaping as high as he could, but the first time he tried, he found that he couldn't stop.

He'd leaped into the air with a fairly conservative amount of strength. He was an eighth-tier mage, and so could leap hundreds of feet if he so chose, but he only went for a few dozen—though that still gave him more than enough time to try and keep himself in the air.

He summoned his wind magic just before he jumped, letting it flow through his body, and then around his body. He formed an intense cyclone around his legs, hips, and waist, delighting in the way that he could feel his body grow lighter and start to lift up off the ground.

And then he jumped.

Though he'd only made it a little over three stories into the air, with his wind magic grasped tightly around his lower half and midsection, he not only took ten seconds to fall back to the ground, but he remained quite stably balanced the entire time. He kept the lift directly under him and didn't flail around, using his experience from his first couple of attempts right before his transformation and from using his flight suit to keep himself upright in the air, and thus, not crashing to the ground.

And when he touched down on the ground, he found that he hadn't used that much magic power in his attempt, either.

His next few attempts went both much better, and much worse at the same time. He leaped higher and higher each time, and each time, he used more and more magic power and less and less physical strength. He would then start to float to the ground with increasing slowness, but with more time in the air, he'd eventually lose his balance and inevitably hit the ground face-first.

And yet, without fail, he'd leap back to his feet and try again.

It was growing easier for him to remain in the air, and he was slowly puzzling out the best way to keep ahold of himself in the air so that he would remain upright, but he was also burning through his magic power at an alarming rate—each individual attempt wasn't that draining, but he was making so many. He supposed it was also easy for him to see why wind mages didn't fly everywhere—flight wasn't quite so easy, but he wasn't going to give up until he'd achieved it.

At least, he wasn't intending to until, after another in a long series of crash landings, he realized that Elise was sitting in a chair outside, quietly watching him.

He pushed himself to his feet and dusted off as much of the dirt as he could, then walked on over.

"Oh! No!" Elise sarcastically called out as he approached, a wide, amused smile on her lips. "Please don't stop on my account! You look like you're having so much fun destroying our lawn again!"

Leon just shrugged, then dragged another chair over to sit next to her. The entire time, her eyes followed him, practically devouring every detail.

She said with only a hint of temptation in her voice, “You’re looking good, love—grass stains aside, of course. How are you doing?”

“Pretty damn good,” Leon said as he collapsed into the chair and held out his hand for hers. A moment later, the two were happily entwining their fingers with the other. “It’s nice not having responsibilities to anyone other than those I’ve chosen to be around. Nice knowing that I can stay around here for as long as I like with you.”

“Nice having the free time to dig holes in the lawn?” she playfully asked as she glanced at him, nothing but love in her eyes.

“Free time is a wonderful thing to have,” Leon said with the utmost seriousness. “Good for the soul. Good for clearing the head and getting to the bottom of certain issues.”

“What issues were you working on just now?”

“Flight, mostly,” Leon replied, and he quickly shared with her what little he’d learned about both flight and his bloodline from his afternoon spent training and testing his magic.

Elise stretched and sighed once he’d finished. “I suppose I’ll have to start taking my own training more seriously from now on, won’t I?” she said. “I’ve been slacking a bit since making it to the fourth-tier, but if you’re aiming for the Nexus, then I can’t fall behind!”

“Fourth-tier is still pretty uncommon in the Nexus, as far as I’m aware,” Leon pointed out.

“I don’t want to be *just* uncommon,” Elise shot back with a cheeky grin. “I want to be completely *unique*.”

“In that, I think you’ve already achieved your goal,” Leon softly replied. The sun was shining as it slowly descended in the west, the Naga River glittered in its light, and through Elise and the gardeners she’d contracted, their yard and accompanying flower gardens radiated health and beauty. But Leon only had eyes for Elise—they were locked on her, and his lips were turned up in the silliest, and yet most loving smile he was capable of expressing.

She laughed, then pulled his head into her voluptuous chest.

“If I’m so unique, then when are you going to lock me down, hm?” she playfully asked. “We’ve been engaged for months, now, and we’ve yet to even *talk* about our wedding!”

Leon, not fighting at all to extricate his face from her grasp, thought for a moment, then replied as best as he could with his face pressed into her breasts, “My instinct is to say that we ought to wait until we reach Occulara, but after some thought, I think we should get married before we leave. That doesn’t mean right this very moment or anything, but I assume you don’t want to leave behind everyone that you know without sharing this with them.”

“No, no I don’t,” Elise firmly said. “There are some people among my mother’s staff that I would like to invite, and I don’t know if they will be leaving the Kingdom when we do. I also want Princess Cristina and Asiya there, and some other people...”

The two sat there making some rough plans for their wedding, mostly going over the guest list for another hour before heading inside. There would be quite a few more conversations they'd need to have, and a lot more planning, but at least they were finally getting the ball rolling.

For Leon, though, the need to head east and return to the stone giants started to take more and more priority in his mind as he and Elise talked. They were planning their future, but the obligation of returning the giant's corpses to their people weighed on him to the point that the next day he made the snap decision to get it done. If he wanted to face the future, then he needed to fulfill this obligation to the past.

### **Chapter 617: Life and Responsibility**

Leon and his retinue had been home a month, and he knew that it was time to head east and return Lapis and its fellows to their people. His heart madly raced and his face burned with shame for bringing them home in such a state, but he could no longer ignore his responsibility. Those giants deserved to rest with their people, not to languish in his soul realm for the rest of time.

It wasn't an easy thing to do, but he had to do it.

Elise wasn't too happy with his sudden decision, but after a month back home, Leon thought that a week or two to take care of this one last bit of business was all right. She agreed, but couldn't hide her worry for him since he decided to go alone, accompanied by no one else save for Anzu. Maia was even less thrilled about that, but Leon convinced her to stay behind—this was something he needed to do himself, to take as much responsibility for the deaths of the giants as he could. He could take comfort in the arms of his lovers when he returned, but for now, he didn't think he ought to be so comforted when he was bearing the corpses of those who'd followed him to the Bull Kingdom back to their homeland.

The one person he was surprised had nothing to say about the matter, though, was Nestor. The dead man steadfastly maintained that the stone giants weren't alive, and that Leon's decision was foolish, but other than that, he almost refused to speak of the matter. Leon wasn't sure, but he was rather suspicious that Nestor dreaded the journey to the stone giants. Leon was adamant that they were alive, and for all that Nestor had professed that it had been his goal to create new life through his golem research, Nestor seemed terrified that his goal had been achieved in the beings he'd so disparaged.

And so, with little warning to anyone save for his family and retinue, Leon stored some travel rations in his soul realm just in case, then hopped on Anzu and took off on an eastward course. From the air, and with Anzu's wind magic, they made exceptional time. It even seemed to Leon that they were making better time than he'd initially expected, and after they landed to rest for the night, he spent some time playing with his griffin and examining Anzu's aura in detail.

As with Maia, Anzu hadn't achieved his fifth-tier equivalent power through training, but rather had gained his power through the natural growth of his body. For years now, though, his power had stagnated at that level, with little indication that he was going to move up anytime soon.

But on this flight, Leon started to see signs that his griffin was still growing stronger. He was fully grown in most ways, but Anzu was only about four years old, and his body was still filling out with muscle. Leon wondered how much longer it would take Anzu to get stronger, and what the griffin's power cap might be. Once he reached it, then his only real hope of continuing to gain in power was through becoming an

Ascended Beast—by achieving proper sapience and gaining the power to transform into a human. If he did that, then not only would he gain the intelligence and awareness of a human, but the limits his beastly nature placed on him would be largely lifted, and he would be able to grow in power just as much as anyone else.

Leon dearly hoped that Anzu would be able to achieve this. He loved his griffin as much as he would a baby brother, and having the griffin stagnate and eventually be left behind would be heart-breaking.

They didn't stop at any towns or any other human settlements. Leon, and even Anzu to an extent, preferred to rest out in the wilderness when they needed a break. In this way, they further increased the speed with which they hurtled across the Kingdom, passing into the Eastern Territories on the second day, and reaching the edges of the Border Mountains by the morning of the fourth day.

Here, Leon had Anzu slow down a bit. With his power, he was fairly confident that he could handle any threats that may arise out in the wild mountains, but he didn't take it for granted. The giants had often warned him of the many monsters within the mountains that they had to deal with, including other griffins and creatures like manticores that wandered in from places farther away.

Fortunately, they didn't have much further to go to reach the Crater Tribe, so Leon kept his aura threateningly projected to ward off anything that might've otherwise considered them food, and kept his eyes peeled for any other threats.

He saw many creatures out in the mountains, from dozens of other griffins flying about to other birds and mountain cats of all shapes and sizes. He only ever saw one thing that was particularly unusual, though it was also fairly familiar.

It was a quadrupedal creature twice the size of a full-grown bull, with an incredibly muscular frame emphasized with tight black hide that looked tougher than enchanted leather. It had a ridge of brown fur running along its spine, four beady black eyes, and pitch black tusks jutting out of its long, vicious jaw. It radiated an aura of the seventh-tier, but Leon could tell from its size and obvious muscles alone that it was likely stronger than just about any human of equivalent power.

He'd seen one of these creatures before on his expedition to Nestor's lab. The one he'd seen back then he'd watched kill an ice wraith and two banshees with seeming ease, and this one looked just as strong. He almost passed by it without a word despite its power, but on a whim, he asked Xaphan and Nestor if they knew what it was, not expecting much of an answer.

Nestor had responded that it was of a species that the Thunderbird Clan had used as war beasts—it was faster and stronger than most horses, save for those from the most well-regarded breeders in the Nexus, and quite strong for their level of magic power. They had terrible temperaments, though, and could only be kept in line by the Clan's beastmasters through the use of bracelets similar to what Leon had looted from the transformation cave.

At that, Leon was immediately tempted to break out that bracelet and test it out on this creature, but after having Anzu circle above it several times, Leon decided not to. The way Nestor had made it sound, these things were common enough—and rather *pedestrian*, not fit for anyone past the tenth-tier—in the Nexus that Leon didn't want to waste one of his limited bracelet slots on it. He'd rather wait for something a little stronger, or maybe something more useful. He couldn't imagine what those creatures

could be, and he felt no small amount of doubt and regret as he and Anzu flew away, but he stuck to his decision and continued on towards the stone giants' crater.

He arrived in the afternoon, and out of courtesy for the giants, he landed outside of the crater and slowly approached on the ground. Anzu was a little nervous when several stone giants appeared out of the black hexagonal trap rock, but Leon kept him calm. The stone giants bowed slightly upon recognizing Leon and escorted him into the crater and towards Rakos' palace.

Leon's heart rate accelerated with every step he and Anzu took. His face burned brighter and brighter with shame now that it was time to take responsibility for his failure to protect his stone giant subordinates. He deeply regretted their loss, and mourned Lapis, wishing that he'd been more sociable with the giant instead of just leaving it at the Royal Palace for so long. He insisted to Nestor that the stone giants were people, just as sapient as humans were, but he'd hardly treated them in a way that reflected that belief. If he were honest with himself, he'd even taken their support for granted and treated them more like keeps pieces than living things.

It was with rapidly deepening shame and regret that he and Anzu were shown into Rakos' throne room, where the stone giant itself sat upon its throne surrounded by about twenty other fifth-tier equivalent stone giants.

**"LEON!"** the stone giant rumbled as Leon walked in. **"A JOY TO SEE YOU! HAVE YOU FURTHER NEED OF US?"**

Leon was silent for a long moment. He'd been mulling over what to say in this moment for months, but now that the moment had arrived, nothing seemed appropriate.

"I... that's not why I've come," he slowly said. He then took a deep breath and decided to just come right out with it. He turned his gaze toward the boulder that acted as Rakos' 'head', and said, "I am here to beg for your forgiveness. Due to my terrible leadership, all of the giants that you entrusted to me fell in battle. I have come today to return their remains to your people, to honor their sacrifice in any way I can, and to ask for the forgiveness of your people, even though I don't believe I deserve it."

With a wave of his hand, Leon emptied the mausoleum within his soul realm where the stone giants had been interred. A hundred large piles of stone appeared within the great hall, and Leon quickly scanned them, doing his best to acknowledge each and every one. They'd all volunteered to head west with him, and for their efforts, they were now returning in pieces. The one that hurt most of all was the pile of stone closest to him, streaked with blue stone.

The giants watching him hardly reacted to a hundred corpses of their fellows appearing amongst them, and Leon grew tenser and tenser as no response was made. He couldn't even sense any magic senses being used to inspect the stone giant corpses. The giants watching him from the throne dais were silent and still as statues.

And then, after many long, painful seconds of silence, Rakos asked as quietly as its rocky voice would allow, **"Is that all you've come for?"**

Leon understood the language of the stone giants, but the sheer alien nature of their speech made distinguishing their tone a difficult thing to do. Rakos sounded matter-of-fact, with a fairly flat tone.

Leon couldn't tell if the stone giant was angry, sad, or not. It sounded almost like it was just asking a simple question...

"That... is all, yes," Leon replied. "I've led so many of your people to their deaths that even if I were in a situation where I might need your aid, I don't think I could suppress my shame enough to ask for it."

From within his soul realm, Leon could sense Nestor's attention, though the dead man remained silent.

**"We exist to serve those of your blood," Rakos stated. "Such is our purpose. To fulfill our purpose is the greatest joy we can ever hope for. To lose so many of our people is a blow, but they returned to our creators—to your Ancestors—with glad hearts, of that, I'm sure. Worry not, Leon, we are honored by your concern, but it is unnecessary."**

Leon lowered his head. "I don't believe it is. Lapis was... a friend. And the others put their trust in me, and I can hardly say that their sacrifice was worth it. It didn't need to happen, and only did because of my own failings."

Rakos interrupted him with a wave of its giant hand. **"They chose to go with you, whatever the outcome! But your concern is well-received. It will bring my people great joy to know that the Divine One values them so."** Rakos waved its hand again, and several of the attending giants began to make their way through all the piles of stone that Leon had brought back, seeming to examine each in turn.

Leon didn't say anything, and merely watched as they made their examinations.

It took them some time, but once they were done, they returned to the dais and rumbled a few things to Rakos that Leon couldn't quite make out. Rakos then said, **"Most of these shells are not damaged beyond usability. New giants shall inhabit these shells, and they shall carry the legacy of those who came before. The previous inhabitants of these shells were warriors who served the divine and met a glorious end in battle killing the enemies of our creators. We can only hope that the new lives these shells will hold will be able to live up to that legacy."**

There wasn't much left to say. Leon still felt ashamed, and the fact that Rakos never once blamed him for the deaths of the giants he'd taken only drove the dagger in deeper. But at least he now had closure, and soon, he and Anzu were shown to the giants' guest room, where they rested for the night.

The following morning, Rakos offered to continue hosting them for as long as they wished, but Leon needed to get home, and so he declined. Rakos, visibly saddened to see them unable to stay for a while, reiterated it and the rest of its tribe's commitment to the Thunderbird Clan, though not in those exact words. Regardless, when Leon left its cave, it was with the promise that should he ever need them again, the giants would be there to render him assistance.

He dearly hoped their aid would never be needed again, but he filed the information away, just in case.

As he left, instead of immediately taking to the skies with Anzu, he led his griffin into the rocky maze in the center of the crater and slowly meandered his way towards the ruins of the Cradle. He grew nostalgic when he passed by the area where he'd first found Anzu, and Anzu seemed to recognize it as well, for he nuzzled up close to Leon once they'd passed it.

Leon smiled and ran his fingers through the albino griffin's feathers, but he remained quiet. He could still feel Nestor's attention on his surroundings. The dead man still didn't speak, and Leon didn't press him for his words.

When they arrived at the Cradle, Leon took a few moments to take in the ruins, then sat down on a huge fallen brick right next to a broken statue of the Thunderbird. The statue had one wing snapped off, and the other had been chipped almost into a similar state, but the Thunderbird's imperious visage had largely survived intact, though time had worn the stone down until the arrogant glare had softened into what seemed a more contemplative expression.

"So, dead man," Leon said out loud, "now that you're here and can see what they've built, what do you make of the descendants of your creations?"

Nestor didn't immediately respond, but Leon could feel the man's attention waver slightly, showing that he'd definitely heard him.

After almost fifteen seconds of painful silence, Nestor murmured, [I'm... still not convinced...]

"You don't sound particularly convincing claiming that you're not convinced," Leon pointed out. "Why are you so resistant to acknowledging that the stone giants achieved what you wanted for them? Is it just because if you did, then you might have to take some measure of responsibility for them as your creations?"

[They haven't at all achieved what I wanted for them!] Nestor shouted back. [They were built to be the slaves of the Clan, and slaves they remain! You only have to march back into that leader's palace and demand their entire species come to an end, and they would all kill themselves without question!]

Leon frowned in displeasure. "It's clear enough that they're still influenced by the instructions you instilled into their Ancestors, but hating them for that doesn't disprove their sentience. They speak, feel, think for themselves. Their decisions may be aligned with the purpose you built their Ancestors to fulfill, but I find it hard to believe that you can look at all they've built here and still deny that they are people."

Nestor fell silent again for several seconds. [Ugly,] he finally spat. [Uncouth. Inelegant. *Flawed*. When I sought to build new life, I aimed for beings that were greater than mankind, with a beauty and elegance that couldn't be denied by anyone. I aimed for *perfection*. These things are *not* perfect. Let's entertain the idea that I'm wrong and you're right—an absurd assumption to make, but let's make it anyway. If these glorified slaves that I built to construct and maintain this lab that now lies in pieces, and that have continued to fulfill that function by continuing to construct shelters around it and refusing to move on, are *alive*, then I can only assume that the universe is insulting me. I've built so many golems over my lifetime that the idea of such *imperfect* beings surviving among them all is... I would destroy them if I had the means.]

Leon sighed and leaned back on the brick he sat upon. "We all find meaning wherever we can," he quietly stated. "They just found it in the purpose you built them for." Nestor didn't respond. And then, an idea occurred to Leon, one that had him bolting back upright, his eyes wide.

"Nestor," he said, "golems are automatons animated by a wisp created by one who has achieved Apotheosis, are they not?"



[That's an insultingly dumbed-down way to phrase it, but I can't say you're wrong,] Nestor admitted.

"Are there other kinds of life forms that might be able to use a golem's shell to move around and interact with its environment?"

[I've never seen one, but I wouldn't rule it out,] Nestor replied. [Some experiments were done with using magic bodies to animate a golem's shell, but it was found that a magic body doesn't have enough magic power within it to properly drive a golem, not to mention a magic body is so fragile that allowing its power to be siphoned away to animate a shell is dangerous. A golem shell would probably require a source of magic power to be properly animated and prevent the hypothetical being made of magic power from killing itself by using up all of its power.]

"You say that, but the stone giants seemed to have found a way around that," Leon pointed out. "The last time I came here, they were even in the midst of reproducing. Surely that means that even a being that exists only as magic power can exist within it without burning itself out, no?"

Again, Nestor fell silent, but Leon thought he could feel hints of dread coming from the dead man, as if what had occurred to Leon had also just occurred to him.

[No...] he whispered.

Leon smiled viciously, but before he could continue with his line of questioning, the Thunderbird suddenly thundered into his mind with such ferocious excitement that he almost lost consciousness.

**[IT'S DONE, BOY! THE ENCHANTMENT HAS BEEN COMPLETED!]**

### **Chapter 618: Learning to Crawl**

"It's done?!" Leon exclaimed as he arrived at the copy of the transformation cave in his soul realm, his tone joyous yet tempered by mild apprehension as his fear led him to think he'd misunderstood his Ancestor's cry.

The Thunderbird was there to greet him at the cave's mouth in her human form, her bronze features lit up with a smile of victory and pride.

"It is," the Thunderbird said, and she jumped down the pit. Leon followed her, and once they reached the bottom, the Thunderbird waved her hand and all the enchantment's runes lit up.

Leon was immediately struck speechless. It was an amazing sight, to be sure, with thousands of runes made of multicolored light slowly drifting through the air, forming and re-forming countless runic patterns above the more permanent runes that had been carved into the floor, but that was only partially the reason for his speechlessness. Rather, the main reason was that the enchantment had been greatly simplified, with enormous sections cut out and replaced, to the point that he could actually follow some parts of the enchantment's function.

*'Over there is where the blood is stimulated,'* Leon thought as his eyes slid along the breadth of the massive enchantment. *'And over there is how the stimulated power interacts with the body. And right there are the protections that keep the body from melting into organic sludge under the enchantment's strain...'*

He could follow the enchantments, but the specifics of what they did were largely lost on him since he lacked the proper understanding of the human body and how this magic interacted with it. But he could read at least some of it, and that was more than the nothing he could perceive before.

“It’s... magnificent,” he murmured in amazement as his eyes returned to the Thunderbird.

She grinned in triumph, her work completed weeks earlier than she’d estimated. “Want to try it out?” she asked.

A smile of excitement blossomed across Leon’s face, and he nodded like a child who’d been asked if he wanted his favorite sweet.

“Stand in the center,” the Thunderbird directed, and Leon obliged. “You shouldn’t have to do this every time, but we ought to observe safety for this first run...”

Her next directions were simple, and Leon committed them to memory. He wanted to be able to do this on a whim, if possible, but it involved much channeling of magic power and waiting for certain sections of the enchantment to be activated in sequence, which took some time. Even then, they went slowly. The Thunderbird claimed that she’d tested the enchantment as much as she was able to, and so this initial activation was, itself, just a test to see if it worked. At the slightest sign of anything being wrong, Leon would stop channeling his power, and the enchantment would deactivate, hopefully returning everything to normal.

As he followed his Ancestor’s instructions, Leon could feel the same change happening in his body as he did when he activated the original enchantment in the transformation cave. His skin began to itch, and much of the magic power in his physical body rushed through his veins like a hurricane. He braced himself for pain, but he felt nothing but the shifting of magic power.

And then, he felt himself start to *change*. He still felt no pain, but he could still feel feathers erupting from his skin, he could still feel his bones warping, he could still feel his muscles growing. It almost felt like undergoing a medical procedure with heavy local anesthesia—his magic power was rooting around in his body, but not a single pain signal was transmitted along his nerves and into his brain.

Another thing he expected was for his draconic heritage to rear its head, but not a single draconic scale appeared along his body. His eyes remained gold, and his feathers a beautiful gold-spotted brown. His body also didn’t grow quite as large as it had during his first transformation, stopping its growth once he’d reached about twice his human height.

On a more esoteric note, he could feel his soul realm flexing under this transformation, but he still felt no pain, and nothing within his soul realm seemed to break. It cost him a great deal of magic power to use this enchantment, but his soul realm was able to weather that drain just fine. He could tell that the Thunderbird was keeping a close eye on everything, though, so he concentrated as much as his subdued anxiety would allow on activating the enchantment.

The entire process took about twenty minutes and had taken perhaps a quarter of all the magic power Leon had built up in his soul realm over the past month and change since his return to the Bull Kingdom. But if it allowed him to transform into the same form as the Thunderbird—if it allowed him to *fly*—then that was a sacrifice he was more than willing to make. And this was just using the slow and safe method

for activating the enchantment—he was confident that with more practice, he’d be able to activate the enchantment faster and more efficiently than this...

Once he was finished, he collapsed upon the floor of the replica of the transformation cave, panting for breath. He may have been willing to use all that power, but it had still taken its toll upon him. His physical body was now that of a massive eagle, twice the size of a modestly tall adult man. His beak was razor-sharp, his talons strong and deadly, his plumage both beautiful and oddly humble at the same time thanks to the brown and gold working together.

“Is that... it?” he gasped.

“Yes,” the Thunderbird practically sang as she skipped over to him and took his face head into her arms, joy radiating from her entire being. “It has been many millions of years since my death, and my Clan has spread my line throughout all the universe. Most, if not all, of humanity can trace their lines back to me, though they bear not a single spark of my power. I had children during my lifetime, and I loved them all with my entire heart, and I loved my grandchildren, and their children, and so on...”

“But... this is the first time that I have ever truly felt like I have a successor! Not only my power, but my *form* has now been passed down! Your Clan will truly be a *Thunderbird* Clan, not merely one descended from me!”

Her tone suddenly changed as she pulled away from Leon, the smile on her face not quite vanishing, but certainly growing much more subdued.

“I trust you remember how to transform back into your human body?”

Leon hurriedly nodded as he pushed himself back to his feet.

The Thunderbird’s smile grew slightly wider again. “Good, because I won’t be helping you anymore with this. I will not share my instincts with you again. You will learn how to move and fly on your own. You will transform on your own. You will further refine this enchantment on your own. Do you understand?”

Leon grinned, and then for the first time in his life, he slightly lowered his head before her out of more than obligation. “Yes, I do. Ancestor, thank you for all that you’ve done for me. I can’t express my gratitude enough.”

“Maybe you can’t, but don’t let that stop you from trying,” she imperiously said as she transformed into her own avian form and took off, quickly flying back to Leon’s Mind Palace with Leon flying just behind her.

To say that he was excited and nervous would be a severe understatement. He was giddy and anxious in equal measure. The possibilities of this enchantment had him skipping back onto his throne as he touched down, while the potential downsides had him hesitating to fully return to his physical form.

But that hesitation only lasted a moment, and only a few seconds later, he was opening his physical eyes, his Eagle form now sprawled across the debris of the Cradle’s ruins.

Anzu had been dozing nearby, but had stood up in alarm and now stared at Leon, confusion evident even on his aquiline face. But he didn’t seem to be panicking, and slowly trotted over to start nudging at Leon with his beak.

Leon tried to get up, but without the Thunderbird providing him with her instincts and muscle memory, all he was able to accomplish was to flail about on the ground, everything that he knew about how to move his body now working against him. His limbs were completely different, he had so many muscles that he didn't have before, his center of gravity was fundamentally changed—Leon was barely even able to roll over under his own power, let alone get up or fly.

So, he stopped for a moment. He'd started to instinctively panic and grow increasingly frustrated as his body refused to move as he wanted it to, but he recognized that feeling and slowed down.

*'I'm too hasty,'* he thought as he lay literally spread-eagle on the ground. *'I need to take this slower... Start small.'*

Slowly, he began to test out how his body moved. He tried to raise a wing the same way he'd move his arm, but the muscles in his wing weren't the same, so while he managed to move it around, it still wasn't moving as he'd intended it to.

Leon tried to grit his teeth in frustration, but only wound up clicking his beak. He tried to scowl, but his face was too inexpressive.

*'This is harder than I thought it would be,'* he thought after long minutes of trying to get control of his body.

As if she could hear him, the Thunderbird said from his soul realm, [Babies take months to learn how to crawl, let alone how to walk. It shouldn't take quite as long as you since you have prior experience with fully-controlled movement and a greater ability to focus, but I wouldn't expect you to be able to fly home today.]

[Ugh, that's a kick in the balls,] Leon groaned in response. He'd also tried to say those words out loud, but all that came out of his beak were a series of shrill chirps. Everything about him was different, even his vocal tract, so he could no longer make the noises of human language.

[It's one you should've expected,] the Thunderbird said with some amusement. [Take things slow, there's no rush...]

Leon nodded, but threw himself into trying to learn how to move while in this state.

He took frequent rests as he tried to get his brain to process how to move in such a radically different body, and when he did, he inspected himself. He'd gotten so caught up in his excitement that he'd neglected the most important part of this experiment: evaluating his physical condition.

The first thing he noticed was that his body was still producing magic power at the same rate as his human body did—hells, it even seemed to be *greater* than his human body since his current form was so much larger and had so much more bone marrow from which mana could be produced—but it seemed that maintaining this avian form cost a measure of magic power that, while not debilitating by any means, did mean that his net gain of magic power was lower by about half than it was in his human form. In other words, it would behoove him to not spend every moment he possibly could in this form, otherwise he'd produce much less magic than he would otherwise.

But he was still looking forward to seeing how well he could fight in this new body. With a new body, that meant he could channel magic in new ways, some that might be stronger and some that might be

weaker than his human form. He'd need to run a few tests to find out, but those would have to wait until after he could at least push himself onto his talons without toppling over.

A feat that he wasn't able to achieve in several hours of flailing about in front of the Cradle, unfortunately.

During his examinations, though, Leon concluded that he was able to transform back into his human form essentially at will simply by cutting off power to the enchantment in his soul realm, a much less involved and mentally taxing process than returning to human form had been following his fight with Jormun.

So, as the sun started to set, Leon transformed back into his human form. His face immediately turned bright red as he realized that he'd torn his clothes to pieces during his transformation, but dressing himself with other clothes from his soul realm was easy. He'd just have to keep in mind that his clothes didn't transform with him.

Once that was done, he ran a few fingers through Anzu's feathers comfortingly—the griffin had been remarkably relaxed during the entire transformation, so Leon gave him a quick snack of a pre-roasted rabbit in appreciation. Then, he made a quick check of Anzu's saddle, mounted up, and steered him into the air. Leon and Anzu circled the Crater Tribe of stone giants once, with Leon imprinting the place into his memory, letting the shame and regret he felt dampen his excitement in the Thunderbird's success before he left the Crater, unsure when, or if, he would ever return.

If he had his way, he wouldn't. He couldn't deny that Nestor had at least some point when he'd said that the giants were slaves, acting only in accordance with the purpose he'd given them upon their creation. He didn't believe they were still slaves, but they still felt an uncomfortable affinity for his blood. He wanted them to be free, and so he felt like removing himself from their lives was the best thing to do. It might not get rid of those underlying directives, but he hadn't the skills or the knowledge to know how to do that.

*'Space between us is best,'* Leon thought as he and Anzu turned back west, beginning their return journey to the Bull Kingdom.

As with their journey east, they stopped only when they needed to rest, and they never stopped within human settlements. They took a little longer to reach the capital again, however, for Leon insisted that every time they take a stop, to transform into his avian form and try to learn how to control his body, each transformation requiring less and less magic power.

And he made great progress in learning to move, too—the last stop they made before reaching the capital, Leon managed to stand upon his own talons without toppling over. He was still shaky and constantly had to adjust his balance so flying was still out of the question, but that he was now able to stand in that form meant that he was getting much closer.

He was still a little disappointed. Despite what the Thunderbird had said, he'd at least hoped that he'd be able to make the last leg of their journey himself instead of relying upon Anzu to fly, but it was what it was.

When they landed on his front lawn, only just over a week since he'd left, Elise, Maia, and Valeria already knew that he'd returned thanks to his mental communication with Maia. Elise had clearly been

working in the gardens growing some medicinal plants, Valeria had been training, and Maia had been sleeping by the looks of things, but all were happy to see him return.

He just reveled in their presence for a while, and over dinner, he told them of his trip back to the Crater Tribe, and the completion of the transformation enchantment at the end. Of course, everyone wanted to see it, so Leon stripped down, covered his body with some conjured water to preserve his modesty, and went outside where he transformed, to the delight of his lovers.

He was quite grateful that he was able to stay standing the whole time. He didn't know if he could've survived the embarrassment if he'd been able to do little else but flail about on the ground in front of them.

But he was home, and he didn't make a complete fool of himself, which was about as much as he could possibly hope for.

For the next couple of weeks, he spent all of his free time in his avian form—which wasn't that much since he still had to spend a significant amount of his waking hours training with his retinue, too. They were all invariably impressed, though in different ways. Anshu was struck silent upon seeing it, while Marcus and Alcander seemed a bit nervous, and Alix was practically bouncing with excitement and admiration.

He couldn't do nothing but train, though, and so when he needed a break, he'd usually spend it with either Elise, Maia, or Valeria. When he was with Maia, their time was usually spent quietly reading or having sex—for the time being, there were essentially no other activities that they wanted to do when in each other's presence.

Valeria acted as a strange counter-balance. She wasn't yet ready for that level of intimacy, but she and Leon still grew increasingly closer and more comfortable with expressing their attraction to the other. They kissed without reservation, and even made out a few times, though never progressing much further beyond that. However, when they trained, it was like all the rest of the world no longer existed, as their attention was focused solely upon the other.

When Leon was with Elise, he also spent a good amount of time making sure she was physically satisfied, but he also spent a lot of time talking with her and helping her out with her garden—which was to say, he spent a lot of time with her in their garden as she supervised the Heaven's Eye gardeners do the labor. She was incredibly knowledgeable about useful flora, but rarely did she ever have to get her hands dirty—though she never once hesitated or complained when those rare times cropped up. Many of the flowers she was growing, Leon was happy to see, were more specimens of the medicinal flower that he and Valeria had brought back from the Forest of Black and White, Elise having bred the flower with other similar flowers in the months since.

After some tests by Heaven's Eye's gardeners these flowers were found to be useful enough for making healing potions that if they were properly processed and used as an ingredient, then they could lower the price of the entire potion by as much as ten percent without a loss of efficacy. Elise assured him that if she could expand their growth, then the cultivation of these flowers could become a reliable source of income for them.

For now, though, they were limited by the size of their garden, and expanding their growing area would likely have to wait until they settled down somewhere in Occulara long-term.

But finally, despite all the other ways his attention was being pulled, after almost a month since the Thunderbird finished modifying the enchantment, Leon managed to figure out how to fly while in his avian form. It required a fairly large amount of wind magic to keep himself steady, but he was able to take off and shakily fly once around the villa before landing.

And he felt like a god, giving off a loud eagle-like shriek as he spread his wings in triumph. His blood sang in joy, his happiness evident even without a human face to express it.

He was finally free of gravity. He could finally fly without the use of equipment or relying upon Anzu.

He'd never felt freer.

### **Chapter 619: Arrival of the Investigators**

Leon flew in lazy figure-eights over the section of the noble district that his villa was in, reveling in the way the wind blew through his feathers and the dampness of the clouds that he passed through. Flying around above the capital wasn't exactly legal, but he didn't much care; this was a fulfillment of a primal urge that he'd had for years—he could finally fly! And without a flight suit or his griffin carrying him! Such a feeling of elation that this brought him wasn't one that he was going to let a few Bull Kingdom regulations ruin for him.

It seemed that the Bull Kingdom largely agreed, because no one came to angrily knock on his doors and demand that he stop despite his complete disinterest in hiding or explaining to anyone outside his family or retinue what he was doing. Perhaps it was because the regulations were there as a safety precaution, but he meant the Bull Kingdom no ill-will, and he knew that the powers-that-be in the Kingdom were aware of his attitude.

So, he spent quite a few days following his return from the stone giants' crater flying around in avian form. He could fly quite quickly, faster even than he could run on foot. He estimated that if he needed to, he could travel a thousand miles in a day, which was more than fast enough for him to fly out of the capital for some time to test his magic while in avian form.

The locations he chose for his tests were uninhabited hills close to the capital. There weren't many uninhabited regions so close to such a large city—a *lot* of food was needed to feed the city, and so most of the land around the capital was devoted to producing that food. However, the farms were mostly concentrated in places like around the Naga River, or further west where the soil was richer and the climate more forgiving. To the east, the ground became rockier and sandier, and so there were less farms and villages to get in his way.

And without many people around, he could really let loose.

He began his tests with his lightning, for that was his most important magical element. He found that he could not only conjure lightning out of his body, as he could in human form, but when it was cloudy, if he reached into the clouds with his magic power, he could even call forth a lightning bolt from the heavens. It was actually an easier technique to use than conjuring lightning from his body, for he was just using the lightning magic that was already there rather than needing to produce it on his own. The

downside was that he was restricted in using it; only on days when there was sufficient cloud cover could he call a lightning bolt from the sky.

Further testing in his human form found that he could do something similar, but it was much harder to do—the Thunderbird had explained that this was because his avian form was more in tune with the ambient magic power surrounding him, but from then on, she began to teach him how to manipulate the weather. It might be a while before he could do something as dramatic as summoning a thunderstorm, but now that he was truly awakening to her power, she didn't want him to stumble down this path blind and deaf. She'd give him the guidance he needed.

Lightning wasn't the only element he practiced, though; his wind magic was almost as potent as his lightning magic, now, especially in his Thunderbird form. It was almost as natural to him when in the shape of the Thunderbird to reach out to the plane around him and call the wind to him, moving it about almost as easily as it was to breathe.

His water magic was still rather lackluster compared to the other two, though in his eagle shape, it was still easier to conjure than normal. Still, it was a disappointing increase compared to the former two elements.

In short, despite the disappointment of his lacking talent in water magic, it was made clear enough in his testing that in his Thunderbird form, his magic was stronger and more efficient, so it also stood to reason that from now on, it was his best combat form.

Unfortunately, learning to fight in his human form took most of his childhood, and he had an innate understanding of how his body was to be moved. Even though he'd now learned how to fly in his new Thunderbird form, having the dexterity, flexibility, and muscle memory to properly fight in that form wasn't something that he could build in just a few weeks or months, even with how dedicated he was to learning. He wasn't sure if such physical fighting was even needed, but for now, his Thunderbird form would be forced into more of a ranged combat style than he was used to.

Once his testing was over, he still trained frequently in both of his forms, but training wasn't his only reason to transform; he also frequently transformed and spent his leisure time lazily flying about making figure-eights over the noble district, not only mentally relaxing as he indulged in his instinctual need to fly but also getting a better and better grasp of how his new body moved and functioned.

With such a vantage point, even though his villa was deep in the city, he was one of the first people to see in the distance a huge yacht making its way up the Naga River, one bearing Heaven's Eye banners and sails. This was no pleasure ship, though—it was sleek and beautiful, made for cutting through both rivers and open oceans while also projecting an aura of awe and majesty, but it also had a full complement of what looked like small Flame Lances of some kind, though they were far too small and compact to have come from the Bull Kingdom.

Leon could sense the presence of several powerful mages aboard that ship, one even reaching the eighth-tier and three of the seventh.

*'The investigators,'* he concluded, thinking of Emilie.

He stayed in the air for several hours, watching the ship make its way past the riverine traffic and then over to Heaven's Eye's private harbor. Several times he felt the attention of those in the ship, but he



made no reactions. After weeks of flying around, he was getting used to a lot of people keeping an eye on him with their magic senses.

He felt that this was something worth cutting his flight time short for, though, so just as the Heaven's Eye ship began disgorging its passengers into Heaven's Eye's private docks, he landed at his villa and went to find Elise to tell her who'd just arrived.

—

"Things are going fine," Emilie said without a hint of worry in her voice as she, Elise, and Leon quietly ate a late lunch in her palace. "I don't fear what they'll find at all."

"Mother, you could lose your position!" Elise protested, the worry in her voice driving her tone up almost an entire octave.

Emilie gave her a mysterious smile. "I may have been a bit worried a few days ago, but not anymore. Do you know who they sent?"

Elise shook her head.

"Damian Makedon," Emilie said.

Elise blinked in confusion, and then her worried expression intensified. "They sent a *Makedon* here?! But they never leave Imperial territory!"

"They do when the Director himself has need of something," Emilie replied with a smile. Elise was taken aback, and leaned back in her chair, her confusion only mounting. However, she remained silent and let Emilie continue. "Damian is here to officially investigate me for my role in ending the Bull Kingdom's civil war, but unofficially, he told me that the Director is going to remove me from my Lordship over this Kingdom's primary Tower and recall me to Occulara no matter what they find."

"What?!" Elise shouted in panic, but Emilie held up her hands and calmed her daughter down with a placating gesture.

"Don't worry, Butterfly," she whispered with a smile of pride. "I'm being recalled to serve in Occulara in a greater capacity. John Kosmos died two years ago, and his seat on the board is open. The Director has tapped me to replace him."

"But..." Elise sputtered before trailing off. It seemed to Leon that she'd realized something, but he didn't have enough knowledge of Heaven's Eye's higher management to come to the same realization.

"I'm sorry," he spoke up, "but it seems strange to send people here to investigate supposed wrongdoings only to, in the same breath, indicate that you're being promoted. Aren't you worried that this is a bait-and-switch? That they're only trying to placate you with talk of a promotion so that you won't interfere in their investigation? That they're using this to keep you from fighting back while they get rid of you?"

"That's a remarkably cynical take on the matter," Emilie remarked with a smile. "Normally, I would say that such an attitude would be the correct one to take—if one always expects the worst, then one will rarely be unpleasantly surprised. This case is different, though. The Director doesn't play politics like that; if he wants someone gone, then they disappear, simple as that. The Director got to where he is

today by being both ruthless and honest to a fault. His word is as good as gold, and Damian Makedon brought a letter written in the Director's own hand giving me his word."

"That seems... kind of contradictory," Leon muttered.

"It isn't at all," Emilie responded. "The Director removes threats and obstacles with extreme efficiency, while treating everyone else with the respect that he would expect to be treated. No matter what, he'll always speak straightly with you. If you anger him, though, then you'll just disappear one day, never to be seen again."

Leon murmured in response, "Grim..."

Emilie shrugged. "He's been the Director for the past two centuries. You don't stick around that long at the top of Heaven's Eye without being a bit grim."

Leon nodded, but if it were Emilie's aim to ameliorate his and Elise's worries, she'd failed. However, he felt at least reasonably confident that he could now bring up the key part of his future plans with her without putting undue pressure upon her.

"I... If you say that this is fine, then it's fine. How much power would you have as a board member of Heaven's Eye?"

"A ton," Elise answered immediately as she squeezed Leon's hand, giving him a smile that was still somewhat worried, but also a little bit relieved, as well. "The board of Heaven's Eye are the personal advisors of the Director and the highest level of managers in the entire Guild. They handle entire branches of the Guild so that the Director can focus on the Guild as a whole without getting too bogged down focused on one particular aspect. I think John Kosmos was the Chief of Acquisitions?"

Emilie nodded, then further explained, "If I succeed Kosmos, then I will be in charge of finding and acquiring not only rare materials, but *all* materials that Heaven's Eye provides, from as mundane as grain to as rare as wyvern hearts."

"That... sounds like one hell of a job," Leon remarked. Heaven's Eye was the single largest provider of just about anything and everything on an international scale. Food, weapons, armor, raw materials, Heaven's Eye dealt in more of all that than most countries on Aeterna. He sure as hells wouldn't be eager to take up that job, but from the look on Emilie's face, he knew that his attitude wasn't shared.

"It's not an easy one, but it's powerful," Emilie whispered, savoring every word as her eyes unfocused for a moment, as if she were fantasizing about the future.

"Is it powerful enough to recommend potential recruits for Heaven's Eye?" Leon asked, his tone coming off far more confident than he felt within.

At that question, Emilie's rather relaxed and unworried expression hardened into a significantly more business-like demeanor, and she leaned forward onto the table, fixing Leon in a steely gaze. "Why Leon... Are you looking to join Heaven's Eye?"

"That depends," Leon replied with a subtle smile. He spared Elise a quick glance, and when she smiled and nodded, he proceeded. "I need contacts down south. I need a support structure. I'm not willing to

pledge fealty to Heaven's Eye, but I'm willing to give up a measure of my independence for Heaven's Eye's support."

"That... is complicated," Emilie said. "If you were willing to join Heaven's Eye outright, then it would be the easiest thing to have you join. Eighth-tier mages aren't exactly common, even down in the Central Empires, so Heaven's Eye getting its hands on another one would be quite the coup. However, if you're not looking to *join* Heaven's Eye, but to enter into some kind of partnership with them..."

Leon glanced once more at Elise, then leaned in to whisper into her ear. Her expression froze, and she glanced back at her mother, then at Leon, and then back at Emilie. Slowly, she nodded, though her expression didn't soften at all.

With a wave of his hand, Leon conjured the platinum card he'd retrieved from his family's archives beneath Teira onto the table, and it was Emilie's turn to freeze.

"You know that I plan to achieve Apotheosis and enter the Nexus," Leon stated. "You know at least some of my lineage. I have great plans, and for that, I have need of Heaven's Eye's resources..."

Everything that Emilie didn't know about Leon, save for Xaphan, Leon began to explain in all the detail that Emilie wished for—after extracting a promise from her to keep it to herself and to never share with anyone the information he was about to share with her. He still remembered her exposing his name to Alix—at this very table, no less—and though that one slip of the tongue hadn't come back to bite him, he couldn't say that another might follow that example.

For her part, Emilie was extremely apologetic about revealing his identity to Alix, chalking it up to a mistake made in the heat of excitement at his and Alix's presence. She readily gave him her word that whatever he had to say to her would be kept in confidence, and she said it so seriously and with such conviction that Leon fully accepted her declaration.

He proceeded to tell her about the Thunderbird Clan and its subjugation of Aeterna—some of which Emilie had already been familiar with, though she didn't have enough detail to know that it was the *Thunderbird* Clan, instead only knowing them as nameless extraplanar invaders who'd eventually been repulsed and defeated eighty-thousand years ago.

He then explained how House Raime was descended from the Thunderbird Clan, and then finished that story with how his father met and fell in love with a Princess of the Great Black Dragon Clan, though he wasn't able to say definitively *why* his mother had been here. Then, he switched gears, and began to speak of the future, of the Clan he hoped to build, and the heights he hoped to rise to within the Nexus. Finally, he finished with giving her a brief explanation of his enemies, including Khosrow and the three lieutenants that Justin Isynos had warned him of back in Nestor's lab.

"... and I want to emphasize that I'm not looking to *actually* take over Heaven's Eye or anything like that," Leon said. "All I want is support as I rise. Nothing more. What form that support might take is not yet for me to expect—I don't know even know what I really need to achieve Apotheosis, or to grow strong within the Nexus, yet. All I know is that within the next century or two, I hope to take my family and ascend to the center of the universe."

When he finished, Leon squeezed Elise's hand, who'd snuggled up close to him in a show of support as he told his story, especially once he reached the death of his father.

Throughout his spiel, Emilie was silent as the grave. She merely listened and waited for Leon to finish, and once he was done, she continued to be silent as she mulled over his words, taking the whole spiel uncharacteristically seriously. Leon let her think and process, knowing that his story wasn't one that any sane person would take completely at face value. But he hoped that he'd presented his case well, and that Emilie could offer him at least some nominal support, even if it was just a few introductions down south.

Emilie regarded him coldly, her emerald eyes piercing right through him, her expression unreadable.

And then, she suddenly brightened up and said, "What kind of person would I be if I left my son-in-law out in the cold?" She smiled and leaned back into her chair. "We have to discuss what joining Heaven's Eye means for you in the short term—they'll not accept you if you don't give them anything in return, eighth-tier or not."

"I'm willing to sell spells and enchanted weapons through them," Leon said. "What might they *expect* of me, though? What might they ask of me? What could I get in return for varying levels of commitment?"

Emilie replied, "It depends. You won't be used as a mule, and your skills in enchanting would have to be officially evaluated. You won't be stuffed into an office, either. I suppose they might ask you to deal with situations that often crop up that might require some magical muscle. You might have to escort a dignitary around, lending them legitimacy and respect by your presence. You might have to liaise with Imperial envoys who would be insulted if they met with anyone of lesser tier. I honestly can't tell you what they might ask of you, because at your level, they won't expect you to work in a defined role unless you join the board or are appointed as a Tower Lord."

Leon frowned, but he nodded in acceptance. That might be a price he'd have to pay, but he still had some concerns.

"How often do these kinds of situations arise where an eighth-tier mage's power is needed?"

"Not particularly often," Emilie said with a shrug. "Heaven's Eye is powerful enough in other ways that we don't really have to rely upon our muscle, and generally speaking, relying upon violence—or the threat of it—doesn't sit well with the Empires. If Heaven's Eye threw your weight around for petty things, it might make the Empires a little nervous. However, meeting and escorting dignitaries around might be relatively frequent, especially in Occulara..."

"It sounds like Heaven's Eye has to walk on eggshells around the Empires," Leon observed.

"They do. It's a complex relationship—Heaven's Eye is extremely old, and extremely widespread, enough so that they have influence from the centers of power to the furthest reaches of the plane. If the Empires were to act against them, it could cause serious economic damage to everyone, not just themselves. However, for all its power, Heaven's Eye can't match any of the Empires in military might—especially since we don't have even a single tenth-tier mage. If we did, though, the Empires might just decide that we've grown too powerful and start to act.

"It's a difficult balancing act for Heaven's Eye to walk—on the one hand, we have to make ourselves so useful that we're tolerated by the Empires. On the other hand, we have to go to great pains to make it clear that we're not a threat to Imperial hegemony, else they'll finally decide that we're more trouble than we're worth and act against us."

"I understand," Leon replied.

"It's enough of a balancing act that there have been members of Heaven's Eye that we've believed *could* have ascended to the tenth-tier, but chose not to in order to preserve Heaven's Eye, or else chose to retire and go into exile. We're invaluable to the Empires, but also their biggest threat, and everyone is well aware of that. We're friendly with the Empires, but not trusted."

"Why don't the Empires just use their resources to set up competition?" Leon wondered.

"They have, within their own borders," Emilie replied. "But none of their private enterprises are able to match Heaven's Eye's economic powers, and they always

## **Chapter 620: Four Points of Interest**

The next few weeks proceeded quite peacefully for Leon. Apart from some wedding plans he had to make with Elise, there wasn't much he had to worry about. With Emilie on his side—at least, as much as she could *be* on anyone's side—he was confident that he'd be able to join Heaven's Eye in some capacity, and that meant he wouldn't have to worry about getting established down in Occulara.

However, with the whole affair with the investigators and the scare that the threat of Emilie's termination had given them fresh on their minds, Leon and Elise continued with their plans to be financially independent. The big money-makers they were going to rely upon were Leon and Valeria's skill in enchanting, and Elise's skill in management combined with her interest in growing exotic plants. Occulara was in a fertile region of the Ilian Empire, so they made plans to find some land and use it to grow their medicinal flowers, along with whatever else caught Elise's fancy. She had a growing interest in growing grapes and other, more magical fruits to make wine, and that got Valeria excited, too. Leon, who drank wine only rarely, and never partook in anything stronger, didn't share in their excitement nearly as much, but he was still happy that they could find something to do together.

Maia was left feeling kind of left out, though. She didn't have many skills that could translate well into the civilized world. She could hunt and fight, but other than that, she didn't know what she might be able to contribute. That sense of inferiority and uselessness, however mitigated by Leon and Elise, then resulted in a redoubled effort in her training. In her mind, if all she could do was hunt and fight, then she wanted to be damn good at both.

When it came time for Leon and Elise's wedding, though, everyone set aside their goals and diligence for a few weeks. When the date arrived, it had only been two months since the investigators arrived, and almost four since Leon and Maia's return from the Serpentine Isles—a staggeringly short period of time for planning a wedding, but they didn't have much time left in the Kingdom, and so had to hurry a bit.

It was simultaneously a sumptuous and luxurious affair, while also retaining some air of privacy. The guest list was rather truncated, and that exclusivity, combined with the social statuses of Elise, Emilie, and Leon, made it one of the most prestigious and talked-about events in the Bull Kingdom. The King himself, and all of the free Paladins made an appearance, as did the immediate Royal Family—August, Stefania, Cristina, and Antonius, as well as August's mother and the King's favorite concubine, Isabella. Accompanying them were a handful of other familiar faces, including Asiya, Valeria's friend from the Knight Academy, and Dame Maxima, the head of Princess Cristina's personal guard, whom Leon met in the opening stages of the civil war. All were happy and congratulatory—at least, on the surface, Leon

thought he imagined it for a moment or two, but he could've sworn he felt a few wisps of killing intent directed towards him from Princess Cristina, but the Princess was so chipper and happy the rest of the day that he put it out of his mind.

Several high-ranking Legates and Consuls, including Minerva—who'd been promoted to Consul of the East, succeeding Trajan—also showed up. Roland had also been invited, and so were a number of high-ranking Heaven's Eye personnel, such as Ajax, Emilie's brother.

In addition, a handful of the most important merchants, bureaucrats, and nobles from around the Kingdom were invited. Only two noble families who'd supported Octavius made an appearance: the Duke of Lentia, Gaius' older brother, and the Duchess of Vesontio, both of whom had defected to August's side during the civil war. In fact, in the course of welcoming their guests, Leon and Elise learned the Duchess of Vesontio and Prince August were in marriage talks, themselves.

That whole affair with August and Vesontio, assuming it worked out, struck Leon as almost ironically similar to the position Octavius had been in. Octavius' mother had been the daughter of the powerful Duke of Valencia, and his mother's younger brother had been the Earthshaker Paladin. Now here was August getting set to marry a Duchess himself, whose cousin was the Brimstone Paladin—the issue of the ongoing mass-revocation of landed titles aside, it was a powerful pairing, and likely ensured at least some stability would last out in the Western Territories, where Octavius' support had been strongest and where the Royal Legions were still quashing dissent.

In total, there were only about a hundred guests, including Elise's friends and Leon's retinue.

The wedding itself was traditional by Bull Kingdom standards. Elise wore a long dress that hugged her body quite tightly, with a high leg slit and low cut that also left her arms bare, made of silkgrass and dyed blood red to complement her hair, which had been done into long waves that cascaded down her back, and ornamented with an emerald-studded golden tiara. Leon, using all his wisdom and humility, admitted to his lack of knowledge regarding fashion in the weeks leading up to the wedding, and so had made Elise's day by asking for help in picking out his attire for the event. Elise, in an ecstatic fervor, brought Valeria on board, and together the two friends conspired to pick his clothes for the day. They eventually settled on a suit that seemed to have been made of silver thread that sparkled in the daylight, beneath which he wore a blue silkgrass tunic. His outer coat was adorned with pale sapphires, which Valeria said were meant to evoke the aesthetic of his silver-blue lightning.

They thought he looked quite dashing in it, so while it wasn't something he would've ever chosen to wear under normal circumstances, he still wore it proudly and without even the tiniest of complaints.

Prince Herculanus himself, the King's eldest son who'd forsaken his claim on the throne for the call of the Blood Priests, facilitated the ceremony.

A stone tablet was taken to the wedding location—a park within the noble district that Elise was fond of frequenting—whereupon Leon and Elise's names were inscribed. The tablet was then copied and taken to Teira, to be stored within the tomb of Leon's Ancestors, as were nearly all the other marital stones of his family. The copy was kept by Leon and Elise. Once that was done, Prince Herculanus bound them with silk, pronounced them husband and wife before the Kingdom and their watching Ancestors, and then prayed for their well-being—making for a mercifully brief formal ceremony, but the day wasn't over, yet.

After the main ceremony was over and everyone socialized for a few minutes, with Leon and Elise's respective social and professional circles offering their congratulations, came time for the games. Everyone, regardless of class or social station, participated in a race where they were encouraged to use physical force to fight to the front of the group, though few got too rough or took the race too seriously, especially with so many powerful mages and important men and women participating. Then, a number of volunteers stepped forward to spar for the entertainment of everyone—Alcander wound up the victor, though many of the stronger guests didn't participate. Finally, the ceremony was capped off with a long feast, during which Leon and Elise walked around to speak with all of their guests and thank them for attending.

Throughout the entire ceremony, Maia and Valeria rarely left their side. Given the Bull Kingdom's allowance of polyamory, the two weren't looked down upon at all throughout the ceremony, even as they acted as Elise's ladies-in-waiting throughout the day. Their dresses were less radiant than Elise's, but Leon still thought that Maia's simple sea-green dress and Valeria's ice-blue were dazzling.

The final event of the day was an exchange of gifts between Leon and Elise. For the most part, their gifts were functional—Leon gave Elise a number of rare flowers that he'd heard she was interested in cultivating and that he'd subsequently bought, and a spectacular gold ring set with four emeralds that had been enchanted to enhance her earth magic, which was the element that she'd decided to devote herself to learning. Elise, meanwhile, gave Leon a number of specialized tools that would greatly aid him in enchanting.

All beautiful gifts worthy of their relationship, but the true gifts were those given in private, which were far more personal. Elise gave Leon an amulet that hung from a fine gold chain, set with a cloudy diamond and three lightning-shaped sapphires, which were enchanted to act like magic batteries he could draw from if he started running low on magic power. Leon had been in battle so many times and had so often run low on magic power that he was overjoyed to receive such a gift.

Leon, meanwhile, gave Elise a stylish coat that had been made from the substantial fur left over from the snow lion he'd hunted to awaken his bloodline. His father had made him a coat from that fur, and Leon now presented Elise with one of her own, tailored perfectly for her. Despite the time the fur had been buried underground and languished in Leon's soul realm, it was still just as beautiful and lustrous as ever, shining brightly in the light of the setting sun.

Leon then surprised Valeria and Maia with coats of their own, each one subtly different in cut and style, though all had been lightly inscribed with enchantments that increased their toughness, allowing them to act as fairly light armor. It left Leon with precious little fur remaining, but in seeing the shared joy on Elise, Valeria, and Maia's faces as they tried them on, he felt that every stitch had been worth it.

And so ended Leon and Elise's wedding. They spent practically the entire following week attached at the hip—or *other* places—reveling in calling each other husband and wife. Maia was usually not far away, and rarely was she ever clothed. Even Valeria got significantly more intimate with Leon, with both exploring each other's bodies in any way they desired, though they had yet to cross that final line into sex.

Still, it was undeniable now that Leon and Valeria loved each other, and were together, which frustrated Valeria's father. He and Leon met up once in the days following the wedding, when Leon and Valeria

visited him in a small villa that Heaven's Eye had arranged for him. He no longer needed constant attention from the healers, and he'd recovered enough to radiate the power of a first-tier mage, but he still had some trouble getting around.

As much as Leon hated it, he knew that Justin would have to accompany him and Valeria when they left the Bull Kingdom. He still struggled with the hatred he felt for the man, but Justin knew the Nexus and Lord Kamran far better than Leon; his knowledge would prove invaluable when Leon and his family and retinue finally began their journey to the Nexus.

With some reluctance, he included Justin in their plans to head south. He still planned on interacting with the man as infrequently as possible, though.

And so passed several months. Months filled with training. Months filled with expanding powers. Months filled with love and joy.

But after five months, it was almost time to leave, and so time for more concrete plans for the future to be made.

—

"I want to know everything," Leon said to Nestor as he laid the map he'd copied from the Cradle out onto the table before the dead man.

He'd made some small modifications to his soul realm in the months since he'd returned from the Cradle after bringing Lapis and the rest of its comrades home. Just before the Thunderbird had announced her success in modifying the transformation enchantment, Leon had been questioning Nestor about the possibility of putting other magical entities into golem bodies instead of wisps, with the implied threat of stuffing Nestor into such a frame.

There were plenty of obstacles to overcome, enough that it wasn't truly feasible, as Leon had learned in the months since, but he'd also decided to play with Nestor a bit and erected a life-sized statue of Lapis within his Mind Palace that loomed over Nestor, while simultaneously reminding Leon what his failures in leadership had already cost him.

But he wasn't here speaking with Nestor to threaten him, now. Instead, he needed to have a better idea of what he needed to do upon arriving in the Central Empires. Already, he'd had several long meetings with Emilie, planning out their route south. The route she'd planned on was the same one that Elise and Anshu had both agreed upon—though the latter only reluctantly, seeming to want to disagree with anything Elise had said and only engaging her in conversation by Leon's order. They'd travel south along the Naga River, then catch a Heaven's Eye ship east to Ariminium, sail south along the Tyrrhenian River, make their way into the Ilumerian Wetlands, and then from there it was just one long boat ride through the rivers, swamps, and marshes until they arrived in the hinterlands of the Ilian Empire.

However, getting to Occulara in the Ilian Empire was one thing; what he did after that was another. He trusted Elise to get their immediate needs seen to—the purchase of a fairly large home, and then getting their business ventures started—but he had his own projects.

Namely, the many sites that had been marked upon the map within the Cradle. He'd had Prince Antonius look into them years ago, and he'd found out that nearly all lined up perfectly with cities within



the Central Empires, leading him to believe that all of those sites had been found and plundered already. However, there were three sites within Imperial territory that didn't line up with cities.

Leon's interest primarily lay with those three sites, but he wasn't going to take for granted the possibility that all of the sites had been discovered or completely ransacked. So, he needed to know from Nestor what each of these sites were. Given that the Raime family archives, Xaphan's prison, and Nestor's lab had all been marked on the same map, Leon wanted to reach those sites and ensure that nothing dangerous was being stored there, just waiting for some unlucky or nefarious person to stumble upon them. He didn't know the exact details of his Clan's invasion of Aeterna, but he knew at least that they had made a mess of the plane, and he wanted to clean up as much of it as he could before he left.

Doing so might even let him in on more Clan secrets that he might need in the future. While he wasn't going to count on it, every site on the map could just as likely hold something fantastic that was just waiting for him to recover, or something dark and terrible that he needed to deal with.

Finding answers to all of these mysteries was exactly why he was now speaking with Nestor, along with learning more precise details of the Clan's takeover of Aeterna.

"We sent many advance scouts," Nestor explained, after going on a lengthy caveat about how he wasn't too concerned with the tactics of the invasions, having left most of that to his father, brothers, and sister in favor of continuing his studies. Leon just nodded and hurried him along. "I think it was about a thousand of our warriors riding in five arks. They weren't our best, but they landed upon this plane with considerable force at their disposal, and prepared themselves for retaliation from the locals, or the Grave Warden. None came, so they spent a few years getting the lay of the land, interacting with the local states and heralding the arrival of our forces. When the main armies of our Clan arrived, the scouts had built up a base of support, and those who weren't already on our side were summarily crushed.

"It was only when we had established full control over the plane, about six or seven years after the scouts had landed, I would say, that the rest of our leadership arrived."

"This was during a time of Reconstitution for the Nexus, yes?" Leon asked.

"Yes," Nestor replied. "The Nexus had already started to crumble, signaling that it was about to fall apart, with the pieces blasted into the Void to become new planes, and a new Nexus to form around the Origin Spark. This is always a process that takes centuries, though, giving just about everyone more than enough time to evacuate to the orbiting planes further out in the universe to wait for the new Nexus to manifest. But I digress.

"Once our leadership arrived, we set about establishing ourselves here. It was a primitive world, one without many of the creature comforts that many of our leaders were used to. It wouldn't do to have even a vassal Strategos housed within what they might consider a shack, even if the locals called it a palace, so we had quite a bit of building to do.

"For most of our Clan, our golems that we brought served as labor enough to get us established, but for the leaders of the vassal Clans that followed us here, we had to conscript many of the locals to work on our projects."

"I can't imagine they were happy about that," Leon said through gritted teeth.

“They were compensated well enough,” Nestor sniped back. “Money and positions were given to those who impressed us. We weren’t here to stay, we were only here to find a Universe Fragment. Once it was in our hands, we intended to leave for the next plane in the Divine Graveyard, and we had no interest in leaving this plane broken and dead.”

Leon nodded, remembering when Nestor spoke of this before. However, he wanted to know about the sites on the map, especially those three that didn’t become cities.

“What can you tell me about this points?” he asked.

“Fortresses, manufacturies, other places of import,” Nestor replied.

“So places that are likely to have been found?” Leon asked.

“I would say that’s a safe assumption,” Nestor replied. “The people of this plane rebelled against us after the death of my father, siblings, and the rest of the Clan leadership. With our weakened state and our vassals fighting amongst themselves, I would imagine that many of these places fell into the hands of the locals, who then used them against those of our followers who were left.”

Leon nodded again. It sounded like many of these places were likely to have been destroyed in the chaos following Jason Keraunos’ fall, but still, there were dozens of points; they couldn’t all have been destroyed.

“Tell me about these three.” Leon gestured to the map and to the three points absent cities.

Nestor hummed in thought. “I believe the one there in the south was where we refined Titanstone.”

Leon’s ears perked up. “You mean the stuff that was in the walls of that golden serpent colossus’ chamber? That is able to transfer magic with unparalleled speed and efficiency?”

“Yes,” Nestor replied. “The lossless conduction of magic power that Titanstone is capable of is essential for building any magical construct of note. Constructing arks capable of traversing the Void between even neighboring planes in any practical and safe manner is impossible without Titanstone.”

“It was only a refinery, though?” Leon asked, seeking clarification.

“Yes,” Nestor replied. “Titanstone ore is solid, while its refined form is liquid, though it retains its shape while magic is conducted through it. There were a few places we found on this plane where Titanstone could be mined, which was about the only resource that caught our attention, despite this place being known as the ‘Divine Graveyard’. You’d think a place with such a grand