

Storm King 801

Chapter 801: MALL

Narses the White, now that the fighting was over and Narses the Black was dead, quickly took control over the situation at the blood farm. He had his security officers, several dozen in total, secure the castle, establish a watch over the docks to the west of the castle, and then start providing aid for the rescued captives. It would take some doing to get them back to civilization, but Leon had no doubts that Narses was up to the task of doing so.

He, on the other hand, got himself and his retainers out of the castle, both to stay out of Narses' hair and to inspect his weapons.

One of the biggest upsets during Narses the Black's ambush was Leon's followers blasting enormous holes into the curtain wall and the gatehouse. This damage had been inflicted upon the castle by a single shot from one of three identical weapon platforms that Leon had brought with him.

As Narses got control of things in the castle, Leon walked toward the closest of these weapon platforms: a large, boxy carriage, heavily armored, bearing a third-generation Lightning Lance on top. Alix had dubbed it the 'MALL', or Mobile Armored Lightning Lance. Leon hadn't been that crazy about the name, but her suggestion had stuck with both his retainers and the engineering team that had designed the platform.

The platform was largely the result of the work his engineers had done in building a small, armored vehicle capable of carrying a squad and not be immediately destroyed by enemy Lances, arks, or mages. Horseless, wheelless carriages were already part of the way there, but the problem was finding a way to not only get it sufficiently armored, but also sufficiently powered so that the enormous weight of the armor could be overcome, and so that the magic of the platform's passengers could be saved for other things rather than powering the mobility enchantments.

The engineers had, not long after Leon took over the project, recommended the removal of weapon systems from the platform, citing the need to conserve magic power for the needed armor and defensive wards, but Leon, after finishing up his design for his second-generation Lightning Lance, had disagreed. His new Lance designs were much more conservative with their power requirements, and with the help of thunder wood, Leon managed to get those requirements down even further for the third-generation Lightning Lances.

The three MALLs that he brought with him on this mission were the first prototypes of the design. Each one needed a crew of three—one driver, one weapon operator, and one commander—and could transport eight passengers within it if it needed to.

As Leon approached, his retainers just behind him, the gunner and commander were both outside, the front door of the weapon platform open, doing a bit of maintenance.

"Chief Leon!" the commander, a sixth-tier mage, called out in greeting.

"How's it going?" Leon asked.

"This baby did its job!" the commander replied, slapping the vehicle's thick armor plating. "It sucks up power like a back-alley whore, but by the gods is it powerful!"

“Uh, yes, Chief,” the gunner added, his tone rather dull, as the commander jabbed him in the ribs. “Strong weapon. One shot, broke wall.”

“Is the platform still operational?” Leon asked.

“Plenty of power, Chief!” the commander responded. “We only got off one shot, but we were ready with another in only a minute!”

Leon heard Alix snickering behind him—presumably at some innuendo he was actively ignoring.

“And the range?” Leon asked.

“We’ve still got at least two hundred miles, and we’d cross them so quickly you’d think we were being chased by the cuckolded husbands of a hundred of our mistresses!”

“That’s an interesting quantification,” Gaius observed. “What’s the difference between a hundred cuckolded husbands and only fifty?”

“Fifty barely demands a light jog, but a hundred’s got us bookin’ it!”

“Right,” Leon said, not so much in the mood for this banter. “How about we get some more concrete numbers?”

After that exchange, Leon’s demeanor had the MALL commander straightening up and growing more serious. As a result, with him taking his report more seriously, Leon learned that they still had the magic power to travel two hundred miles at a sustained pace of about forty miles per hour. They also had another ninety-nine shots with their Lightning Lance, each one taking as much power as the MALL needed to travel at top speed for two minutes.

If the MALL ever ran out of power, its power crystal would need to be swapped out. They were fairly large things, and while the task commander could store spare crystals in their soul realms—Leon having made the regulation that there would be no task commanders below the sixth-tier—the power supply was, by the constraints of the design, buried too deeply in the vehicle to be quickly swapped out. Before setting out, Leon had had the three crews that he’d brought with the weapon platforms train on them, and they’d managed to shave the power source swap down to about an hour.

After speaking with that commander, Leon led his retainers to the other two MALLs, and after getting their similar reports, he let his people finally relax. He was quite happy with the weapons’ performance. Given the ability for mages to carry just about anything in their soul realm, there hadn’t been much need for such weapons to carry themselves around in Imperial war doctrine, but Leon could easily see the use of having a mobile armored personal carrier with such a powerful weapon, especially since the vehicle could be piloted by just about anyone. It couldn’t fly any higher than about three feet off the ground, but that was more than enough to get over just about any obstacle, and could potentially augment the strength of any weaker forces he might pick up in the future.

There were, of course, always improvements to be made. He’d taken note of how sluggishly the vehicle turned, and how well it performed when traveling over the swampy terrain of the Wetlands. The drivers had all mentioned some stickiness in the controls, but everyone marveled at how quietly the vehicles ran.

Before he could complete his notes, Leon found himself interrupted by Narses the White, who'd come over while Leon was getting his retainers and the MALLs organized. All three weapon platforms had been formed up in front of the destroyed gatehouse, while Leon had allowed his retainers to relax as they pleased. Most of them remained outside, but Anna had climbed into the passenger compartment of the nearest MALL and collapsed, tears running down her face. Valeria had gone to keep her company, but Anna subsequently insisted on being alone.

"Leon," Narses said in greeting.

Leon nodded back.

"I'd like to speak. Alone."

Narses' tone was respectful, but insistent; Leon acquiesced, leaving Valeria in charge of the retinue as he walked off into the swamp with the Chief of Security where they wouldn't be overheard.

Leon was curious about what Narses had to discuss alone since a progress report could be easily given in front of everyone else. However, when Narses came to a stop, he didn't establish any wards that might prevent eavesdropping. Instead, he stopped at the edge of the swamp, staring out over the murky, dark green water, most of the region cast in darkness thanks to the thick leafy canopy.

It seemed that Narses needed a moment to get to whatever it was that he needed to talk about, so Leon simply asked, "How're things going with the people we freed?"

"Hm? Ah, we've treated those who needed medical attention the most, and gotten everyone plenty of food and water."

"How're we going to get them back home? I can't imagine they're all from the Ilian Empire, but even if they were, we can't exactly escort them through this swamp safely..."

"When we leave later today, I was going to leave several of my people behind to take care of everyone. I'll have a larger delegation sent out when we get back to civilization. It shouldn't take more than a day or two for a larger task force to arrive at that castle and escort everyone to safety. I'll also keep the place under surveillance for a while to pick up any stragglers, and then have it demolished in... maybe a month or two? That should be enough time to catch anyone we missed."

"Good. Wasn't looking forward to trying to defend such a large group from swamp monsters, or having to come back out here if more vampires move back in."

"You're a real humanitarian, aren't you, Leon?"

Leon grinned sarcastically. "I try."

"That's fuckin' sad, then, isn't it? By the gods I need a drink." In one swift motion, Narses conjured a bottle from his soul realm and brought it to his lips, taking several deep gulps before pulling the bottle away. "I hate vampires. At this point, I'd rather they all do us a favor and die off."

"You're in like-minded company."

"I'm sure I am. These things have been after you for years, haven't they?"

Leon nodded.

"All the more reason we should've taken the *other* Narses prisoner. The *lesser* Narses. The *weaker* Narses. The—"

"I think I get it. And I was prepared to take him prisoner, honestly. An interrogation would've gone well for us, especially if we were able to bribe him as we were with Valentina."

"Hm... How has she been working out, by the by?" Narses the White glanced over his shoulder at Leon's retinue, with whom Valentina was mingling.

"She's back to researching anti-magic, as was her passion before being assigned to blood magic. Why? Thinking of asking her for more than she's already given?"

"She gave us a lot of good intel, but no, I'm sure she gave us all she had to give. Rather, I suppose I just regret letting this Narses die like that. Actually, 'regret' isn't quite strong enough: I'm fucking *furios* that *your* retainer took *my* prisoner!"

Leon frowned as Narses' tone rose in anger. However, he stared unapologetically back at Narses. "Her vengeance was hers to take," he said simply.

Narses glared at him for a long moment, before grunting, "That it, huh? Letting such a valuable potential source of information go for the sake of vengeance?"

"I'm not *happy* about it," Leon responded. "But neither am I all that broken up about it. A vampire's dead, Anna got her revenge for her family."

"And how's she taking it?"

Leon glanced back at his retinue, noting that Anna was staring at the wall of the MALL she sat in, her eyes unfocused, prominent tear streaks still running down her cheeks.

"As well as anyone in her position, I think," Leon growled.

"That's the thing, isn't it? She has her vengeance, and in taking it, she has made us less prepared to deal with any more vampires later on. The intelligence that we could've taken from Narses could've been game-changing! He sacrificed a massive blood farm just to lure you into a trap, who knows what else he might've given up? We certainly don't know, because your retainer killed him!"

"And what would you have had me do?" Leon shot back. "Let my retainer see the man who murdered her family walk free after giving up his allies? Tell her that her parents died for nothing? You're right, we don't know what we might've gotten from him; it could've been nothing at all!"

"Were you really fine with taking him prisoner?"

Leon's tongue froze as Narses stared back at him, the Chief of Security's expression one of utmost seriousness.

After a moment of thought, Leon just shrugged dismissively as he looked out over the swamp. "What's done is done, no use in crying about it," he bitterly spat.

“But what *hasn’t* been done still waits for us, Leon. And if you don’t get a better grip on your retainers, then you’re going to get into trouble. Listen, I respect you, I consider you an ally. But we’re *weaker* now than we might’ve been without the weak leech’s potential cooperation. And what has killing him brought her? Seems to me like it’s nothing but pain.”

Leon glanced back at Anna, but after a moment, his eyes drifted in Valeria’s direction.

“Leon,” Narses continued, his tone turning tired, “this isn’t a deal big enough to fight over. So, and also out of respect for you, I’ll overlook this. But if I can give some unsolicited advice: don’t let this fester. That girl needs some help, and not of the violent or magical kind.

“Now, if you don’t mind me changing the subject, those MALLs you brought with you worked wonders. One shot from each punched holes in that wall! How quickly can you build more?”

Leon stared at Valeria for just a second longer before replying, his tone rather neutral and devoid of any emotion, “Hard to say. Not for me to say, I think. Need to update the plans with some improvements, then I’ll get the plans to Lady Emilie; she’ll know more.”

“Mm, right,” Narses responded. “I suppose Research and Development isn’t the one to go to for production; innovation is your thing, and actually building what your mad researchers put together is for the rest of us, isn’t it?”

Leon shrugged noncommittally. Their conversation didn’t last much longer with Leon’s attention now much farther away, so only a couple minutes later, Leon and Narses emerged from the swamp and returned to the castle.

Leon waved to his retainers before heading in Anna’s direction, sparing a loving smile for Valeria, who didn’t hesitate to return it. Narses was right: he couldn’t let this fester.

He paused just outside of the MALL, leaning against the door in a place where Anna couldn’t miss him. He stayed there for a full minute, waiting for her to tell him to go away and glancing in several times to make sure that she knew he intended to head on in.

When she didn’t ask him to leave, he ducked inside and took a seat on one of the crude, if relatively comfortable benches along the walls of the compartment. He didn’t immediately speak, but instead averted his eyes as Anna hurriedly wiped her face and tried to make it look like she hadn’t broken down.

“L-Leon,” she eventually said.

Taking that as his cue to look back at her, Leon met her gaze. Her blue eyes were bloodshot and her recently-altered bright orange hair was a bit of a mess.

Leon sighed and said, “We’re not going to be staying here for too much longer. A couple of hours at most.”

Anna nodded.

“How’re you doing?” Leon asked.

“F-Fine!” she insisted, a shaky smile plastered across her face. As Leon stared at her skeptically, her smile faltered, and she quickly said, “I’ll be fine...”

Leon hummed in acknowledgment. "There won't be any official fallout from this."

Anna slumped back in her seat a little bit more than she was already. "I'm... I'm sorry, Leon. I don't know what came over me..."

"I understand," Leon replied. "You confronted the man who destroyed your family. He... did things that can't ever be forgotten. Things that can't ever be forgiven..."

Anna sniffled back some new tears. "Helen... I don't know how to tell her about this..."

"I can do it for you, if you want?" Leon didn't think she would, and he wasn't surprised when she quickly shook her head.

"No, no... that I have to do myself. My sister... she won't... she'll be disappointed, I think." Her voice broke up several times as she spoke.

Leon looked at her, then slouched in his seat, propped his feet up on the bench across from him, and interlocked his fingers behind his head. "No one ever wants to endorse vengeance, I think. Actually, I think a lot of people are just scared to. They don't want to think that they're that violent. That humans are capable of that much anger and hate. Most of these kinds of people never experience anything that instills that kind of fury. They'll never understand exactly why you did what you did..."

Picking up on what he was saying, Anna finished his statement, "... but they'll judge me anyway, won't they?" She sounded tired and scared in equal measure. "But Helen..."

"She's a good person," Leon said. "Better than I could ever be, certainly. Forgiving, peaceful."

"She just wanted to move on," Anna stated. "Forget that our parents were... that Casimir *took* our parents from us! That he was *taking* other people from their family! That he *needed* to be stopped!"

"So you don't regret what you did?" Leon asked.

Anna paused what Leon thought was about to be quite the angry rant at her sister and her expression fell. "I... He *needed* to be stopped..."

"That wasn't why you killed him, though." Leon immediately second-guessed his words, but by then they'd already been said. However, when he glanced at Anna, he found her staring at him with curiosity, her eyes silently asking him a question. Scowling, Leon looked away and asked, "How much do you know about my father?"

"That... he died a while ago," Anna said.

"Twenty-one years ago. A little more than that, actually. Murdered in our home. Killed the men who did it, but succumbed to his injuries. I left home intending to find the man who ordered it, and anyone else involved... but when I had the opportunity, I didn't take it. I had the man who ordered my father's death in my hands, my blade to his throat... and I didn't kill him."

Anna stared at him and asked only, "Why?"

Leon frowned. He didn't want to color her perception of Valeria. "I'm not sure I want to say."

Anna nodded slowly.

"I suppose I'm curious, then," Leon continued, shifting back to her. "How does it feel? Knowing that your parents have been avenged by your hand? That the man who did so much harm is gone?"

Anna frowned, her eyes still searching his own. But after a moment, she turned back to the wall as her eyes unfocused for a moment. She glanced down at her dominant hand, the one that had held her spear as she thrust it into Narses' chest.

"I don't..." she whispered. "I... I suppose... I feel relief. A sense of closure. But I also..." She deeply sighed. "My parents are gone, Leon. Nothing I do will ever change that. I'll never get back what Narses took. There's a pit in my stomach, and a bigger one in my heart. The one in my stomach is disgust—I lost control over myself and did something foolish. We *should've* taken Narses prisoner. Interrogated him and all that. That'll go away in time. But the hole in my heart is there forever. My mother and father are gone and will never return. Narses' death changes nothing."

Leon nodded along in silence.

"I'm glad it's over," Anna said, her tone brightening just a hair. "I don't... I don't like what I did. But it's over. I wish I could do as Helen did and put this behind me. Move on. But that pit *hurts*."

"Still?" Leon asked.

Anna nodded, and they both fell into silence.

After several long minutes, Anna eventually said, "I'll be fine, Leon. Narses needed to die, no doubt about that. If you'll still have me, I'll be good to go whenever you need me."

Leon smiled at her, playfully leaned over to punch her shoulder, and then slid out of the MALL.

"We'll head out soon, then," he said. "I'd like us to get home by tomorrow, if possible."

Leon continued smiling,

Chapter 802: Perspective

"... Sounds like a successful raid," the Director said as Leon finished his report on what happened at Narses the Black's castle. Speaking with the Director about his Eye had been the first thing on Leon's to-do list once he and his people returned to Occulara, even with Elise needing him for planning his party. He and the Director met almost alone, with only Penelope there to hear the report; even Narses the White was busy organizing a relief force to be sent for the captives rescued from the blood farm below the castle. "The guild had some success of its own, though nothing quite so spectacular..."

Leon cocked an eyebrow, his interest piqued as the Director pulled a map of the Ilumerian Wetlands out of his soul realm.

"With dedicated searching, my accountants found quite a bit of misappropriated funds that Narses was hiding," the Director explained, and Leon could hear the suppressed wrath in the old man's voice in every syllable. "He used this funding to not only purchase a manor for himself out in the Wetlands, but also support a small cabal of personal followers."

Leon moved a little closer to examine the location. "Has it been scouted?" he asked. "Do we know how—"

"No need to guess, Leon," Penelope interjected. "I've already paid the manor a visit. I didn't raze it to the ground, but I came quite close."

"Huh," Leon grunted in mild surprise. He wasn't sure if he ought to feel elated that the problem was dealt with, or angry that people he didn't quite trust took care of something that he wanted to see taken care of with his own eyes.

'Though, Penelope's fine,' Leon thought. 'I doubt she'd throw in with the vampires, even if her father's not so above such methods...'

"Any good material discovered there?" Leon asked aloud.

"None that I could find," Penelope replied. "I have a large contingent of demonologists crawling over the place as we speak, though. They should have a report on what they find by the end of the week."

Leon frowned slightly, but he supposed that was about as much as he was going to get without going there himself, and he wasn't quite sure he wanted to go that far. He had other concerns, Narses himself was dead, and he knew that the guild and the Ilian Empire's demonologists were skilled enough to go over the place with a fine tooth comb.

With a deep sigh, Leon said, "I suppose that's the best I can hope for in this case. Was he hiding anything else?"

"Quite a bit," the Director replied. "Mostly standard-rate corruption, such as additional embezzled resources, but he had quite a few friends in the guild that I've taken the liberty of bringing in for questioning. It seems that Narses the Black managed to get his grimy fingers deep into my guild..." The Director practically spat the last sentence, and as far as Leon could tell, it was no joke.

Still, he couldn't help but ask, "How much were you expecting, working with vampires?"

The Director glared at him and look about set to start arguing, but he paused a moment, his expression turning pensive. "I... miscalculated," he admitted. "Bringing them in was a mistake. It won't be repeated."

That was all Leon needed to hear, especially now that he and the Director were much closer in power. "Good," Leon responded. "What are the chances that there are more vampires laying in wait somewhere on the plane? At this point, they *have* to be running low on manpower..."

"Hard to say," Penelope said. "If there are, I don't think they'll present much threat."

"Don't count on that," the Director chided. "I'm tempted to make the same guess, but assume the worst and plan accordingly."

Leon agreed in a general sense, but he couldn't quite see the possibility of any more powerful vampires running around the plane that could pose much threat, especially since Narses the Black had implied as such before his ambush failed.

[Xaphan, thoughts?] Leon asked, calling into his soul realm.

[Mmm,] the demon hummed in thought. [Amon was always someone who preferred quality over quantity, though he'd take what he could get. We've likely shitcanned his local forces, but if that's the

case, then he'll resort to recruiting whoever he can. Or at least, he will if there's still something here that he thinks he can strike at.]

[Unlikely, given our power.]

[True. He might write off this plane if I'm all he wanted, but this isn't the last we've heard from that usurping, pretentious fuckboy, I guarantee it.]

[I'll keep my eyes open, then.]

[You do that little pigeon.]

Leon blinked. [What? I'm a pigeon now, am I?]

Without hesitation, Xaphan answered, [Yes.]

[When did that happen?]

[Right now. I have decreed it. By order of a Lord of Flame, you are now named 'Pigeon'.]

[No.]

[Yes. It's done.]

[Maybe I should start calling you Little Ember? Or maybe *Former* Lord of Flame?]

[Mm. I'll be magnanimous, human, and allow you to your inferior name. As prestigious and awe-inspiring as Pigeon is, you don't deserve it.]

[Give me some time to recover from that massive disappointment.]

[Of course, human. My burns take long to heal, take as much time as you need.]

With that, Leon felt Xaphan's attention sink back down into his soul realm, leaving him feeling fairly aggravated, but in the same breath, a little calmer. The possibility couldn't be ruled out that Amon had other vampires on the plane, but at the very least, he seemed to prefer smaller groups, relatively speaking. Leon didn't anticipate too many dealings with vampires for the immediate future.

That thought brought out a wide smile, and he turned his attention to more important things.

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Following his meeting with Penelope and the Director, Leon returned to his Tower. However, instead of heading to his office, he instead met with the lead engineer responsible for the MALL and had an hour-long meeting going over his observations of the platform's performance.

The weapon platforms had performed quite well, their wheelless design allowing them to navigate the swamps of the Ilumerian Wetlands with ease when they weren't stored in Leon's soul realm. The vehicle crews, whose commanders were also a part of the meeting, were also quite complementary of the design.

However, there was always going to be room for improvement, and they hadn't exactly participated in a pitched battle—they'd simply moved into position and fired a single shot each. The weapon platform would need more intensive battle tests before it could be deemed ready for wider production.

Following the meeting, Leon finally made his way back to his office, but upon arrival, he found Penelope already there, waiting for him. He'd been warned by his secretary, and sure enough, as he walked in, she was sitting in one of his office's armchairs. She'd grown her usually-short black hair out in the past few years, and it spilled down her back like a silky waterfall, devoid of even a single curl. She smiled when he walked in, a charming, friendly look that told Leon she wasn't here for anything particularly serious—or at least, nothing that had to do with Heaven's Eye.

"Penelope," Leon said as he slowly ambled over to a chair opposite his guest.

"Leon," Penelope said, not rising from her seat, but giving him a friendly little wave. "How're things going?"

"Fine," he replied. "You?"

"Better now that we don't have to worry about Narses stabbing us in the back."

"Which one?" Leon sarcastically asked.

Penelope gave him a strange look. "Do you have a problem with Narses the White?"

Leon cringed slightly and said, "No. Joke that didn't land—what's going on, need something?"

With a quiet chuckle, Penelope asked, "I was a little more concerned about you."

"Me?"

"You. You and your minions, anyway. The good Narses already sent his report back, and while Father didn't have much to say on the matter, I was curious about how that encounter ended. Is everything fine in your retinue?"

Leon blinked in surprise. Asking about his wellbeing wasn't something he ever would've guessed Penelope would do. But after a moment, he decided that he wouldn't mind breaking words with her for a little while. He could use some outside perspective, anyway.

"Yeah, things were a little tense there at the end," he said. "Bad Narses was involved in some unsavory stuff."

"He was a vampire," Penelope pointed out. "'Unsavory' can describe just about everything they do."

"True. In this case, it was more personal. He... murdered the parents of two of my retainers. Anna, being so harmed, couldn't stop herself from killing the man."

Leon did his best not to make it obvious, but as he narrated what happened, he carefully watched Penelope's expression, looking for any hint as to what she was thinking. When he finished, she was quietly staring at the wall behind him, a thoughtful look on her face.

After fruitlessly waiting a beat for her to respond, Leon added, "Can hardly blame her. She lost her parents to that monster; I think revenge is understandable."

Penelope scowled. "Someone like that shouldn't have been on the mission to begin with! She was far too close to the suspect to be trusted to be objective! And now we've lost a valuable source of information on vampire activity on this plane!"

Leon frowned, but didn't respond. She was right, and bringing Anna was his fault. He knew how she was likely to react, and he brought her anyway. But his intent was to kill the vampire anyway, so he figured it wouldn't have mattered. He never would've thought that Narses would try to surrender, or that the other Narses would accept it.

'At least there's only one Narses now,' Leon thought with some dark amusement.

"Depends on the mission goal," Leon matter-of-factly stated. "Still, you're not wrong. I wonder about bringing Narses in. How would that have gone down? How would Anna have taken that? Would she have resented it? Would she be happier for it?"

"That's something I can't answer," Penelope replied. "And we'll never know, now, will we?"

"I guess not..." Leon whispered. "If you were in her position, what would you have done? Do you even know?"

Penelope sighed. "My mother's gone, though due to natural causes, thankfully. I can't imagine what I would do to someone who offed my father. I'd be angry, I'd want revenge, but I don't know how far I'd take it. It would really depend on the details. Were I in Anna's exact shoes, I think I wouldn't be happy about it, but I'd take Narses in. I don't want someone like that running around the plane, and he undoubtedly knew many more people like him. Bringing him in represents the best chance to ensure that what I hypothetically suffered wouldn't be repeated."

"Could you live with yourself after that?" Leon wondered aloud. "This person killed your father—in this scenario—and you'd be comfortable letting them live?"

"I did not say that. I... like to think that I'd do what duty demanded of me, regardless of how I felt. I think *you* made a mistake bringing Anna on that mission in the first place, I don't blame *her* at all for killing the man, given what she suspected him of, what he was, and his attempted trap."

"That's just what you *think* you'd do, though," Leon murmured.

Penelope frowned. "I don't know what I'd *actually* do unless I were in the exact same situation, so guessing is all I can do. We can tell ourselves whatever we want, but we won't know what we'll do in a given situation until we find ourselves in it." She slouched against the back of her armchair a little bit and added, "I will admit that it's easy to sit back and criticize someone's actions after the fact. It is a lot harder to *do* when in a given situation. But some things have clear-cut answers, and that's why we have legal tribunals."

"How many tribunals does Heaven's Eye perform?" Leon asked. "This guild has always stuck me as a bit authoritarian, we don't exactly have a lot of due process..."

"We rarely need to when we get enough evidence," Penelope replied with a nonchalant shrug. She then fixed Leon in a serious gaze. "To cap off my point, I think that... if not *forgiveness*, then at least making the attempt to make peace with your enemies—situation depending—is for the best."

“Easy to say...” Leon muttered.

“Yes, yes it is,” Penelope conceded. “But consider the fact that Anna got her revenge, and we were deprived of a gold mine of information on vampires. How is she doing, by the way? Is she happy that her enemy is dead? Does she seem better off?”

Leon frowned again. Anna had been completely silent on the way back to Occulara, hardly meeting anyone else’s gaze. She most certainly did *not* seem happy, and when they arrived back at his villa just a few minutes before he left for his meeting with Penelope and the Director, they ran afoul of Helen, and Anna almost broke down before her younger sister managed to pull her somewhere private.

When Leon didn’t answer, Penelope whispered, “I’ll take that as a ‘no’, then. I think I’ll just summarize what I’m thinking like this: what’s done is done. Bad things happen, and punishments need to be meted out. But it’s the living that deserve our concern, not the dead. Better to focus on what you can do for the living rather than trying to honor the dead with something they’ll never appreciate. If we can do more good than harm by taking our enemies in alive, or even making some kind of peace with them, then isn’t that the more moral thing to do?”

“Big ‘if’,” Leon responded.

“It is,” Penelope agreed. “It’s hard to talk about these things in the abstract. Every situation is unique. But that’s just the way I try to live: focusing on what I can do to ensure the prosperity of those around me. And if vengeance won’t aid me in that goal, then how valuable is that vengeance, anyway?”

Leon didn’t immediately respond, remaining quiet as he turned her words over in his head.

“I suppose I’ll just leave it here, then,” Penelope said as their silence stretched out uncomfortably long. “It sounds to me like you have some business to deal with back home, but I’m glad for this chat. These were things I already kind of wanted to touch base with you on, so I’m glad we could take care of that.”

Leon hummed in acknowledgment as she stood up, but as she reached the door to his office, he quickly called out, “Penelope. Thanks for speaking with me. It’s good to get a little outsider perspective. It’s easy to get lost in one’s own head about things like this.”

Penelope gave him a strange look, but nodded and said her goodbyes, leaving Leon alone in his office with nothing but his work to keep him company.

Leon, however, had far too much running through his mind for work, so after less than half an hour, he called it a day and left. If there was one thing that Penelope was unequivocally right about, it was that he had personal business he needed to take care of back at his villa, and not just with Anna.

—

Leon watched in loving fascination as Valeria twirled about, swinging her glaive in ways that were more akin to dancing than proper combat training. Her light blue training attire was skin tight, showing off her voluptuous body, her silver hair swung behind her in a single loose braid, and her clear, sapphire eyes were closed in concentration. And yet, despite her closed eyes, she moved with absolute surety, and Leon could detect the tell-tale ripples in the training room’s ambient magic from her magic senses. She hadn’t noticed him, though, keeping her magic senses trained only on the area about ten feet from her in all directions.

This was obviously not combat training, but more keeping her body limber and in control. Dancing, she and Alix had often insisted to Leon, was one of the best ways to not only keep oneself in shape, but also to always be comfortable moving around.

Given how she moved with such grace, Leon could understand that much, at least.

He watched her move for almost twenty minutes before she finally stopped, panting slightly from her exertions despite her power. She opened her eyes, and only did she seem him leaning against the doorframe, watching her with a loving smile.

“Leon!” she exclaimed, a smile of her own lighting up her face before an emotional cloud immediately darkened it.

Leon knew exactly what that cloud was, and dispelling it was his purpose in coming here.

“Val,” he whispered as he slowly walked over, shutting the door behind him to give them some privacy. She didn’t fight him at all when he took her into his arms, pulling her into a tight embrace. He held her tight, only letting go once she returned her glaive to her soul realm and returned the hug.

“What... why are you here?” she stoically asked, her expression returned to its usual neutral state. Such an attitude was one that Leon hadn’t seen directed his way in a long time.

“Wanted to talk,” Leon responded. “Care to sit with me?”

Valeria hesitantly nodded, and Leon could tell that she was just as apprehensive about what he had to say as he was. But she sat down with him right there in the middle of the training room.

Neither of them spoke for a long moment, Valeria clearly waiting for him to get to his point, while he breathed deeply, working himself up to what he had to say. When he finally did, he found that his body was flooded with emotional adrenaline, making his hands shake and his voice crack.

“I... I’m now older than my father ever was,” Leon said, unable to keep a steady tone. Valeria’s eyes widened in grief as he spoke, but he laid a hand over hers to bring as much comfort as he could. “Your f—*Justin’s* agents... when they came to our home, my father was thirty-seven, just a few months shy of thirty-eight. I... reached this milestone just a couple months ago. I am now, and will forever be, older than he was. My birthday just emphasizes that. It’s not one that’s easy to face.”

“Leon, I—” she began, but he raised a hand and cut her off.

“Just give me a minute or two, all right?” he asked. “I need to get through this, and I don’t think I can start again if I stop.”

She nodded, and he continued.

“I thought for a long time what I would do to those responsible. I still think of what I’ll do when I find ‘Lord Kamran’. Given the hostage he has, I don’t think I’m alone in this.”

Valeria gave him a nod of solidarity—her mother, Kamran’s adopted daughter, was still in his hands as far as they knew.

“But even though he gave me his boss’ name, I haven’t forgiven Justin,” Leon stated. “His part in my father’s death will never be

Chapter 803: A Needle, a Body, and a Party

Leon steeled himself for his party the best way he knew how: by spending almost the entire day locked in a meditation chamber, with none for company his own thoughts. He sank his consciousness down into his soul realm, and once he woke up in his Mind Palace, he took to the sky and left it behind, choosing to spend his time out in the mountains that surrounded the vale of his Mind Palace.

He’d built up much of the island in the past five years. Of course, he’d added little in the way of civilization—he saw little point in it, given the lack of other life in his soul realm—and so had packed the thousands and thousands of square miles he had access to with as many forests and mountains as he could. Countless peaks rose up from his island floating in the Mists of Chaos, most with a carpet of green between them that rose up to brush their metaphorical ankles.

Such a place, even for as long as Leon had lived with it, still felt eerie. It was beautiful in his own mind, standing as a showcase of raw, primal nature, but it was still empty of life. There were no wolves howling in the distance, no birds, no buzzing insects, no cries of distant fauna to break up the shallow breeze that had finally started to blow within his soul realm.

Leon enjoyed such total silence, of course, but when he was flying above a range of mountains in his soul realm, he often wished he could hear the true sounds of nature that might remind him of home.

Before his birthday party, however, silence was what he sought, and was what he found. He parked himself on the peak of the largest mountain within a hundred miles of his Mind Palace, sat down, and stared out into the distance. He wasn’t looking at anything in particular, choosing to instead simply exist and let his thoughts come as they chose. He spent so much of his time rushing from project to project—practicing his blacksmithing, studying the arts of enchanting, seeing to his Heaven’s Eye duties, training, monitoring his retinue’s training, and spending time with his family—that he rarely allowed himself the time to just sit down and not do anything.

It was a rare treat.

He figured that his soul realm guests knew that his time in the mountains was private, and so never bothered him. Even the Thunderbird, despite their frequent training sessions, rarely approached him on those few occasions that he went out and lost himself in thought.

This time, however, seemed an exception, as a couple of hours after Leon sat down and started to relax, he heard the fluttering of wings in the wind, and then the Thunderbird was there with him, standing right next to him in her human form, staring out at the gray mist that surrounded his soul realm. There she stood, silent and motionless, for minutes.

Finally, she asked, “Ready for this, Leon?” Her tone was quiet and motherly, and as she asked her question, she took a seat on the rocky mountain peak right next to him.

“If you’re talking about the party, then I’m as ready as I’ll ever be,” Leon responded calmly. He almost surprised himself with his serenity; he’d thought that with Justin attending, he’d be more out of sorts. However, Valeria had promised that Justin would stay out of the way, for the most part, and Leon had

many other people there to occupy his time. Anastasios and the Grand Druid, he was sure, would demand much of his attention, and aside from them, Penelope and the Director himself were coming. Cristina, Asiya, and several more of Cristina's knightesses were also coming, along with Narses the White, Emilie, Jordan, and a host of other Heaven's Eye dignitaries and local bureaucrats.

'Looks like Elise is going to get what she was after,' Leon thought as a smile crept across his face. *'The party of the century...'*

"And after?" the Thunderbird inquired.

"Take it as it comes," Leon responded. "Not much demanding my attention."

The Thunderbird clicked her tongue, then turned her head toward him, prompting him to tear his eyes away from the distance and do likewise.

"There *is* something that I've been hoping you would do..." she whispered. "Back in the north, beyond those frozen mountains, sealed deep in the ravine..."

Leon's expression froze on his face as he breathed, "Iron Needle..."

The Thunderbird nodded. "A Universe Fragment, waiting to be claimed. Or so I sensed, anyway. Once that controls the element of lightning in its totality. All that can be compressed into 'lightning magic' is within the Iron Needle."

"You almost make it sound like the Needle is the source of lightning magic."

"It isn't," the Thunderbird replied. "It's simply an artifact of such staggering power that it, along with the Storm Diamond, paved my road to divinity. I found the Iron Needle first, when I wasn't much stronger than you. You should go and try to reclaim it for the Clan."

"Such an artifact would prove quite the boon," Leon said, "but how dangerous is this? Something so powerful I can't imagine is easy to claim..."

"Correct. But it's a matter of will, and that, I believe, you have enough of to press your claim."

Leon chuckled softly and asked, "Are you sure it's even down there? Seems strange to me that so powerful a thing hasn't been claimed by anything else."

"They aren't sentient outright," the Thunderbird explained, as she'd done for him before, "but they have wills of their own. They claim their bearers as much as their bearers claim them. If a Universe Fragment doesn't want you, then nothing you can do will force it to be yours. For the Iron Needle, none but I could claim it. It has never served anyone but my descendants. It hasn't been that long, relatively speaking, since it was last held by one of our Clan, but I believe that the same will hold true now. Find that Iron Needle and make it yours."

Leon made eye contact with the Thunderbird and gravely nodded. "If you think it's time, then I'll trust your judgment. I'll head north soon after this party. I might be gone for a while, though, and will have to get my affairs in order."

The Thunderbird nodded in turn, and then they both fell silent for a while.

After a while, Leon stood up, the time rapidly approaching for him to return to the waking world. He bid his Ancestor adieu and made his way back to his Mind Palace with her assurance that she would be watching. He wasn't sure if he was comforted or disturbed at such a blatant statement, though his discomfort he thought was the point if the Thunderbird's provocative parting smile was anything to go by.

However, before sitting back down in his throne, he made his way over to Nestor's table. He still had some time, there was no real need to rush.

"Nestor," Leon said, curiously looking at the ruby containing Nestor's magic body, still secure on its stand. Nearby, and ever present, was the journal of one of Jason Keraunos' vassals that Leon had taken from the transformation cave in the Serpentine Isles. Its locking enchantments, devised by Nestor, were apparently so good that even now, more than fifteen years later, Nestor had yet to crack his own work.

"Leon," Nestor said in greeting. "Have you some business with me?"

"Nothing in particular," Leon replied. "Just felt like chatting for a few minutes."

From not too far away, Xaphan called out, "More like procrastinating! Little Leon is too nervous to go out and show his face!"

"With a face like that," Nestor added, joining in on the fun, "who can blame him?"

Leon sighed, wondering just what he was expecting, coming over here. Pushing through the mockery, he kept his expression stoic and neutral, and said, "So those armored weapon platforms performed quite well."

"Mm, yes, those," Nestor growled.

"You disagree?"

"I don't like the name they were given," Nestor replied, sounding as if he were forcing the words out through clenched teeth. "Takes away from the awe and majesty that such weapons ought to command."

"Such is how things go, sometimes," Leon stated, his tone resigned. He didn't like 'MALL', either, but what was done, was done. The name had stuck.

"Their performance was satisfactory, then?" Nestor asked.

"As I just said: yes, they were."

"Then your engineers aren't useless. I would've thought it would have taken them centuries to miniaturize the enchantments needed for such an armored platform."

"It's a complicated machine," Leon admitted. "Just building one of the damn things cost more than two hundred million silvers, but I'd say every coin was well-spent. They moved quickly, their weapons fired successfully, and their crews were quite grateful for the armor."

Nestor sighed. "It's good to have mobile weapon platforms. Hopefully, they prove more convenient than simply mounting the Lightning Lances to war beasts."

"That *might* be more convenient," Leon conceded, "but so is *not* relying on war beasts. I think a foot or two of enchanted steel armor plating might be better than whatever natural defenses a war beast might have. And if any war beast can surpass that, then they're going to cost quite a bit more than two hundred million silvers, I think."

"As you say," Nestor replied. "Is there something you need, boy? Or did you just come over here to talk about your weapons project?"

"Suppose I just wanted to talk, dead man, nothing more. Thought crossed my mind that I might be too harsh on you. Wondered if you ever wanted to move into a more mobile body."

Nestor was silent for a long moment, and when that moment was over, he said with disbelief dripping from his tone, "You were thinking that? Really?"

"An errant thought," Leon admitted, "but a serious one. I'll never forget your attempting stealing of my body, Nestor, but in the past few years, you've done me good service... even if your attitude has been less than stellar, but that's understandable. However, I'm in a forgiving mood. Or at least, a more conciliatory mood. I've said it before that crimes committed against me are easy to forgive; those committed against those I love are less so. I'd like to forgive you, Nestor, but I wonder about your intentions."

"If I get a body, then we can be allies," Nestor hurriedly stated. "No matter what, I'm loyal to our Clan. However, my body is dead and gone, rotted to dust. You are the only hope for our Clan's revival. Putting me in a more ambulatory body would be... *desirable*, and I would redouble my efforts to get us back to the Nexus, where we can *really* start to rebuild the Clan!"

Leon smiled, having few reasons to doubt him. And yet, getting Nestor a body was a risk and a sign of trust that he wasn't sure he had in the man. But a sign of trust that Leon was a little more willing to give now than he was just a few years ago.

"Our Clan used slaves, dead man," Leon gravely stated. "I've vowed not to continue that tradition. But I'd be a hypocrite if I continue to hold you in the state you're in, wouldn't I?"

"I'm not sure I'm the one to judge in this case," Nestor muttered.

A moment later, Xaphan shouted, "He is! Hypocrite!"

Leon waved at the demon but paid him no other heed.

"So, Nestor. How about it? A body?"

"Would I remain in here?" Nestor asked.

"No. I'd want you out in the world where you can continue your work better. And where you won't have such ready access to my soul realm."

"Understandable," Nestor murmured. Left unsaid was anything about Nestor running, whether punishment or otherwise. Leon didn't think he needed to go into long, detailed descriptions about punishments if Nestor acted against him, or abandoned him, or anything like that. If this was going to be a sign of trust, then Leon was going to show that trust.

“We’ll need a body, then,” Leon said.

“I’d suggest purchasing an orphan or something of that nature, but I don’t think you’d go for that, would you?”

“No,” Leon contemptuously spat.

“Then did you have some other body in mind?” Nestor asked, his tone starting to sound more apprehensive.

Leon glanced at the golems that could be seen in his soul realm: the two work golems he’d taken from the small manufactory beneath an Occularan villa, and the librarian golems that were working in his soul realm’s vault, keeping all of his stored items secure and organized.

As his eyes swept back to Nestor’s ruby, he could practically hear the dead man’s teeth grinding.

“If...” Nestor growled, “... that is... the *only* option... then *fine*.”

Leon smiled and said, “Then we’ll discuss it more later. For now, I suppose I have a party to get to, don’t I?”

Nestor grunted unhappily, and Leon returned to his throne, and then a moment later, to his physical body.

—

Leon stood outside of his home, dressed in a mostly-blue ensemble, trimmed in silver. At his side was his family: Elise, Valeria, Maia, and Anzu, all dressed in resplendent outfits of their own, though Maia and Anzu seemed largely indifferent to what they were wearing. If anything, they seemed almost aggrieved that they had to be here, playing host as the party guests arrived.

For the most part, the first group of guests to arrive certainly didn’t warrant their concern, as far as Leon cared. These guests were chosen by Elise simply due to their connections within Heaven’s Eye. Political invites, meant to give opportunities for them to curry favor with Leon and his family.

It was almost an hour before the more personal guests started to arrive, the first being a person of high stature—though not in the land they currently resided in.

She came in accompanied by a small convoy, five carriages in all and surrounded by a dozen knightesses, each one wearing armor and bearing weapons personally forged and enchanted by Leon, sold at cost. This was Princess Cristina’s entourage, and the arms of the Bull Kingdom were prominently displayed on her carriage.

Elise and Valeria, Leon could tell, grew more and more excited with every second as the entourage approached, and as the carriages filed into his front courtyard, Elise left their group to give the Princess a more personal welcome.

The Princess herself was the first out of her carriage, and she’d changed a fair amount in the past fifteen years. She seemed a little taller, the independence of her posting having given her more confidence. She had a greater command of magic, likely helping in that regard, too—she radiated the aura of a fifth-tier mage, to Leon’s surprise. He hadn’t seen her in almost two years, though she still swung around ever

few months or so to spend some time with Elise and Valeria. Judging from her aura, Leon guessed that her bloodline had somehow become awakened, though how, he wasn't sure.

Following her came Asiya, and she tightly embraced both Elise and Valeria after energetically hopping down from her carriage. She, too, was much stronger than when Leon had last seen her, with a strong fifth-tier aura emanating from her, too.

As they were ushered inside, Elise and Valeria had to fight to stay back at the entrance, but stay they did, and only a minute or so later, as the Princess' carriages were led to a place to wait for her to leave the party, a small group of chariots arrived, with Narses the White's personal golden chariot leading the way.

The Chief of Security leaped down his chariot before it even came to a halt, shouting, "Leon! Marvelous to see you again! Thank you for your invitation, my friend!"

Leon went down to greet his technical equal in Heaven's Eye, with the rest of the man's family—including Sofia—disembarking their own chariots behind Narses. The way that Narses greeted him, Leon felt like he wasn't holding that deep a grudge for Anna's killing of Narses the Black, and Leon let out a tiny breath that he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

After Narses came Emilie, who greeted her Leon and her daughter with love, along with Jordan, her first husband and Elise's father, who did the same.

Following them came the most important groups: Penelope and the Director, followed by the twin Imperial processions with Anastasios and the Grand Druid, both riding in the same carriage so as to not to step on each other's toes by going first or last. Greeting them all left Leon feeling quite drained, having repeated the same thanks for their attendance and what not for seemingly a thousand times by then. And with them came a handful of younger nobles from their realms, none of them stronger than the sixth-tier or seemingly older than maybe thirty. Leon guessed that they were some of their most promising young talents, brought here to schmooze and cavort with him, Heaven's Eye, and their counterparts from the other Empire.

Notably, Leon realized that Cassandra was not among them, and he wasn't sure if he should feel relieved or depressed over it. The heckling that the Grand Druid gave him over her absence certainly pushed him towards the former, but he couldn't help but be just a little sad he wouldn't get another spar with the crimson-eyed Imperial Princess this day. The Grand Druid was cryptic about why she didn't come, but Leon read only bait in that refusal—the Grand Druid wanted him to come and ask about the Princess, she wasn't going to give that information up freely.

Once Leon finally got their groups inside—they'd seemed almost willing to just have the party in his front courtyard the way they were acting—he prepared to head back inside, too. However, one last guest arrived, accompanied by no entourages, riding in no chariot or carriage, and wearing no gold or fancy enchanted jewelry.

Eirene arrived, Anna's lady, whom Leon and Elise had hired as a private beastmaster just a couple days before. Anna was already inside, having had to arrive early given her status as one of Leon's retainers. Eirene, however, apparently had to take some extra time to get ready, and had flown over with one of

Leon's latest flight belts, skimming just over the road to keep in compliance with anti-flying regulations of the Ilian Empire.

Leon greeted her warmly, ushering her inside. Once that was over, he glanced at Valeria, a wordless question in his look.

"He's here," Valeria whispered back to him, and Leon nodded.

Justin was there, too, but by mutual tacit agreement, he hadn't arrived by the front courtyard, but rather had been brought in by the servant's entrance around the south side of the estate. Leon hadn't yet greeted him, nor was he in a rush to do so. He had many other guests to glad-hand with, and he wasn't going to carve out too much time for the man.

So, with all of their important guests now inside, Leon and his family entered the villa, Maia looking like she hardly cared, though her eyes were sharper and more attentive than her body language suggested; Elise practically bounced inside, solidly in her element; Valeria was completely stoic, showing not even a hint of

Chapter 804: Mingling

Leon's villa was alive with conversation and gentle music. Several hundred of the most important people on the plane were in his home, with guards and adjutants of their own, all technically gathered to celebrate Leon's thirty-eighth birthday and his ascension to the ninth-tier, though in reality were mostly here to meet and talk with Leon and one another. Despite this, Leon was still a little surprised when he walked out into his villa's biggest courtyard and a great cheer arose.

"There he is!" Narses shouted. "The man of the hour!"

The crowd of attendees responded with another roar, most of them holding up drinks in Leon's direction.

Leon, taken off guard, froze for a second as all the eyes in the courtyard swiveled in his direction, but when Elise took hold of his arm, he smiled and raised his other arm, waving to the waiting crowd.

"Thank you all for coming!" he called out. "You honor me and my house with your presence! But please, though it my birthday, see to your own entertainment first and foremost!"

As he trailed off, the first of Elise's planned entertainment features walked out: two dozen of the finest theatrical dancers in the Ilian Empire, dressed in loose, flowing, colorful clothes. Accompanying them were half a dozen men dressed all in black holding magic lanterns of varying colors, using them to shine on the dancers as they began their impressively complex routine. At the same time, an orchestral band began playing something tasteful and classy, though Leon didn't have enough of an ear to tell more than that.

But Leon didn't have much of an opportunity to take in Elise's chosen entertainment, for as the dancers came out, he realized that most people were still staring at him, instead. He didn't even have time to grab himself a drink before Anastasios came waltzing over, his presence the only thing that got almost everyone else to begrudgingly look away.

Still, Leon noticed Penelope, the Director, and the Grand Druid all huddled together, whispering conspiratorially about something or other.

“Leon,” Anastasios drawled as he wrapped an arm around him. “I have to congratulate you! Ninth-tier! At your age! Even for a man with your... *resources*, that’s a startling rate of advancement!”

“Thank you, Lord Protector,” Leon said as he nodded to Valeria and Maia, wordlessly telling them that they didn’t have to follow him around anymore. “I try to keep an eye on my fitness.”

“Ha! ‘Keep an eye on my fitness’, he says!” The Lord Protector gave a booming guffaw before looking around at the way the courtyard had been decorated.

In the past few weeks, Elise had much of the courtyard’s marble polished and shined, and the columns of the peristyle plated in gold leaf. The walls, meanwhile, were covered in silver reliefs of birds in flight, dodging and weaving around bolts of blue lightning, rendered in lapis lazuli. Leon appreciated that latter addition, and even had the figure of a stone giant, represented in the same material, added to one of the reliefs.

“Lady Elise, your decorations are delightful,” Anastasios said.

“Thank you, Lord Protector,” Elise beamed.

“How do you know it was just her, huh?” Leon playfully asked.

“Please, Leon, give me some credit. I’ve spent enough time around you to know that you have the aesthetic sense of a half-blind magpie.” Anastasios gave Leon a cheeky wink, ensuring that his words weren’t taken too seriously.

Leon chuckled and shrugged, then said, “It really does look great, love.”

Elise smiled lovingly at him and pressed herself closer against his side.

“Leon,” Anastasios said, drawing Leon’s attention back to him, “We should speak later, but not now. It’s not of great importance yet, but it’s still something we should discuss in private.” The Lord Protector’s expression was grave and serious, and Leon responded with a similar attitude.

“Then please, Lord Protector, stay and enjoy my hospitality, if you’re able. Your room is still as you left it, save for a bit of cleaning.”

“An offer gladly received,” Anastasios replied. “I have some business with this city and will try and speak with you in a few weeks, but for now, that bastard Narses looks like he’s digging into the good stuff, and he could use a lesson in *sharing*...”

Anastasios disentangled himself from Leon and hurriedly made his way in Narses’ direction, who Leon saw had cracked open a large, elaborate bottle and was doing his best to copy the moves of the twelve male dancers that Elise had hired. He was failing quite spectacularly, but both Alcander and Sofie, along with a small crowd, were there with him, cheering him on.

Once Anastasios left him and the Grand Druid made no moves to take his place, it seemed that the floodgates opened. Over the next hour, Leon was like a rock on the shore, withstanding waves upon waves of bureaucrats and dignitaries, all hoping to exchange words with quite possibly the youngest

ninth-tier mage on the plane, and certainly the youngest member of Heaven's Eye's board. Had Elise not been there with him, taking much of the edge off their incessant congratulations, Leon felt like the waves might've carried him off into insanity after the first few minutes.

Or so he muttered to Elise, anyway, to her amusement.

"It's a good thing that just about everyone's had some words with you, then. Save for the Grand Druid, of course," she whispered back.

"Have they?" Leon asked, noting that of the hundreds of people in attendance, only a fraction had come to speak.

"Those who're of any note have," Elise clarified.

"Good," he said with a covert sigh.

"Don't look so glum, love," Elise murmured. "So many have come to pay you respect, this is something that countless people have dreamed of and never obtained."

Leon struggled to maintain a smile and didn't respond. His eyes drifted around the room, stopping on no one in particular for a long moment, at least until he finally saw him, the man he'd been dreading to see for years, a man he'd have been happier to pretend didn't exist.

Justin Isynos.

Valeria wasn't with him, instead choosing to spend her time talking and laughing with Cristina and Asiya, and it seemed that no one else had approached Justin, either. The man was sitting alone in a corner, by one of the smaller bars that Elise had set up for this party, quietly drinking some dark liquor. He was holding himself up with perfect posture despite the drink in his hand and the festivities around him, but one look at his aura showed just how weak he truly was.

His aura almost seemed to flicker and sputter, barely able to maintain Justin's third-tier strength. The man's hair had lost much of its luster, now appearing more gray than silver, and there were a few more lines in his face. In short, it looked like he'd aged at least twenty or thirty years by mortal standards from how he'd appeared in Leon's memory, now well into middle-age rather than looking fairly youthful.

With another sigh, Leon disentangled himself from Elise, giving a meaningful nod in Justin's direction as explanation. Elise just squeezed his arm one last time, then went to link up with Valeria, Cristina, and Asiya.

Leon walked in Justin's direction, ignoring the eyes that followed him everywhere in the courtyard. He sat down next to Justin at the shady end of the bar, surprising the man a bit, it seemed.

"Ah! Leon!" Justin exclaimed, almost spilling his drink.

"Careful there," Leon responded, "that looks expensive." He nodded to both the drink and to Justin's blue tunic, made of silkgrass and trimmed in silver—a strange combination of colors, though Leon supposed Valeria had sported them even before becoming involved with him.

"It's... nothing," Justin said as he quickly put his drink down and took a moment to regain his composure. Leon waited for several seconds for Justin to fully turn towards him and say, "Happy birthday, Leon Raime. Here's hoping for many more."

"Thank you," Leon said with little sincerity. "Thank you for attending."

"Such invitation can hardly be refused, when coming from beloved daughter," Justin remarked.

Leon let a small smile play out over his lips for a moment at the mention of Valeria, before his expression turned neutral again. "How has your recovery been going, Justin?" he asked, trying and failing to sound casual.

Justin frowned and bitterly said, "About as well as I can expect. Not well, but even that's more than I deserve."

"You've managed to regain at least a little bit of power, it seems."

"A little bit, yes, but hardly a drop in the bucket of the ocean I once commanded." Justin seemed to catch himself and hurriedly added, "Leon, I hope we're not going to make this discussion entirely about me. This is a day dedicated to you, after all!"

Leon smiled, though there was no warmth in the expression. "Then we ought to discuss topics I want to talk about, shouldn't we?"

Justin gave him nothing more than a political smile.

"I've wondered for a long time how to deal with you, Justin," Leon said. He almost brought up more personal details, but he was still aware that, despite the relative privacy of their place in the courtyard, there were still a great many eyes turned in their direction, and even more ears. "Wondered if the decision I made back then was the right one. What are your thoughts?"

Justin seemed a little perturbed when Leon suddenly asked his opinion, and took a moment to reply. "I... I am grateful that I get to watch my daughter grow up," he said, his voice breaking slightly near the end. "I'll admit that in my darkest moments, I never thought I'd live even this long. And it's not something easily forgotten when someone like you... makes the decision you made."

The man seemed like he had more he wished he could add, but he, too, was conscious of their onlookers.

Leon sighed again. "I've had cause recently to reevaluate my decision. I've come to the conclusion that I wasn't wrong then, but such conclusions aren't set in stone. But for now, I want Valeria to be as happy as she can possibly be. I want her life to radiate joy in all directions."

"We're in agreement there."

"Good. Then it seems that you have to keep on living for a while longer."

Justin, whose eyes had wandered back to his drink, snapped his gaze back to Leon.

Leon gave him a sly smirk and said, "You look like you're counting the days till you're in the grave, Justin. The day you're buried is the day Valeria's life is made irreparably darker. So I won't let you die on us. Besides, I think we've still a great many conversations to have about our future."

Justin seemed to deflate slightly, but a moment later, after a quick glance at Valeria, still locked in intense discussion with Asiya, he seemed to grow a bit more of a spine. He sat up straighter and nodded to Leon.

"You shame me, Leon," he whispered, "and you're right to. Valeria and her mother mean the world to me. All others who could've claimed such importance in my life are gone. I would not want to inflict such pain upon my daughter. But..."

"Then don't," Leon said as if it were the easiest thing in the world. "I think we should speak a little more later, so don't just leave without saying goodbye."

Leon, unilaterally deciding that their conversation was over, stood up and walked away, leaving Justin along to think about things. As he did, Leon felt Valeria's eyes finally turn in their direction, and seeing him walking away from her father, she whispered something to Asiya and Cristina and moved in his direction.

"Everything all right?" she whispered as she drew close.

"Everything's fine," Leon replied. She smiled, kissed his cheek, and then moved in Justin's direction, while Leon made his way over to Cristina, taking the seat Valeria had just vacated.

Cristina and Asiya weren't alone, but when Leon sat down, many of those around them seemed to give them a bit more of a berth. Elise, Leon noticed, was not among them, his wife having moved on to mingle just before Valeria left.

"Look at that, Asi," Cristina said, "he just arrived and already he's driven off all our suitors!"

"Bad Leon! Bad!" Asiya playfully scolded, though the wide, tipsy grin she wore took any unintentional anger out of her statement.

"Not my fault if they stop lavishing you two with all the praise you deserve," Leon said, matching Asiya's tone. "Though, I have to ask, are you sure you want their attentions?"

Leon had noted that most of those driven off by his presence were men, and Cristina and Asiya were sitting particularly close to each other...

Of course, from Elise and Valeria seeing them regularly, he also knew that the two young women had started a romantic relationship with each other.

"Attention is always welcome, so long as it's the sort worthy of a Princess!" Cristina declared, seriousness absent in her tone.

"Then I apologize and humbly ask forgiveness," Leon mockingly stated.

"Hmm," Cristina hummed, making a show of thinking it over. "Very well. Sir Leon, I forgive you your heinous transgression against my Royal person." She looked like she was about to say something more, but whatever that might've been was cut off by a furious bout of giggles.

"In all seriousness, Leon," Asiya said as her Princess struggled to regain her self-control—the copious amounts of alcohol she'd apparently already consumed not helping matters, "thanks for remembering us. It's been a while since we last spoke, and it's good to catch up."

"Same here," Leon replied. "How's your mother?"

"Mom's doing well," Asiya said. "I've been making plenty of money for both of us as Cristina's personal guard—" She paused a moment to glare reproachfully at Leon as he lightly laughed—the Princess' lover, of course, was flush with financial resources. "—*But*," Asiya continued, "she insisted on paying her own way. She got a job with a local bank run by Heaven's Eye in a wealthier part of Ilion. Even rose to become its manager."

"Wow," Leon said appreciatively. "Please pass on my congratulations."

Asiya nodded just as Cristina seemed to regain control of herself.

"And you, Princess?" Leon asked once he was sure the Princess was checked back into their conversation. "I would've congratulated you on your power had I known about it. It feels natural to me, not like you binged on potions to get there, like your brothers did..."

"Of course I didn't," Cristina practically spat with disdain. "I may not be the most *disciplined* when it comes to training, but I wasn't about to take the easy way out. It's either the natural way, or no way at all!"

"Sure," Asiya sarcastically agreed, "for a given definition of 'natural'."

Cristina glared at Asiya for a moment, but did nothing more than throw her arms around her dusky-skinned lover. In response to Leon's questioning look, the Princess explained, "I've made several trips back home in the past fifteen years. My father's granted me resources that have allowed me to acquire a few things that have made the journey more bearable, and I've brought quite a few things home with me to help the Bull Kingdom magically advance. In recognition of the work I've been doing for the Kingdom down here, he awoke my bloodline."

Leon's eyes about popped out of their sockets in surprise. As far as he knew, Cristina hadn't expressly renounced her claim to the throne of the Bull Kingdom. Awakening her bloodline thus essentially turned her into a potential claimant against August...

'Although,' Leon thought, glancing at the Princess' arm wrapped around Asiya's shoulders, *'if she doesn't have any children, then it isn't that big of a problem. With her so far away from the Kingdom, she can't gather supporters for a potential coup or civil war, either...'*

"It may seem a strange choice," Cristina said as if she could hear what was going through his head, "but one he made with great thought. He knows what he did, and though he didn't pull a renouncement of my claim from me, he still didn't do this until after I revealed what I had with Asi."

Leon nodded, feeling a little more relieved that King Julius hadn't been quite so cavalier with his Kingdom as he'd feared.

“He had to ‘make those shits in the south take my daughter more seriously’,” Cristina quoted, putting on her best imitation of her father. “Given how much technical knowledge I’ve had to buy, and how much has opened up to me with my greater power, it’s a good choice.”

“Oh? What exactly are you sending back north?” Leon curiously asked.

“Oh, you know, stuff,” Cristina mysteriously replied, and Leon recognized that as an end to that conversation, though from the way she blatantly winked at him, he didn’t think it was anything illegal, at least.

“Well, it was good speaking with you two,” Leon said as he got up, “but I’ve more people to speak with, I think. Hopefully we’ll the change to catch up again soon.”

“Sure!” Asiya said with a spirited wave.

“Of course,” Cristina said with a nobler nod.

With that, Leon turned around and went over to the closest bar where he took a few moments to order something weak as he glanced around at the courtyard, wondering who he ought to speak with next. The order he’d talk to people would definitely be noticed, and he also realized that after he left Cristina and Asiya had attracted a larger group of people wanting to chat. It seemed that Justin had a few people hanging around, waiting for Valeria to leave. It seemed that just having Leon talk to them was enough for people to take notice and think these people worth making connections with.

“Good party,” said someone to Leon’s left, almost making him jump out of his skin. He’d been quite certain that no one was there just a moment ago.

Leon glanced at the man and froze, immediately recognizing the man sitting at his bar, quietly sipping at some glowing blue drink and staring at Leon, a smile of amusement on his face. Leon felt his heart rate skyrocket.

“Ambrose...” Leon whispered. “Good to see you...”

Chapter 805: Chatting with a God

Ambrose, the Grave Warden of Aeterna, looked much the same as he did the last Leon had seen him: tanned skin tone; brown eyes as warm and inviting as Leon had ever seen; a lithe, though still quite muscular build; and generally average facial features. He was the sort of man who would go completely unnoticed in a crowd, but once one’s eyes landed upon him, they’d realize he was not a man to be played with.

The biggest reason for that impression was his subtle, though tremendously powerful aura; he was clearly no longer pretending to only be ninth-tier. It was so easy to overlook, blending in so well with the ambient magic of Aeterna that Leon had to actually look to find it, and once he did, he found it opaque, solid, and utterly unknowable. It was a generally-accepted rule amongst mages that the auras of those who’d reached higher tiers of magic relative to the viewer were almost indistinguishable from one another, making it essentially impossible to tell what tier a mage was if they were stronger by at least a tier than the observer. However, Ambrose proved himself to be the exception for Leon, his aura so intense and impenetrable that even the veritable nebulae that were the Lord Protector and Grand Druid’s auras were utterly dwarfed in comparison.

In other words, Ambrose was so much more powerful than the two tenth-tier mages in the room that even Leon, who was significantly weaker than all three of them, could see the difference as plain as day.

“Been a while, kid,” Ambrose stated, not a trace of ice to be found in his tone. “Quite a while.”

Leon nodded a little awkwardly. Ambrose had first introduced himself as a ninth-tier envoy of the Ilia Empire, come to survey the damage following Leon’s final fight with Jormun when both were transformed, but Xaphan at later revealed that he was actually the Grave Warden himself, the most powerful man on the plane, far, *far* past the point of initial Apotheosis. He had the strength to claim divinity and not be wrong, as far as Leon understood it. Once his business had concluded, Ambrose had given Leon a written invitation to come and find his home in Ilion. Leon had quite diligently ignored the invitation over the past sixteen years, not trusting that invitation at all.

“Seems like a good party,” Ambrose drily repeated. “My invite was lost in the mail, I’m sure, I’m sure. I mean, I invited you to my place, so I’m sure that you were courteous enough to respond in kind, respond in kind...”

Leon gave the man a thin-lipped smile, unsure of just what to say with the Grave Warden himself right there in front of him.

From within his soul realm, he heard Xaphan quietly whisper, [Don’t... make this guy angry, Leon. Be *very fucking careful*...]

Suddenly, Ambrose let out a great guffaw that Leon felt resound throughout his body in a manner similar to an explosion. However, it seemed that he was the only one who heard it—in fact, it seemed rather like he had completely disappeared, with no one paying them any attention.

“What’s going on?” Leon asked as Ambrose laughed.

“Oh, oh,” Ambrose gasped exaggeratedly. “You should see the look on your face! Your look!”

Leon quickly pulsed his connection with Maia, and his river nymph mate, who was barely managing to not fall asleep as several rather elderly men from Ilion’s local bureaucracy talked at her, suddenly looked in his direction in response, but her eyes drifted right over him. She sprang to her feet and her aura spiked for a moment, drawing some attention, but Leon quickly sent her calming feelings, and she relaxed slightly.

[Leon,] she whispered, [where are you? I can feel you, but...]

Leon glanced at Ambrose, who seemed content to watch and wait, a look of amusement on his face.

[I’m... fine,] Leon responded. [Talking with someone important. Will explain later, but for now... I’m fine.]

Maia relaxed more, and Leon noticed the Grand Druid making her way in Maia’s direction, while Anastasios looked close to doing likewise. Leon scowled, but Ambrose was his priority right now.

Turning back to the Grave Warden, Leon asked, “What is this?” He waved his hand about the room for emphasis.

"I wanted some privacy, but I enjoy the atmosphere here," Ambrose replied, and just a moment later, a drunk Alcander, Narses, and a handful of others started shouting about 'contests of strength'. Leon saw that Elise was already heading in their direction, so he breathed easy knowing that that potential situation was already well in-hand.

"What for?" Leon bluntly asked, crossing his arms and standing between the Grave Warden and the rest of his guests—not that he thought doing so would actually *do* anything, though.

"Couple things, couple things," Ambrose replied. "Wasn't waiting long, not long for you to accept my invite—I'm old and patient. Old. Patient. But I recently spoke with an old friend about recent things of great import, and my friend spoke of you. Of you. I decided to come and find you to see what my old friend was talking about, and found that you were throwing a party. So, I decided to join you. To join. All joke's aside, do you object to my presence? I'll not stay long if you do, not stay long..."

Leon grimaced for a moment as he mulled it over, but eventually, he forced himself to relax a bit and lean back over the bar next to his surprise guest.

"It's fine," Leon stated. "Your presence. It's fine."

"Thank you, thank you," Ambrose whispered, not looking at all put out by Leon's cautious demeanor.

"Who was this friend of yours?" Leon asked.

"A secret," Ambrose responded. "But they did say something about you having a tau pearl..."

"How did y—" Leon cut himself off, but after a moment's thought, a realization came to him. The tau live in close proximity to the plane's central sea, and Ambrose lived in the center of that sea. It was no great leap for him to make that connection. "The tau told you, didn't he?"

"Huh? I thought I was being subtle, being subtle!" Ambrose complained without too much seriousness. "Ah, well. I suppose it doesn't matter. My old friend had high hopes for you, and I wanted to see if my own estimates of your character were correct. Correct estimates. And in the past hour or so, I've seen quite a bit..."

Ambrose trailed off while giving Leon a leading look, as if wordlessly expecting Leon to ask him to continue. But Leon ignored the look and just waited, reasoning that the man wanted to talk anyway, and was going to no matter what he said or did.

'Benefits of power to be so... strange,' Leon thought with some exasperation and a hint of jealousy. Someone weaker might have to be more compromising in their attitude.

If the Grave Warden were disturbed or angry at all at Leon's reticence to play along, he didn't show it, and continued after a moment, "That silver-haired man over there, I noticed you speaking with him, the silver-haired man. He seems quite injured, who is he to you?"

"You've been watching him and need me to answer that?" Leon asked, incredulous.

Ambrose chuckled and replied, "I guess not, but a conversation is a two-way street, isn't it? Not good—usually—to make it seem like you know everything, not good at all. Makes the other person uncomfortable in my experience. So, your father-in-law, or close to it, is here. You and he have old

business that would see anyone else killing each other. But you're with his daughter, and he's on his deathbed."

Leon blinked in surprise and, before Ambrose could continue, blurted out, "His deathbed?"

Ambrose cocked his head slightly and said, "Yes. He's actually quite close to death, quite close. It looks to me like some old injuries haven't healed as well as they should have, and his attempts to regain his magic power isn't slowing his ageing as it should. Big problem for him, big problem."

Leon stared at Justin, still quietly chatting with Valeria, and now that he was looking for it, he supposed Justin did look weaker than he should, with slightly shaking hands and seeming to be more tired than he should've been given the hour. Both were easily explained away, of course, but...

"Is it... Is it..." Leon whispered, unsure of just what he wanted to ask.

"If nothing else happens to change it, then he'll be dead in less than a decade," Ambrose stated with a modicum of seriousness and consolation.

"Hmm," Leon grunted. "Something to keep in mind, I suppose," he said, doing his best to make it seem like he didn't care.

Ambrose just smiled and gave him a strange look, which Leon, still trying to make it seem like he wasn't looking at Justin and Valeria, didn't notice until after several seconds of silence.

"Leon," Ambrose said, finally bringing Leon's attention fully back to him, "your goal is to rebuild your Clan, is it not?"

"It is," Leon answered with only slight hesitation. He started to put himself on guard again, but it seemed that wasn't going to be immediately necessary.

"Don't worry, don't worry," Ambrose said, clapping Leon on the shoulder. "I ask out of concern for my plane. I wish to know what your intentions are, to know how much harm you could potentially bring to Aeterna. How much harm. Does this make sense? Will you tell me, or will I have to... well, that's a blank that doesn't have to be filled in."

Ambrose stared at Leon with great curiosity, and Leon realized he wasn't going to get away from this conversation without answering the Grave Warden's questions.

"Ideally," Leon said after a moment of thought, "in my best-case, wish-fulfilling scenario, I make peace between the Empires and the Sky Devils, grab all the bits and pieces of my Clan that are left on this plane, and lead the Sky Devils back to the Nexus. Hopefully leaving Aeterna more peaceful than it was before me."

"An admirable goal, and admirable goal," Ambrose whispered. "But one I don't think will be easy to accomplish."

"With enough power, anything's possible," Leon said with less seriousness than he felt. He agreed with Ambrose that it was going to be hard, and he could admit to himself that he didn't think he could pull it off, but that was the goal he was aiming for. Still, leading *all* of the Sky Devils away from Aeterna was going to a feat of monumental proportions, and one he wasn't sure he could do even if he achieved

Apotheosis. It might take some time establishing his presence in the Nexus before he could come back for those left behind.

"Not wrong there, not wrong there," Ambrose conceded. "But do you have enough power?"

"Right now? No. But I'm growing fast, and have plans to grow even faster."

"Do those plans involve going north at all? Do they?"

Leon froze for a moment and stared at the Grave Warden, who innocently smiled back at him.

"You're not reading my mind, are you?" Leon asked as he shot some of the Thunderbird's lightning through his brain, though his mental defenses hadn't been tripped at all.

"No, I just know my plane," the Grave Warden responded. "You have Hesperidic Apples. Much can be done with those things—one could even help your father-in-law heal."

Leon's eyes widened for just a moment with that information. He still had a spare apple, but whether or not he wanted to give it to Justin was another matter entirely.

'If he dies on his own, then that's for the best, isn't it?' he pondered, so distracted he almost missed the Grave Warden's further comments.

"Those can help you grow quite quickly, but there are other ways to grow faster. Not many, but the one you most likely want to use is in the north, in your home vale, isn't it?"

Leon shrugged noncommittally.

"You don't have to confirm it, I know already, I know," Ambrose claimed. "I tried to claim that particular thing myself, you know. And it resolutely refused me."

Leon felt a wave of satisfaction and schadenfreude from the Thunderbird, who he hadn't realized was listening in.

[Idiot tried to take the Iron Needle?] she whispered. [My Needle won't bow to anyone but one of my blood...]

Leon wasn't so sure about that, but he was grateful that the Iron Needle was still available. But he didn't like his chances if the Grave Warden himself wasn't able to take control of it.

"Leon," Ambrose stated, his tone suddenly serious, "I confess that just checking up on you wasn't the only reason I came here today. Not the only reason. I... hmm, how to put this... Well, frankly, you owe me."

Leon felt like if he'd been drinking anything at that moment, he would've spat it right in the Grave Warden's face in shock and incredulity at that statement.

"It's true," Ambrose insisted. "Your awakening of your bloodline got the attention of quite a few people down here, and they would've made your life a living hell if I hadn't stepped in and prevented them from heading your way. And for that you owe me. Of course, I wasn't originally intending to call this in, but circumstances being what they are..."

“What circumstances?” Leon asked, his heart rate accelerating, his suspicion rising, his anger following suit.

[Don’t accept anything from this man,] the Thunderbird hissed. [Nothing. You owe him nothing. He acted without proper contract. Any cover he gave was a gift. You owe him nothing.]

Leon didn’t need her to say that for him to understand it already. But still... he wanted to know what was going on.

“Time marches ever forward,” the Grave Warden waxed poetically. “It spares none, not gods, not men. We all die someday, and everything will one day come to an end. Such is the way of things. And sometimes, when the powerful die, it creates great instability. Great instability.”

“Would you kindly straighten tongue?” Leon growled, his anger emboldening him enough for much of the obligatory respect in his tone to vanish.

“I will not kindly do that, nor will I do so unkindly,” Ambrose replied, sounding mock-affronted. “I’ll not do so at all, as a matter of fact! But I wanted you to know that you owe me, and I have something I need from you. If all is well, it will just be a bit of your time: a matter of weeks, at most. A matter of weeks.”

“And if things aren’t well?”

“Then... what I want from you will take quite a bit more than just a few weeks.”

“What are you even talking about? What do you need from me that you can’t do on your own?”

“I’m not the strongest being in the universe, Leon. There are people and creatures that even I have to, if not bow to, then at least treat with great care. Someone like me can go just about everywhere he wants to go, but not *everywhere*, full stop. But someone like you are weak enough to avoid detection in certain circumstances...”

Leon, having spent a great deal of time and effort in growing to the point he had, didn’t much appreciate being called weak, but he wasn’t going to hold that against Ambrose. In the grand scheme of things, ninth-tier wasn’t even close to where he needed to be, no matter how proud he was of reaching it.

“I’m inclined to refuse you,” Leon said. “Far as I’m concerned, we have no real business with each other, do we? A favor granted without request is a gift, I think.”

“Unfortunately, I might have to insist otherwise, no matter how much I might want to agree,” Ambrose replied, looking as conflicted as his words implied. “I don’t enjoy saying these things, but when the stakes are what they are...”

“What stakes? If you actually explain, then maybe I’d agree to whatever you need, but if you don’t even bother...”

Suddenly, Ambrose straightened up and said to Leon with the utmost seriousness, “Don’t worry too much about it, Leon! I think I’m putting the cart before the horse, in this respect. I’m concerned about something, and I still have ways to investigate. You, if you’re needed at all—and I hope for all mankind you’re not—then I can explain later. But for now... there’s no need to worry. No need.”

“You fill me with such confidence,” Leon sarcastically replied. “I’d rather you didn’t try and manipulate me, Ambrose. I prefer people who say what they mean, not try and manipulate others to designed ends.”

“Apologies, apologies,” Ambrose whispered. “I suppose I ought to get going, shouldn’t I? Many things to do, and my bed is just calling my name. I hope you won’t be a stranger Leon, please feel free to call upon me whenever you wish, even if it’s just for a chat! I can help with a great many things, many thing, even Universe Fragments!”

Leon scowled and didn’t immediately reply—not that Ambrose seemed to expect one. Instead, he just stood up, drained the last of the alcohol in his glass, and then disappeared. Light didn’t bend around him, shadows didn’t gather and draw him in, he was simply there one second, and gone the next.

Leon blinked in surprise, but at almost the same time, a fairly drunk Alix came stumbling over and exclaimed, “Ah- Ah! There you are, L-Leon! I’ve be- been looking for you!”

Leon still preoccupied with all that Ambrose had said, simply stared at the stool the Grave Warden had just been perched upon, unsure of what to make of all that. He didn’t turn his attention fully to Alix until she practically collapsed onto him and shouted, “Al’s starting fights!”

Leon scowled again and glanced over his shoulder, and sure enough, Alcander, Narses, and several other rowdier elements of Leon’s party seemed to be starting a dueling ring, and far from scandalized whispers, it seemed to only be attracting interest from the rest of Leon’s guests.

“I suppose I’ll have to go and deal with that, won’t I?” he whispered.

“Yeeees,” Alix mumbled.

“For now, how about I have you brought somewhere to sleep that off?” he asked.

“No!” Alix emphatically responded. “I can-can still walk just... f-fi... fine!”

She struggled to her feet and began stumbling toward a door, helped by two of Leon’s female attendants who aided her in leaving the party.

As she left, Leon sighed, thinking over what the Grave Warden had said before he had to tend to party business.

[Anyone know what he was talking about?] Leon asked his soul realm passengers.

[Huh? Who? Wasn’t paying attention,] Nestor shamelessly replied.

[Thanks for your contribution, then,] Leon responded. [Ancestor? Xaphan?]

[There aren’t many people he’d have to be so careful around,] the Thunderbird mused. [Only Elemental Kings, Demon Princes, and fellow Grave Wardens. Maybe a few other unique beings out in the universe, but they wouldn’t be so close to the Nexus and unknown to me at the same time.]

[Much as it pains me, I agree with the sparkly pigeon,] Xaphan boldly said, and Leon felt his soul realm rattle for a second, punctuated by the demon grunting in pain. His voice more strained, Xaphan added, [I-If there’s some problem he can’t solve himself, i-it would imply it’s something that he can’t approach

without pissing someone of comparable strength off. But you might be weak enough to escape notice, allowing you to get close to the problem and solve it.]

With a frown, Leon glanced back at the Grave Warden's stool and thought, *'Better not call me, then. I'm not your damn fixer. I'm not your damn servant. Rather you just left me to my own devices.'*

But that was all he had time to think about, for soon enough, the crowd started getting rowdy enough that he had to turn his attention back it, or risk damage to his home. Besides, a little fighting sounded like the perfect thing to get his mind off what the Grave Warden had just dumped on it—at least, for a little while.

Chapter 806: Gifting Time

The end of Leon's birthday party came too slowly for his liking, though by the way many tried to keep it going, they were hoping it would last all night.

As the night had progressed, the party had transformed from a more dignified affair to something rowdier, fit more for a nightclub than a gathering of some of the wealthiest, most powerful, and influential people on the plane. Duels, dancing, and even a few of the younger guests heading out to empty rooms in Leon's villa to hook up. Despite his position, Anastasios was perhaps the worst of the bunch, though Narses and Alcander certainly gave him a run for his money with their fighting, boasting, and tests of strength.

But, finally, once everyone else had passed from 'good and drunk' to 'wasted', the party started to die down. Most of them were fairly strong mages, so their drunkenness wouldn't last long, but Leon was still happy to see most of them leave with the soberer members of their entourages. Only those fairly close to his family were given guests rooms. Cristina, Asiya, and their followers were some who stayed the night, along with Anastasios, the Grand Druid, and all of their hangers-on. Justin, too, as much as Leon was less than enthusiastic about it, stayed the night, though not without plenty of cajoling from his daughter, first.

In truth, Leon was somewhat happy about that last development. He still didn't like the man, was still about as far from forgetting his part in Artorias' death as he'd ever been, but his talk with the Grave Warden had left him thinking.

As a result, as the sun started to rise, Leon sought the man out. The party hadn't been long ended, and Leon had just gotten done saying his goodbyes to his guests. His retainers were already asleep, and his family were on their way there, but Leon wanted to talk to Justin, first. The only one accompanying him was Valeria, and he couldn't fault her for that and spoke no words to dissuade her.

After knocking on Justin's guest room door, they had to wait for a short while, the man having clearly already bedded down for the early morning. He'd only recovered up to the fourth-tier and needed quite a bit more sleep than someone else might at that level.

When Justin finally opened the door, Valeria greeted him warmly, though the man's eyes didn't drift too far from Leon, who silently stood back as Valeria cajoled her father into letting them in for a private talk. When they finally sat down in the guest room's sitting area, Justin was blunt.

"What brings you two here so late?"

Valeria looked to Leon, Leon having not told her why he needed to speak with Justin before now.

“Had a chat with someone interesting,” Leon partially explained. “He told me some things he noticed about you. But before we delve into that, how did you enjoy the party? Noticed quite a few people swarming around you after we broke words.”

Justin gave him a long, searching look, but instead of pressing him for more information, he answered, “There were a few curious people approaching me after we spoke, yes. It seems they mistook me for someone of importance after having our gracious host come to speak with me so soon after all the other niceties were over.”

“Anything in particular they want?” Leon asked, his words dyed the color of amusement.

“Introductions,” Justin replied. “No one making any untoward requests—or requests of any kind, though some had the look of those contemplating making requests. They just wanted to get close to me, I’m sure, to get close to you. Or to find out what makes me so important that you would speak with me before any of them.”

Leon smiled and nodded.

“Don’t worry, Leon,” Justin said, “I’ve been in many a court, I know how these games are played. Your enemies will find no ally in me.”

“I hope not,” Leon murmured, to which Valeria lightly pinched his arm.

“Was that all you wished to ask?” Justin inquired.

“No, but I suppose there’s no reason not to swing back around to the purpose of my visit.”

“This interesting person you spoke to, is that right?”

“Yes, though who they are is unimportant.” The way Justin and Valeria looked at him, Leon knew they didn’t agree, but he pressed on anyway. He’d be telling Valeria later, of course, but around Justin he was going to remain tight-lipped. “What matters is that they are a figure of great power, great enough to see through things that others might find opaque. Things like a man’s health, for example...” Leon gave Justin a knowing look, and the man sighed and slouched a little further in his seat.

“How much do you know, then?” the older man asked, his expression somehow adding ten years in just those few seconds onto his already fairly aged features. For a former eighth-tier mage who looked quite young in his prime, he now looked quite middle-aged, by mortal standards.

Leon glanced at Valeria, who was frowning slightly, and took her hand in his own. “You’re dying,” he said to Justin, and the older man slumped slightly in his seat, while Valeria bit her lip in apparent frustration. “Looks like you both knew, then.”

“Leon,” Valeria whispered. “I wasn’t going to keep this a secret...”

“Don’t worry about that,” Leon replied. “I know some things are hard to talk about. I’m just wondering... was this the reason you wanted him to come?”

Valeria hesitantly nodded.

“Thought so. I would’ve preferred knowing that before, but as I said, not a big deal. Now, Justin, the man who informed me told me you don’t have much longer to live. A decade at most, if you’re unable to recover faster than you have been.”

With a sigh, Justin explained, “I was given a more optimistic estimate. If I can recover to the fifth-tier, I’ll double the amount of time I have left. If I can reach the sixth, then reaching the seventh again will come days after that, if not less. At that point, I’d extend my life by at least a century or two. More than enough time to reach the eighth again, and try for the ninth.”

“Are you confident you’ll reach the fifth, though?” Leon asked. “The estimate I was given was grim, to be sure, and the man who made it didn’t seem the sort who would lie about these sorts of things.”

“Do you care so much about me, Leon?” Justin asked, his teasing tone not hitting very hard with the fear Leon could see in his eyes.

“The reason I care is not my own,” Leon bluntly replied, squeezing Valeria’s hand again. “More than that, I have in my possession something that might help.”

Leon let his statement hang, gauging Justin’s reaction. However, he didn’t see excitement or apprehension, he merely saw quiet acceptance.

“What do you have?” Valeria asked, speaking when her father seemingly refused.

Leon took a deep breath and retrieved his last spare Hesperidic Apple from his soul realm. “I have this,” he said. “You need to reach the fifth-tier again to stave off death, and since it’s only power recovery, it should only take one of these, I think. Another to reach the sixth, maybe. I’ll have another batch in about half a year. What’s more, they might even help you heal, if my source is right. What do you say to that, Justin?”

Justin remained slouched in his seat, dejected, looking mostly broken, though Leon could see his eyes tracking the golden apple in his hand. He figured that if he were weaker, Justin might’ve already made a grab at the apple, but Leon was ninth-tier, and Justin knew this. He didn’t have the power to take something Leon didn’t want to give.

“You mean to make me beg?” he growled. “I may be a broken man, but I’ve not lost my pride.”

“Father!” Valeria shouted, and Justin’s determined demeanor crumbled immediately. “If you’re really on death’s door, then take the apple.” Her glare brooked no argument, and Justin, after weathering it admirably for several long seconds, pushed himself up and rather weakly reached out for the apple. He moved slowly, his eyes always on Leon as if he expected Leon to pull it back at the last second. Leon contemplated doing so, just for a bit of fun, but he felt that was a bit too childish, and simply held the apple out for the older man.

Justin took the apple without further complaint, but didn’t immediately dig in. Instead, he held it, examining it closely and turning it over in his hands. He held it with great care, treating it with a surprising degree of reverence.

“How did you get one of these?” he quietly asked. “And of such high quality, too...”

“Seen them before, have you?”

“They’re common enough in the Nexus that I’ve had a few before,” he explained. “They’re not exactly growing everywhere, but they’re available enough for a man of sufficient wealth and privilege. But I’ve only had a few, and not quite so... *pure*...”

“There are different purities?” Leon asked.

“It’s a fruit, like any other, and like any other, it will absorb the magic and nutrients around it. A tree in a place with polluted land or power will be likewise polluted. Some places naturally have less magic and poorer soil than others. The apples grown there will be smaller and duller, and have less magic within. The apples I have were like that: barely more than half the size of these, and with the sheen of a painted rock rather than... *this*...”

Leon smiled in understanding: the apple glowed in Justin’s hand, and even he found it mesmerizing. But he wasn’t about to tell Justin his secret, not the least of which because he barely understood it himself. It was Tikos who nurtured the apple trees and helped them become so healthy and lustrous, and Leon barely understood the basics of nature magic, let alone the complex magics that came to the tree sprite naturally.

With a quick glance at Valeria, he took an authoritative air and commanded, “Just eat the damn thing. It’s not poisoned, and if it’ll help, then why look it in the mouth?”

Justin glared at him for a brief moment before hesitantly sinking his teeth into the skin of the fruit. His sapphire-blue eyes widened and unfocused, showing Leon the exact moment when the fruit’s juice hit his tongue. After that moment, he hesitated no longer, devouring the remainder of the fruit in a matter of seconds, before his body began to practically shine with magic power. But Justin had nothing more to say after that, as the power of the apple coursing through him knocked him unconscious as he swallowed his last bite.

“Dad!” Valeria exclaimed, surging up from where she sat next to Leon, but Leon wasn’t worried. Sure enough, when Valeria saw her father still breathing, and his aura getting stronger rather than weaker, she visibly relaxed. “Thank you, Leon,” she whispered as she sat back down with him, molding herself into his side.

“Anything for you,” he replied.

“Is that why you did this?” she asked.

He briefly contemplated arguing otherwise, but in the end, nodded once. “He’s your father,” he said, and explained no more.

She didn’t immediately respond, but after hugging him again, she quietly gave voice to her gratitude once more.

—

Justin remained unconscious for a long time, and Leon hadn’t the luxury of time to wait. He’d indulged in his party very little, and without a need to sleep, he’d scheduled a meeting with Valentina for later in the morning. They, along with Red, Alcander, and Xaphan, had some practice to see to, all of them utilizing the magical element of fire.

They'd all met several times in the past few years to discuss their own views on the element and share some of their personal techniques. This time would be a little different since there were outsiders in Leon's villa, and he certainly wasn't going to be putting his black fire on display for them.

But for those few hours, they demonstrated their growth in one of Leon's more private courtyards, and debated the use of several techniques.

Their session was cut a little short when Valeria arrived, informing Leon that Justin had awoken. Leon immediately excused himself, promising to return if this business didn't take too long, and left with Valeria.

As soon as they were alone, though Valeria stopped in the hallway, then pulled Leon into a nearby sitting room. It wasn't as heavily warded as a devoted conference room, but that was only relatively speaking; Leon had ensured that his home had robust wards throughout, so Valeria had little restraint once the door closed.

"Who was this man who told you about my father?" she asked. "I didn't see you with Anastasios or the Grand Druid much during the party, so it couldn't have been them..."

"He wasn't either of them," Leon admitted. "Rather, he was someone who towers over them both, making us all look like children playing with magic rather than artisans perfecting a craft. The Grave Warden."

Valeria's eyes widened in shock, Leon having made sure his family knew of the man, his power, and his significance long ago.

"He was... here?" she whispered.

"He was," Leon confirmed. "Same strange man Xaphan and I met back in the Serpentine Isles. A little miffed that I didn't take him on his invitation, and that I hadn't sent him an invite to the party, but otherwise pleasant. Bit off, though, I think, and he claimed to have come here for several reasons, never really sticking with one. I'll talk about that with you, Elise, and Maia later, but more immediately relevant, he told me about Justin, having seen me speaking with him earlier. He told me of Justin's condition almost off-hand. Seemed a bit surprised that I didn't already know."

Valeria frowned slightly and apologized again, but again Leon dismissed it. Her father was dying, and her man hated her father's guts. Leon thought she was worried that he'd celebrate her father's death, even though he wouldn't have done such a thing—at least, not openly. While he'd shed no tears for Justin, he cared too much for Valeria to be so callous, especially with his own father's death on his mind lately.

"How is he, then?" Leon asked.

"Awake," Valeria said, immediately brightening up. "Fifth-tier, too." She drew close to Leon and hugged him again. "I wasn't ready to lose him."

Leon gladly returned the hug, and together, they made their way back to Justin's room. There, they found him waiting for them, pacing around the sitting area flexing his fingers and staring at his palm as if unable to believe his senses. He looked stronger, healthier, and even slightly younger, if Leon's eyes weren't deceiving him, and he radiated the aura of a fifth-tier mage, as Valeria had said.

"Leon," he murmured as Leon entered. Several expressions flashed across his face over the span of a heartbeat, and he said, "I don't know what to say. Thank you."

"Didn't do it for you," Leon admitted. "This was for Valeria. Can't have you dying on her, now, can I? Not when we still have to cut Lord Kamran to pieces and rescue your wife, right?"

At the mention of his wife, Justin smiled only briefly, before a dark cloud cast itself his demeanor. "Yes," he said, though without the enthusiasm that Leon had been hoping for. "I didn't think to live to see it. Our odds are still terrible, but..."

"No 'buts'," Leon sternly rebuked, a sentiment that Valeria backed up with an expression of murderous intent, followed by determination. "Let's not get too caught up on what-ifs. Focus on what we can do, focus on getting stronger. As my Ancestor's constantly repeated to me over the years, with strength, everything else will come."

"Surprisingly wise coming from the Thunderbird," Justin remarked.

"How so?"

"I've heard some stories about the Thunderbird in life, and while many words could be used to describe her, 'wise' was not one of them."

"Oh? Heard some stories of my Ancestor, have we?" Leon asked, smiling at both Justin and Valeria. Valeria shook her head, but Justin looked rather uncomfortable at Leon's seeming friendliness, and for that, Leon couldn't blame him. He was trying hard not to make his distaste for Justin known, and while he was also quite curious, he thought that his mask wasn't working as intended.

"Not many," Valeria answered. "She had the pride of the gods, and the power of one. She fought often and delighted in stories of battle."

"True enough," Leon replied.

"Brutal to her enemies," Justin added, "and had a vicious rivalry with a massive serpent. Nowhere in any stories of her I've heard was her wisdom or intelligence emphasized. She's mostly portrayed as a brute, solving her problems with varying levels of applied power rather than deft cunning or wise administration."

"Good thing she's not around to hear you," Leon cheekily stated. "Might have upset her a bit."

[Already done,] the Thunderbird whispered from his soul realm, and Leon fought the urge to nervously laugh, but when his Ancestor deigned not to continue, he kept himself calm.

"Anyway," Leon awkwardly said with a potentially upset Ancestor to worry about, "it's good to see that you were helped by that apple. So long as we all remain agreeable, I'll see to it that you're furnished with a few more every once in a while."

"No need to go so far out of your way for me, Leon," Justin replied as he took a few steps forward and wrapped an arm around Valeria. "You've already given me back many years, and a little bit of hope, where none had remained. I have a few more years with my daughter, and perhaps more. I would never be so presumptuous to swear myself to your cause, especially with our history, but know that you have an ally in me. If I can aid you in any way, don't hesitate to let me know."

Leon smiled, his lips a little thinner than intended. "I'll keep that in mind."

Chapter 807: Steel Body

Leon stared at the work he'd finished in front of him, the culmination of the past month of research, development, and manufacturing. Almost a ton of steel, and five million silvers in other rare materials had gone into the project, and since it was the first of its kind—and *especially* since Leon was mostly copying Nestor's designs and lacked much of the specialist knowledge to get what he was looking at on more than a surface level—he wasn't quite sure it was even functional. Many things could've gone wrong in its production, even moreso because Leon hadn't brought anyone else on to the project to make it practical.

What he was looking at was a golem frame, built from gray steel and regularly interspersed with powered gems and long, thin copper wires inscribed with runes. Its internal mechanics were extraordinarily intricate and had taken all of Leon's skill and finesse to craft. Hundreds of small, highly specific pieces had to be built precisely according to Nestor's designs, otherwise the whole thing would be rendered nonfunctional.

On top of that, enchanting the thing to actually move was one of the most intricate and involved pieces of magical engineering Leon had ever worked on. He was skilled enough to parse what he'd been instructed to do and to read the designs, but to actually create something so complex was something he didn't think he was anywhere even close to being capable of.

But, in the end, he'd managed to build it. Its power source was installed, its mechanics assembled, its enchantments completed, its exterior plating installed. The whole thing cut a fairly impressive shape, resembling a man roughly Leon's height, with a svelte figure and dexterous digits perfectly designed to work with enchantments. Its form as a whole followed the shape of the human body quite closely, with the golem's external plating resembling well-built musculature and a head with vague impressions of human features. It could *almost* pass as an armored human when viewed from a distance. A far distance.

Despite the intricacy of its design, something it couldn't do was absorb magic power. As much as Leon was showing trust in Nestor by helping him to build an autonomous body for himself, he wasn't about to allow the man to start absorbing magic power from the air just yet.

'But he could just make that modification himself, theoretically...' Leon silently worried as he finished his last inspection, but he forced himself to relax. *'Trust, trust, trust,'* he said to himself, repeating it like a mantra many times over the past month.

It turned out that almost from the moment he'd broached the topic of getting the dead man a body, Nestor had been working on the design. Given his expertise in golemcraft, even if it hadn't been practiced in almost eighty-thousand years, Nestor had finished in a matter of days. Leon had taken a few more days to inspect his work, both marveling at its design—so elegant that even he at his skill level could partially understand what he was looking at—and freaking out over its intricacy.

And now it was done, his inspection finished. What was to come next was testing.

"Hurry up, boy," Nestor grumbled as Leon paused to give his work one last apprehensive look.

"I'll take my time, thank you very much," Leon countered, moving no faster as he got ready at the enchantment control console. "This was incredibly expensive and time-consuming; I want to make sure it's been done right."

In order to build the golem, Nestor had also designed an assembly pad for Leon, which was thankfully much less complex than the golem itself was. It was primarily just a circular pad with a few steel arms to hold the golem up while Leon assembled the thing by hand, but the arms had fairly complex enchantments running through them all the way to a connected control console. Using the console, Leon would be able to test various functions of the golems assembled on the pad. Fortunately, in this case, there weren't many functions it needed other than needing to move about with great finesse, be capable of quick, sustained movement, and be able to do precise, highly detailed enchanting work.

It was not, however, capable of using magic. Its power source was designed for it to move around and sense the world, but no more. Leon didn't doubt that Nestor could work with that if needed, especially with ancient runes, but... *'Trust, trust, trust...'*

Activating the various runes and runic circles on the console had the golem frame lifting its legs and arms with ease and alacrity, then opening its hands and curling its fingers one-by-one. Leon, listening to Nestor, put the golem through a couple of hours of similar tests until Nestor was satisfied.

"Very nice..." the man said, his ruby seeming to glow with delight. "Leon, put me in there."

"Just like that?" Leon asked, his fatigue having built up over the past few weeks of production and assembly.

"Now that it's here, I need to be put in there," Nestor declared. "Move quickly, else I'll start doubting my work, or my resolve will falter. Move on, now!"

Leon grimaced slightly, understanding Nestor's thoughts. Though there were safeguards put in place, Nestor's ruby held his magic body, the only thing that remained of Nestor in existence. If the ruby was destroyed, as it very well could be when put into something as mechanically intricate and magically powerful as the golem was, then Nestor would die a second and final time, his magic body going the way of his physical body and taking his mind with it.

Leon didn't hesitate much. Nestor had proven himself an asset, and over the past seventeen years, Leon had grown to like the man, to an extent. He could piss Leon off to no end, and he was a strict and frustratingly demanding enchanting teacher, but he was the only one of Leon's Clan left aside from the Thunderbird herself. He was, in effect, perhaps the only person who could truly commiserate with Leon over the fate of their Clan.

"All right..." Leon said after his moment of hesitation. As Nestor had said, if he hesitated too long, all he'd do was allow doubt to creep in. Better to trust in their production skills than begin doubting now, especially since all the tests were green.

With more determination than he felt, Leon picked up Nestor's ruby and went over to the golem. It was a simple, if almost minute-long process of opening up the golem's chest—its most heavily armored location—and slide the ruby into its designated place. Another minute of locking it in and sealing the golem back up again, and Leon was back at the control console, inputting the last few commands to bring the golem up to full functionality.

Once those last few commands were made, Leon's job was done, and he stood back to watch and wait.

At first, he didn't feel much, but Nestor wasn't making any noises within. Then, Leon felt a shift in the magic power in the golem. The power source buried in the golem's midsection began feeding magic power into the thousands of terribly complex enchantment circuits throughout the frame. The golem itself began to hum as power began to feed into the mechanical components, shifting and turning around to make new enchantments as needed as the golem powered itself up.

And then, like someone suddenly waking up, the golem sprang to life. The golem shrieked in a pitch higher than any human could possibly make as its legs went ram-rod straight and its arms shot out in front of it. Leon jumped back a couple of steps and summoned his lightning, but a moment later, the golem jerked and loosened. It froze for a second, then the head turned to the left and right, and then its arms were slowly raised up to its face. By this point, the shrieking had stopped, and the golem, aside from the mechanical humming from within, was completely silent.

"Leon..." Nestor said, his voice echoing out through the golem, carried by enchantment up through the chassis and projected from the golem's head. It echoed slightly within the metal body, providing his voice with a clean resonance that Leon could feel himself start to be slightly jealous of.

"Nestor?" Leon hesitantly asked. "You still alive?"

The golem suddenly dropped its arms and straightened out, its body language nothing but human as it picked itself up and stood on its own power. "I believe we've long established that, no, I'm not alive," Nestor straightly replied. "But my living condition hasn't changed. It's just that I can move around on my own, now."

Leon grinned and relaxed. "So, it was a success, then?"

Nestor, now obviously in control of the golem, tried a few stretches, looking for all the world like a thin, well-built man in a tight suit of armor preparing for a run. "Seems like it was."

Leon smiled and allowed himself the smallest moment of pride in his work, then he rushed back to his throne and returned to the physical world. Once there, he shot up from his lounge in his workshop and pulled Nestor out of his soul realm, planting him right there in the middle of his workshop.

When Nestor appeared, he stumbled for a moment, but managed to catch himself.

"A warning would've been appreciated!" he complained.

"Was my departure not enough?" Leon shot back, his tone light and teasing.

Nestor grunted, the sound echoing slightly within the golem he now wore.

"What's it like in there?" Leon asked.

"I'd rather not talk about it," Nestor replied testily. "It's degrading enough that this is what I've been reduced to, and I'd rather not draw too much attention to it."

"Does that include giving me a rundown on its functions? How's it working out so far?"

"Hard to say after barely two minutes, but it's... working as designed." Nestor spoke his last words like Leon had to rip them out of his mouth with pliers.

"Don't sound so excited there, Nestor," Leon sarcastically chided, "you might give the impression that you actually *like* being ambulatory again."

"It's a welcome change, I'll admit. Now, why don't we get back to work? I have a lot to catch up on. Now that I have this opportunity, might I make a request to borrow your labor golems, three tons of raw iron ore, forty tons of coal, half a ton of paper, two tons of titanium, half a ton each of aluminum, copper, and tin, and a cat? Oh, and as much thunder wood as you can spare?"

"A cat? What use do you have for a cat?"

"I like cats. I just want one."

"Any breed in particular?"

"A big one. With fangs and claws."

"Let's head up to the villa, get you properly acquainted with everyone. Once that's over, speak with Anna. She's the one to talk to regarding the bigger beasts."

Nestor hummed in acknowledgment. "And the rest?"

Leon grinned. "I'll see what I can do. Sounds like you have some plans?"

"Your facilities here are grossly inadequate. I intend to build something that's just a little more suitable for men of our lineage. You'll be heading north for the Iron Needle soon, aren't you?"

Leon nodded.

"As much as I'd like to accom... I'll need to build proper storage for that, too. Add a quarter ton of gold and two tons of silver to the list. And half a ton of quality steel. If it's all delivered before you leave, I should have everything done by the time you get back."

"Know something I don't about how long this is going to take? I wasn't imagining it taking longer than a few days at the most, travel time aside."

"I have no idea, that's why I said 'should'. Try to listen to your elders, Leon. Should help you stay out of trouble."

"Ahh, trouble. Me and trouble are close, though. I almost invited trouble to my wedding, but Elise wouldn't have it. Would've gotten drunk, broken the porcelain, thrown up all over the bathrooms, and proper stolen some silverware."

"Think yourself a comedy genius, do you, Leon? If you look closely, you'll notice that I'm not laughing. Allow that fact to discourage you from this course of action which you are ill-equipped for."

"You just don't get me, old man." Leon cheekily stuck his tongue out at Nestor, pride in his accomplishment loosening his lips. After taking the time to give the golem he was wearing another once-over, they walked out of his workshop side-by-side, Leon marveling at the novelty of it all. His heart was still rapidly beating in his chest, the thought that this was all a mistake still there in the back of

his mind. But trust was a hard thing to show to a former enemy, even one who'd been on his side for the past seventeen years. But Leon was committed to making this work; if this new age of their partnership was going to fall apart, he was determined not to be at fault.

As they approached his villa, though, he started to feel a little apprehensive about introducing Nestor to everyone. The man had already met Maia and Valeria during the expedition to his lab all those years ago, and it hadn't gone well. Nestor had been wearing Leon's body at the time, and he and Leon's ladies had parted on violent terms. Leon had been up front about Nestor's involvement in everything since then, and had even gotten his family's assent to provide Nestor this body, but he was still nervous walking into the villa with Nestor at his side, not saying a word, not even seeming to look around him.

The latter struck Leon as most odd since until this point, Nestor had only been able to use his magic senses to perceive the world around him, yet the golem was equipped with light-gathering enchantments in its skull which Nestor said would function as eyes. He was able to physically see again for the first time since his physical body died and transferred his magic body into his original ruby. Leon figured if he were in Nestor's position, not only would he be looking around everywhere, desperate to experience the world through the power of sight, but he would also be bouncing around in excitement at finally being up and about after being trapped in gems for millennia—his brief takeover of Leon's body notwithstanding.

On the other hand, Leon also greatly appreciated Nestor's work focus. If he was more focused on upgrading their workspace than he was on celebrating his new state of being, then Leon was only too happy to accept such diligence.

Leon's family and retainers, alerted to what had happened a few minutes before by Leon sending them mental messages, assembled in a private courtyard of the villa. With Anastasios and the Grand Druid staying in the villa at the same time, Leon was a little apprehensive about them seeing Nestor, but wasn't too concerned about hiding the man. The two Empires had some of his Clan's old golems, and with the documents and artifacts he'd activated for them over the past few years, he knew they were active, so he wouldn't accept any complaining from them about him having some of his own.

As they arrived, Leon and Nestor were immediately the focus of attention. Alix, Marcus, Alcander, Gaius, and Anna watched Nestor with curiosity. Red looked bored, while Tikos and Helen barely looked up, locked as they were in conversation. Talal and Anshu were, of course, away, dealing with business. However, Leon's biggest concern was his family's reactions.

Anzu seemed the most positive, walking over in human form to examine Nestor closely. Elise followed, though with a little more apprehension. Valeria and Maia, meanwhile, glared at Nestor with undisguised hostility and only slightly more disguised killing intent. Judging by their auras, if Nestor made even a single misstep, he'd find his unarmored golem frame being torn asunder in an instant.

"Good that you're all here," Leon began as Nestor stopped before Anzu. "This is Nestor, who I'm sure you've all heard me speak about many times before."

"Your enchanting teacher, right?" Alix said, approaching Nestor as Anzu started poking at some of Nestor's exterior plating.

"Stop that," Nestor imperiously commanded, and Anzu took a half-step back in surprise.

"It's not your place to be giving orders," Valeria sniped from where she stood, and any friendly atmosphere in the rest of Leon's retinue vanished as everyone made way for a potential storm.

"Lady Valeria," Nestor said, his tone barely above a growl. "Good to see you again."

"The sentiment isn't shared," Valeria retorted. "It's my understanding that you've done us all great service, by Leon's mercy. But if it were up to me, you would've never been shown such mercy to begin with."

"Fortunate was I, then, that you weren't in charge of my punishment. Yet you still reap the benefits. Good for you."

Valeria and Maia both took a few menacing steps forward, their killing intent growing slightly, only stopping when Elise grabbed both of their arms and Leon practically shouted, "Enough!" The two stopped, though Leon suspected that Elise's gesture had been token at best; if Valeria and Maia continued walking forward, she wouldn't stop them.

"We have some history together, and not all of it is pleasant. But what's done is done, it's in the past and over with. Punishments were meted out. Now it's time to be productive. I don't expect anyone to like anyone else here, but I do want us all to be civil, and to understand that we're all on the same side." Leon looked at everyone else, his eyes lingering on Maia and Valeria a little longer than the rest. "I also don't expect Nestor to just fit into our dynamic as if he were here the whole time. I mean, he kind of was, but... not the point. So if anyone has anything to say to him, say it now. Once we're done, I want us all to be able to work towards the same goal together with as few doubts and misgivings as possible."

"Are you sure trusting him is the right idea?" Valeria asked, and not for the first time. Leon's entire family agreed with his decision to give Nestor the body, but even with Maia's initial disagreement, Valeria had been the most outspoken for not doing so.

"That will remain to be seen," Leon replied. "But for now, I trust Nestor. What he does with that trust will be up to him."

"There will be no cause to doubt my commitment, girl," Nestor formally stated, his rigid tone almost covering up his dismissive insult. "Though I am no longer of flesh and blood, and though my Honored Ancestor has decreed that I will remain in such a state until she otherwise states, I am still of the Thunderbird Clan, and will work toward its resurrection. As Leon is the last living member of the Clan, he is the de facto Clan leader, and commands my loyalty."

Leon chuckled. "Not a reprieve from your incessant criticism, apparently..."

"You are but a boy," Nestor replied. "You will have the respect you've earned, and not a drop more."

"Such as it is," Leon said with a dismissive wave of his hand. "Anyone else have anything to say? I'm sure we're all eager to return to work or training or whatever else we were doing."

To Leon's surprise, it was Helen who next spoke up. "Do you know any nature magic?"

"Though I'm well-versed in many field

Chapter 808: Ninth-Tier Problems

“... and the ark research is going fairly well, but it’s eating a ton of resources,” Talal said.

“How long can we keep it going by relying on reserves?” Leon asked.

“Six months, then we’re going to have to start restricting some projects if we don’t get more funding.”

“Hmm,” Leon hummed as he sat back to think.

He and Talal were in one of his back courtyards going over some last-minute business he had with his branch of Heaven’s Eye, making sure that all of his ducks were in a row before he ventured back north. He was planning on a fairly long trip, even if he was going to be moving quickly, and had to ensure that his house was in order before leaving.

Fortunately, Talal had proven his worth as an administrator more than Leon could’ve ever hoped for, and he was more than comfortable leaving the branch in his capable hands until he returned.

‘Not like it would make much difference as things are anyway...’ Leon thought with some amusement. He still made most of the big decisions, but a lot of the admin work he’d delegated to Talal or to other assistants.

His household affairs were mostly handled by Elise, too, and Valeria—and now Nestor—were more than able to keep an eye on his personal projects while he was gone. He just had to make sure his priorities were known and kept while he was away, leading to this meeting with Talal. He was due to leave for the north in a matter of days, so this would be the last meeting he could have with his Vice-Chief.

“If it comes down to it,” Leon said, “restrict our golem research’s funding.”

“Antiochos won’t like that,” Talal murmured.

“We can placate him with other things, as well as his other researchers. But arks, Lances, and our floral communications are to be prioritized. Trim fat where you see fit.” Thanks to Tikos, Leon had quite a few lotuses of the sort that had allowed him to easily communicate with the tree sprite over thousands of miles. He’d given a few of them to his subordinates to study and try to replicate, but so far there hadn’t been much progress. Tikos could still communicate through them fine, but his researchers were still barely beginning to understand how the lotuses worked, let alone how to make something with similar capabilities. It would be a long time before the current method of long-distance communication, the highly expensive comm stones, might be replaced.

“What about Valentina’s projects?”

“She’s making do with few resources as it is and isn’t bothering us for more. I see no reason to restrict what little she’s already getting.”

“Understood.”

“Anti-magic, as well, can be restricted, if need be.”

“Is that wise?”

Leon smiled, his attention briefly turning southward. The Sky Devils already had antimagic, as far as he was aware, and it was far more advanced than what he or Heaven’s Eye had. While it wasn’t yet clear if

he could win them over, especially given the continued hostilities in the south, he was comfortable at least putting further research into antimagic on hold, at least for the time being.

"I want it, but other things are to be prioritized," Leon replied. "Following those cuts, if more needs to be brought down, our astronomy and xenobiologists can spend some time twiddling their thumbs. But only if need be."

"Understood," Talal repeated, scrawling Leon's directives down in a notebook.

Leon was about to continue when one of his servants came out into the courtyard, looking quite apologetic for interrupting. However, the look in his eyes kept Leon from feeling too annoyed: a mixture of fear and anxiety that told him someone of great importance wanted to interject.

Sure enough, the servant informed Leon that both the Lord Protector and the Grand Druid were requesting his presence. So, Leon cut his meeting with Talal off a little early, telling the man that he trusted him to use his own judgment so long as Leon's priorities were kept.

And so, Leon soon found himself in one of his more private lounges with Anastasios and the Grand Druid, him in an armchair while they shared a sofa, sitting close enough that if he didn't already know they were fond of each other, he would've started to suspect such was the case.

"So, how are you two doing?" Leon asked as the door shut and his robust privacy wards kicked in.

"Thinking about you," Anastasios replied.

"Really? Or were you thinking about what I can give you?" Leon wondered with a cheeky smile.

"Are those two things different?" the Grand Druid asked. "I, for one, look forward to the day when you marry my granddaughter."

"You might be waiting a *long* time for that," Leon replied. "How is Cassandra, by the way? She's clearly been busy if you weren't able to drag her down to my party."

"That girl, honestly," the Grand Druid muttered, her tone turning a little more critical, though still remaining soft. "Such a perfect opportunity to take you for herself, and she instead spends it working."

"If her work means that much to her, what's the problem?" Leon asked, his words coming flavored with light criticism.

The Grand Druid shrugged and didn't answer that particular question, but explained, "She found something out east, beyond the lands of the Sentinels. Nothing magical, but some evidence of an ancient civilization that she was excited to see."

"That *does* sound exciting," Leon said, impressed.

"Indeed," Anastasios agreed. "Not much remains of the time before your Clan, Leon, so the fact that she's found anything at all is remarkable."

Leon smiled a little bitterly, not only picking up on the slight but also remembering the Serpentine Isles. He couldn't help but wonder just Cassandra might've found if it predated his Clan's arrival, yet apparently wasn't magical.

“Better to let her have her fancies,” the Grand Druid said a little dismissively before turning her attention back to Leon. “But what we’re here to discuss today is you, Leon. More specifically, what you have planned coming up soon.”

Anastasios added, “Yes, Leon, it’s no secret in your home that you’re preparing to leave, though we don’t know where. Would it not be safer to consult with the two of us about where you’re going, and for how long before you go?”

Leon smiled, but he wasn’t going to be baited so easily. How long he would be gone for, though, wasn’t that big of an ask, especially since he was counting on their support for his house while he was gone.

“I’ll be back hopefully within the month,” he explained. “More than that, I’ll not say. Private business, you see.”

“Mmhm, ‘private business’, you say?” the Grand Druid asked. “And just after inquiring after my granddaughter, eh? Should I be encouraged?”

“You should be however you should be,” Leon replied noncommittally. “In the meantime, you two ought to feel more than welcome to continue enjoying my hospitality. Though I may be gone, you’re still welcome in my home.”

“Is that your way of asking us to keep an eye on your family while you’re absent, Leon?” Anastasios asked, arching an eyebrow and smiling slyly.

“It’s my of saying that you’re welcome in my home while I’m gone,” Leon repeated with pointed emphasis.

“It’s good that we’re welcome,” the Grand Druid said, “because your ascension does leave us with some growing problems.”

“Oh?” Leon responded, though he wasn’t too surprised that they had some problems with his growing power.

“Not with us, so don’t worry about that, Leon,” the Lord Protector was quick to add. “At least not directly. I was meaning to bring this up with ever since your party, so our meeting today is for the best. We can get this out of the way.

“Leon, you should take heed of your position. Heaven’s Eye’s power is limited, and our watch isn’t perfect, strong as it is. Your recent ascension to the ninth-tier does have many people concerned, worried that you might be following the path of your ancestors. Many people still think you an enemy, and want us to not only pull our support, but to actively deal with you permanently before you can grow stronger. These people might be growing bolder or more desperate as you grow stronger.”

“I figured such would happen,” Leon bemoaned, his tone mostly even though coming with a hint of weariness. “Honestly, if they could just leave me alone, I’d more than happy to do the same for them.”

“That’s what we’re emphasizing to our subordinates,” the Grand Druid replied. “The aid you’ve been giving us, in turn, has been greatly helping to keep their nerves calm.”

“Yes, adding a few old arks to your fleets and a couple small armies of golems are sure to do that,” Leon quipped.

“Our countrymen are not who you should be worried about, though,” Anastasios continued. “We can keep our people in line. It’s other people who ought to keep you worried.”

“The Keeper?” Leon asked. Heaven’s Eye had done much to disentangle itself from the Sentinels, but the Sentinels were already a rather spartan people, so, relatively speaking, they weren’t losing too much business there. Rather, it was the rerouted trade routes that were the bigger hassle, having to arc around Sentinel land where able that were the headache. The Sentinel economy had certainly taken a hit, but Leon had no doubt that the Keeper didn’t care at all.

“He’s our biggest concern,” the Grand Druid said. “He’s certainly been keeping an eye on you, but so far hasn’t made any moves against you or us in these past few years. Still, if you’re leaving our immediate ability to protect you, then that might change. We can stay here and protect your home and family if that is your desire, but that would leave you potentially alone with the Keeper, if he should make a move.”

Leon gave them a mysterious smile. “I have some measures to protect myself against him, but I appreciate and understand your concern. If I run into any trouble, I have no problem with just running away. Even if that’s not a good plan, leaving is still a risk I’m willing to take.”

“What you’re after is just that important, is it?” Anastasios asked.

Leon just continued to smile at him.

“Very well, very well, keep your secrets. Just watch yourself out there, Leon. I don’t want to learn that the Keeper or some other powerful enemy you might have painted a mountain with your blood or something.”

“I would hate to hear that, too,” Leon retorted, somewhat sarcastically.

“You just come back, young man!” the Grand Druid ordered him. “If you die, Cassandra would be devastated! She’d been asking about you, you know!”

“Would she be happy that you said that?”

It was the Grand Druid’s turn to smile at him and not reply.

“Your concerns are appreciated. But I’ll be leaving in just a few days. In the meantime, please continue to enjoy my family’s hospitality.” Leon’s tone indicated their meeting was done, unless they had anything more to say. So, after a quick reiteration of their warnings, Anastasios and the Grand Druid allowed the meeting to end.

Leon was happy that they gave him the warnings, though he didn’t start thinking they were too concerned about his well-being, personally. Regardless, he took their warning seriously, though he didn’t alter his plans. The Keeper was powerful, much more so than he was, but he’d expanded on a few of his tricks in the past few years. He would be surprised indeed if any potential enemies were able to follow him when he finally left.

“Ah, one last thing,” Anastasios said, pulling Leon out of his thoughts just as the Lord Protector was about to leave, “would you be willing to arrange a meeting between myself and some of your retainers?”

“Make that both of us!” the Grand Druid added.

Leon raised an eyebrow and, now feeling a little more on guard, asked, “Which ones?”

“The inhuman ones,” Anastasios said. “And the demon. I would love to speak with them for a while, get their perspective.”

“Especially that tree sprite,” the Grand Druid whispered, looking almost hungry. “The way those creatures use nature magic is *incredible*. I’ve *always* been jealous that they were able to use it so naturally where humans are unable.”

Leon smiled, understanding the request, but not taking too much comfort in it. “I’ll ask them. Being inhuman, of course, they have little respect for your titles, but your power is another matter. This might have to wait until I return, though.”

“That’s all we ask,” Anastasios said, finally leaving departing with one last nod of his head, followed closely by the Grand Druid.

Leon sighed. [You hear that, demon?]

[I did,] Xaphan grumbled. [You’re not leaving me behind, that’s for damn sure. I suppose it’s natural, though; it was inevitable that the pathetic humans of your plane finally started to recognize my majesty and sought an audience. Shame that it comes just as I was getting used to the quiet down in here again.]

[So... do you *want* to talk to them or not? I think they’d accept if you refused, though they’d hardly be happy...]

[Yes, I’ll meet with these human supplicants, Leon. Don’t lose your little human head over it.]

Leon scowled, but put it out of his mind for the time being. For now, he had to return to preparing his journey back north. It was nerve-wracking, seeking something so powerful as to be called a ‘Universe Fragment’, but the Iron Needle was one of the artifacts that made his Clan as powerful as it was. With some luck, it would help Leon to match those old glories. He just had to go and get it.

‘No small ask at all. Nope, just gotta go and get this semi-sentient thing of unparalleled power and bend it to my will. Easy. Like picking up some bread from the baker on my way home. Easy.’

—

“... but really, no one wants to send any messages back to the Bull Kingdom?” Leon asked his ladies, astonished at their negative responses. This was to be their last night together for a little while as he was to leave for the north the following morning.

“No,” Valeria simply responded, whereas Elise had a more eloquent answer, one which she’d been repeating several times in the face of Leon’s continued disbelief.

“Who would we send a message to, husband?” Leon’s fire-haired wife asked.

“You uncle?” Leon responded.

“Mother and I speak with Uncle Ajax regularly,” Elise dismissively replied. “As a Tower Lord, he’s in constant contact with Mother, and I get to sit in on some of those chats.”

“Yes, but not even a more personal letter or something?” Leon asked.

“No,” Valeria repeated. “There’s no one left there who I would want to message.”

“Really? No friends?”

“How many friends do you still have there, husband?” Elise asked.

Leon frowned, briefly thinking of those he’d met during his time at the Bull Kingdom’s Knight Academy. He’d not thought about Charles, Henry, or Alain in a long time, and he wondered what a reunion between him and them might even look like. He was a ninth-tier mage, now, and their relationship would never be as it was. He learned that emphatically enough when he’d met them before leaving the Bull Kingdom for the Empires, when he’d been eighth-tier. He’d said his goodbyes then, and their relationship then had already been so strained that all of them knew that that was the last time they’d speak.

“I suppose I could speak with the King, August, and some of the Paladins,” Leon said with a frown.

“But no one else to seek out, isn’t that right?” Elise asked.

“There’s Minerva at the Bull’s Horns!” Leon insisted. “And Torfinn with the Brown Bears!”

“Have fun, then Leon,” Elise said as she kissed him on the cheek.

Leon sighed. “All right, then. Last chance!”

“I wouldn’t mind seeing my mother again,” Maia quietly whispered aloud, and the rest of them went silent. “I can go on my own, though,” she added before Leon could offer anything. “She doesn’t live in a place for outsiders.”

“So be it,” Leon said with a shrug as he looked at Maia. She didn’t seem to be sparing him much attention with her nose buried in a book, and with his eyes on her, he didn’t notice Elise creeping up on him from behind until she’d already tossed him onto their bed.

He barely had time to register what had just happened before Elise was crawling on top of him, a predatory look in her eyes as she slid a hand beneath his shirt and ran her fingers along his abs.

“You didn’t think you were going to leave here without giving us our due, were you?” she whispered sultrily. At the same time, Leon heard Maia slam her book shut and then felt her approach, heat and desire coming through their connection.

Leon grinned, grabbed Elise’s waist, and easily lifted her off of him. She yelped in surprise as he tossed her down on the bed beside him and immediately reversed their positions from a moment before. But before he could launch his offensive, his hands already performing recon on his wife’s chest, Maia surged in and slammed her lips against his.

Elise moaned in arousal as Leon’s fingers sank into her breasts, and she wrapped her legs around his waist, pulling him in closer. Maia followed him down, their lips not parting until her head was almost pressed into Elise’s face. She darted out just in time and began to physically peel her clothes off instead of simply pulling them into her soul realm.

Leon took a moment to appreciate the sight, but as he was about to turn his attention back to Elise beneath him, he paused, then rose up a bit. He looked over his shoulder at Valeria, who was watching them with something that looked like indecision wracking her gorgeous features.

When she noticed him looking at her, her cheeks flushed crimson, but she didn't look away. Leon smiled invitingly, but he already knew what she was going to say—

"Can I..." she hesitantly began. "Can I... watch?"

Leon smiled in surprise and glee. There was only one answer in his mind, and it was the only answer he could possibly give.

Beneath him, Elise sprang up as far as his body would allow.

"You can do that, and more, if you want," she said.

Valeria bit her lip as she stared back at Leon, and slowly nodded. "I'm... not going to participate. But... I..."

"It's fine," Leon said as she trailed off. "You won't be left out. You'll have as much, or as little, as you want."

Valeria smiled with embarrassment and took a seat. She kept her legs shut tightly together, but Leon noticed her hands resting on her thighs. "... Keep going..." she whispered as she undid the top button of her pants.

Leon smiled, then turned back to Elise. He wasn't going to see any of them for a while—a couple of weeks, at least. And it seemed that this was going to be a goodbye to remember, a sentiment that Elise and Maia seemed to agree with as they began to tear Leon's clothes off, all while Valeria watched, her sapphire eyes not missing a single detail.

Chapter 809: Return to Ariminium

Leon stood in his back courtyard, most of his people around him ready to see him off. For the past few weeks, he'd been getting his affairs in order to ensure he could take as much time in the north as he needed. The Director and Penelope were aware, and Talal had his standing orders. Elise had his villa and Valeria, his retinue.

He'd been surprised to find that his ladies' lack of desire to send any messages back to the Bull Kingdom with him were shared among his retainers—Heaven's Eye was perfectly capable of sending letters back and forth even to that most remote Kingdom, and his people had stayed in contact with their families. Even Alix, who was from a common, no-name family, was easily able to send messages back home with the salary that Leon paid her.

Still, that didn't stop them from seeing him off with his family. Even Anastasios and the Grand Druid had stopped by that morning to say their goodbyes. Of all of them, however, the two he found most notable were Valeria and Anzu.

Valeria's reaction to the informal goodbye ceremony was quite easy to see through. Her face flushed red every time she looked at him, even as she fought to keep a smile off her face. She grew even more awkward when Elise pressed herself against Leon and gave him a long goodbye kiss. Given how much of

a show that they'd given her the night before, though, Leon could understand her embarrassment. He'd satisfied all of his ladies the night before, but Valeria had mostly seen to herself while watching Leon with Maia and Elise. She didn't ask for her turn until late in the night, after Elise and Maia had been practically knocked out from pleasure.

The other one that drew Leon's attention was Anzu, and for a more concerning reason. His new little brother was upset, though not particularly vocal about it. He wanted to come with Leon, and every time Leon glanced in his direction, the griffin-in-human-form only pouted more. It wasn't long before Leon relented and asked Anzu if he wanted to come with. The griffin's joy was a thing to behold, and he transformed back into his griffin form and practically bounced all over the courtyard.

Goodbyes could only last for so long, of course, and soon enough, it was time for them to wrap up.

"It's about that time, I suppose," Leon whispered.

"Is it already?" Elise complained as she tightened her grip on his arm.

"Yes, unfortunately," Leon bemoaned.

"Hey Leon!" Alcander called out. "Make sure to bring back presents!"

"I only bring presents back for those who deserve it, Al," Leon shot back.

"Yeah, Al," Alix jumped in, "have you been eatin' your veggies? Washing behind your ears? You been a good boy?"

"Sofia's seemed to think so," Alcander said with a proud, provocative smile. "She's done nothing but compliment my performance so far."

"She must be rather sheltered then," Marcus lanced from the side. "But that's not the point. Good luck on your journey, Leon! May your Ancestors walk with you. Or fly, as it may be."

As if on cue, Nestor came walking into the room, his golem frame instantly taking everyone's attention and dampening their spirits.

"Luck shouldn't be relied on," he intoned, his voice resonating metallically from his new artificial body. "Lightning is a better crutch."

"One that will see liberal use should it be needed," Leon said as Nestor walked over.

"Leon," the dead man began, "I... I know that I decided to upgrade your tools while you were gone, but... I would like to offer my services for what's to come."

Nestor was careful around his words, which Leon appreciated. He hadn't told his retainers exactly why he was heading north just yet, in order to keep the reason from leaking. He trusted them implicitly, but the Lord Protector and Grand Druid were staying beneath his roof, and he didn't want to pique their interest any more than was necessary.

"That shouldn't be necessary," Leon replied. He didn't want Nestor with him for this. If the Thunderbird was correct, having others support him when he went to claim the Iron Needle would only harm his

chances. He had to take the Needle himself, or it wouldn't listen to him. "I'd rather I have some new toys when I get back!"

Nestor cocked his head slightly, nodded after a moment, then turned around and left without another word.

"That guy's fuckin' creepy," Alix loudly stated before Leon thought Nestor was out of hearing range—not that Alix seemed to care.

"He knows his runes, and I wouldn't want to provoke him too much if I were you," Leon darkly stated. "But, enough of that. I can only delay this so much. You ready, Anzu?"

The white griffin chirped happily and lifted his forepaws off the ground in excitement.

At the same time, Leon gave Elise one last smile and disentangled his arm from her grasp. "I'll be back soon," he promised.

"You'd better be," Elise replied as she gave Leon one more kiss.

As she stepped back, Maia wordlessly took her place, planting a big kiss on Leon's lips while flooding their connection with love and affection. Leon reciprocated in kind.

Then it was Valeria's turn, and she overcame her embarrassment from the previous night's indulgences to give Leon a quick hug and kiss, though neither as heated as Elise or Maia's.

Once that was over, Leon had everyone step back, while using his villa's enchantments to shroud him in a dark cloud. When the cloud lifted a few seconds later, Leon stood before them all in his Thunderbird form, standing a couple feet taller than he did when he was only eighth-tier. His feathers, too, appeared a little glossier, and his golden eyes a little shinier.

On his left leg appeared a fancy silver ring large enough to have fit quite loosely over Leon's human bicep. It was decorated with carvings of birds in flight and fern-like lightning patterns. The largest bird held in its talons a large sapphire, while all around it were tiny diamonds studded into the ring.

Leon filled the ring with power and the sapphire glimmered with arcane light while the diamonds flashed in sequence, helping to amplify and stabilize the enchantment placed upon the ring. The magic in the ring caused a shroud of darkness to fall upon Leon, and he faded from view, his entire massive avian body disappearing from view.

At the same time, Anzu put on a ring of his own, this one over one of his forepaw's ankles. Upon it was a similar enchantment. Once he faded from view, both he and Leon took off.

These new invisibility enchantments were much refined from what they'd been five years before. These ones weren't quite advanced enough to make any of Leon's people intangible or allow them to sink into shadows, but a new function had been added to the rings to allow Leon and Anzu—and whoever else might be wearing one of his dark invisibility rings—to track each other. They'd be invisible to everyone but themselves, finally patching that particular hole in their design.

And so, Leon and Anzu, invisible, climbed high into the air, then turned north. It would be a while before they stopped.

—

With Leon's magic senses, he was able to see the Bull Kingdom long before he and Anzu reached it. It looked much the same, and though he'd been eager to get out of it once he'd reached seventh-tier, returning now at the ninth felt rather nostalgic, due in no small part to the bit of the Bull Kingdom that first came into view: the Bull's Horns.

He'd stayed at the twin fortress for about a year and a half, training and studying under Prince Trajan. Of all the time he spent in the Bull Kingdom's Royal Legions, his time there had been his happiest. There was a large part of him that grew depressed as he flew closer, tempting him to slow down before he reached it, thoughts of his mentor coming to the forefront of his mind. But he kept moving at a steady pace, thoughts of the Iron Needle spurring him onward.

He examined the Bull's Horns in more detail, seeking to distract himself with whatever he could on his approach. The main fortress, and Ariminium at its foot, was almost exactly as he remembered it, save for a well-constructed moat dug in front of the first of the three walls blocking the pass. Several more permanent fortresses made of stone and concrete had been built out in the pocket of land before the border, instead of the wood they had been before the war with Talfar, and were now connected to the fortress by several walls and towers, acting as forward barbicans for the fortress' main defenses.

Leon was gladdened to see that most of his favorite haunts in Ariminium were still around; the restaurants he frequented, and the parks he liked to train in.

[Do you remember the Bull's Horns?] Leon asked Anzu as they flew, still invisible far above the surface of Aeterna.

[Not well,] Anzu responded in common speech, putting his practice on full display. [A few brief flashes. A room with a sandpit.]

[The barracks I was assigned,] Leon replied, half to himself.

[I remember the villa in the capital better,] Anzu said. [My body grew there, though sapience didn't find me until later.]

[Maybe we'll stop by there, then,] Leon suggested. [Unless someone's bought it and doesn't want us around, or something.]

[I'd like that,] Anzu replied.

The two kept flying onward for more than half a day. Leon's magic senses had a range of quite a bit more than a thousand miles, and from the air, the two could see a long distance. They both saw the Bull's Horns long before arriving.

Despite their familiarity with the fortress, Leon didn't want to step on any toes, so he directed Anzu to land on the southern edge of the Gulf of Discord, on the outskirts of the Samarid city built opposite Ariminium. There, Leon and Anzu became visible again, and Leon returned to his human form. Once that was taken care of, they took to the skies again, and flew the last handful of miles to the edge of Bull Kingdom territory. Once there, they landed a second time, and began walking down the road toward the fortress.

They arrived fairly close to nightfall, falling in with a caravan that had been rushing to reach the fortress gates before they closed for the night. They just barely made it. It still took the guards at the gate a long time to process the entire caravan since it numbered more than a hundred, and had many pack animals and goods besides. The tired, annoyed-looking Legion Tribune watching the gates made damned sure that once they were let in, they'd have their goods searched and tariffs would be applied, his tone making it clear that he didn't want to be dealing with such a large caravan at a time when, Leon guessed, his shift was just about to end.

So, they moved through the gates slowly, the Legion watching every one of them as they funneled through, checking IDs and doing preliminary searches on the carts. Leon noticed quite a few people take notice of him and Anzu, who was still in his eye-catching white griffin form, but it wasn't until he and Anzu at the back of the caravan finally reached the gates that anyone realized his identity.

In a way, Leon was somewhat disappointed. He'd had some thoughts of returning the Bull Kingdom and dramatically announcing his identity, to the amazement of the soldiers on guard. He wasn't one for drama, but he'd thought it would go at least a little more dramatically than it did.

Instead of him having to announce himself, stunning the watching guards with his obvious magnificence, the Tribune remained both attentive and professional, his eyes only widening slightly as Leon and Anzu walked up, the last in the caravan to be processed.

"Leon Raime!" the Tribune exclaimed, drawing a few more curious looks Leon's way. "Move right on in, Sir! I'll have word of your arrival sent to the Horns!"

"Thank you, but drop the 'Sir'," Leon replied with an easy smile, mildly disappointed.

The Tribune just smiled and waved him through while a Centurion next to him was hurriedly waving a couple of flags to those on the top of the wall, undoubtedly sending word of his arrival ahead.

Leon's pride was tickled at least a little bit when, just before the fortress doors closed behind them, he heard the guards start whispering frantically amongst themselves.

—

Leon, upon passing through the triple-layered wall, was met on the other side by a sixth-tier Legate, and shown immediately up to the fortress itself. He and Anzu passed by familiar baileys and stables, Leon pointing out where Anzu had been frequently taken to train and play when he was still the size of a dog. When they reached the main courtyard in front of the citadel, though, Leon went quiet, for installed in the center of the courtyard was a large statue, three times larger than life, of Prince Trajan himself. The Prince wasn't striking any heroic poses, but instead stood with his arms crossed, a contemplative look on his face as he stared westward, toward the rest of the Kingdom.

Leon couldn't help but smile and pause there, admiring the craftsmanship in the marble. It was a startling likeness.

He was jerked out of his reverie when a loud, booming voice bellowed from the front door, "Leon Raime!"

If there weren't ten thousand eyes upon Leon before then, there certainly were after that; Leon was aware of just how many soldiers there were stationed in the towers and buildings around him.

He turned his head slightly to the front doors, and there striding out of them, was the familiar sight of Sir Constantine, the knight who, during Trajan's tenure as Consul of the East, had been the third-in-command behind Trajan and Dame Minerva. Leon actually expected the latter to walk out and be the first to greet him, not Constantine.

"Sir Constantine!" Leon replied in greeting, moving forward to clasp the other man's arm. "It's good to see you!"

"And you, young man!" Constantine replied, a warm smile on his face. "It's been too long, or not long enough, I say! What brings you all the way back here? The south too soft and cushy for you? Something draw you all the way back to our little isolated corner of Aeterna?"

Leon chuckled and replied, "No, I've actually enjoyed my time there. But I found myself with some business that brought me north and figured I'd stop in and see how the place has been doing in the past few years."

"Ahh, you're welcome anytime!" Constantine declared. "Please, come on in!"

Leon acquiesced, but as he was led into the keep by Constantine and a hundred of his assistants and retainers—a veritable welcome party had been set up for his arrival despite the short notice—he asked, "Where's Dame Minerva, if I might ask? I was looking forward to seeing her again, too."

"Ah, Minerva's been promoted, of a sort," Constantine answered. "She was Consul of the East for twelve years, and then was brought back to the capital to assume the post of Consul of the Central Territories. I was named Consul of the East after her—upon her recommendation, too."

"I can't think of a more worthy man," Leon said, though disappointment ran through him like ice water.

'Time stops for no one,' Leon bitterly thought, hoping he'd have just a bit more familiarity than just stone and concrete upon his return to the Horns. However, it wasn't long before he found a bit more of what he was looking for in the form of the Diplomatic Corps. Aquillius and his Legates were waiting to greet Leon in the keep, and soon enough, they were all feasting in the great hall, laughing and reminiscing about the short time Leon had been with them.

Fortunately, in the past sixteen or so years, the stone giants had remained peaceful—and Leon figured he'd go and spend at least a day with them before leaving for the south again—so the Diplomatic Corps had largely been focused on the Samar and Talfar Kingdoms. The Samar Kingdom's ire had cooled since the incident with Leon and Asiya, but Talfar had finally resolved its war with the Han Kingdom in the east, and there were rumors that Queen Andraste was looking to avenge her brother's defeat in his ill-fated attack on the Horns. Leon didn't like her chances, if she ever let that arrow fly.

It wasn't long before Leon had had his share of nostalgia at the Horns and begged off further celebration. It had been a long journey, he'd argued, and he needed rest. He'd never gotten specific enough in his stories of the south to mention that he was now ninth-tier, but even though they thought him eighth-tier, his lack of need for rest was never brought up. They simply accepted it, and he was shown to the same luxurious quarters that had been set aside for Andraste above the Diplomatic Corps when she'd arrived following the previous war to negotiate peace.

Leon allowed himself and Anzu to stay only one more day, visiting a few of his more favorite places in Ariminium, despite Constantine and Aquillius' attempts to get him to stay in the keep and spend his time with them. He had nothing against them, it was just that his desire to see them was less than others in the Kingdom.

Anzu was quite interested in the places they traveled to in the city. He was much bigger, but at a few local places, he was recognized more easily than even Leon, and at one place even came away with a belly full of steak sandwich, given to him for free.

So, though their return to Ariminium and the Bull's Horns hadn't gone exactly as Leon had envisioned with Minerva gone, when they left the following morning, he was satisfied and ready to move on.

Chapter 810: Brief Visits

The capital of the Bull Kingdom had changed little in Leon's time away. Most of the damage done by the civil war had been fixed, and he could see a few new monuments built in prominent places in the city, but other than that, it was essentially the same as it had always been.

Leon arrived with only Anzu to accompany him. When he left Ariminium, both Aquillius and Constantine had offered to arrange worthy escorts for him, but he wasn't in the mood for taking a weeks-long tour of the Kingdom. He respectfully refused and, while flying under his own power, reached the capital before evening the day he left Ariminium.

He already had a place to stay lined up with Ajax, who'd replaced Emilie as the Heaven's Eye Tower Lord of the capital, but before heading over to the Tower, Leon took Anzu down into the noble district.

It was easy enough to find his old villa, which he'd left in the hands of Heaven's Eye before leaving. He'd been told that it had been sold fairly quickly, so he wasn't surprised to see a family of wealthy aristocrats living within it. He had Anzu stop about a thousand feet above the villa, simply looking down upon it, losing himself momentarily in his memories of the place, from the attack by vampires during his and Elise's housewarming party, to the last goodbyes he'd said to Elise before springing August from prison and beginning the Kingdom's civil war. He remembered their return to their home following the conclusion of the war, and saying goodbye to it again after the campaign in the Serpentine Isles.

All-in-all, for the amount of time he'd owned the place, he'd lived in it remarkably infrequently.

"Do you remember this place, Anzu?" he asked as they floated above it, Anzu having changed to his human form so he could speak.

"Better than I remember Ariminium," he replied, his voice colored in the warm hues of nostalgia. "My stable's gone."

Leon half-grimaced, half-grinned. He'd built quite the nice stable for Anzu when he was growing up, but apparently, the new owners had other plans for that space. Now, the place the stable had once occupied was a recreational pavilion, while the dock in the backyard of the villa on the Naga River had been greatly expanded, allowing a fairly large yacht to be moored at the villa.

It wasn't long before both were satisfied with having this taste of nostalgia and made their way to Ajax and the Heaven's Eye Tower.

Ajax had noticed their arrival in the city—Leon had felt several other powerful magic senses sweep over him and Anzu, so he knew that their arrival was hardly a secret, not that he intended for it be one in the first place—and had come down to the ground-floor lounge to greet them. It was a fairly splendid affair, with plenty of attendants making a big show of his presence, while many of the nobles in the lounge craned their necks to see him. He saw a few relatively familiar faces, and by the looks of things, many of them recognized him, as well.

Not that he bothered himself too much with them. Instead, he embraced Ajax, introduced him to Anzu, and then allowed himself to be whisked away to Emilie's old palace, which Ajax had taken over after Emilie's promotion.

He'd intended to head to the Royal Palace the following morning, but apparently that wasn't quick enough for some people, for when Leon emerged from his night-time training with Anzu, Dame Minerva had shown up, with a whole bevy of hangers-on. When he left the Bull Kingdom, Leon hadn't ever expected to see her again, but he was glad that he did, though he kept the depth of his power unstated.

Together, they reminisced, swapped stories of what they'd done in the past couple decades, and had a fairly good time. Their dynamic had never been overly warm, but Leon enjoyed catching up with her, and hoped he could do so at least one more time before one of them died.

'Probably going to me,' Leon cynically thought, considering his occupation the trouble he tended to find himself in.

After Minerva, he visited the Royal Palace, and there he found that things were peaceful, stable, and overall much better than when he'd left. Without Octavius, and with King Julius returned stronger than ever, factionalism in the court had been largely eliminated. Combined with the greatly diminished landed aristocracy—Julius was still working on revoking titles and land—meant that the court was more united than Leon had ever seen it.

Leon made his way to the palace on foot, deciding to show some amount of respect since he was now here as an adult guest rather than as an apathetic teenager. It didn't take the guards along the bridge to the capitol island long at all to wave him through their defenses, and then escort him to the palace proper. Fortunately, Leon wasn't subjected to the splendor of the court, and was instead brought to one of the King's private sitting rooms.

The King himself was overjoyed to see Leon, no doubt greatly aided by Leon's apparent physical resemblance to Kyros, his grandfather. The King was still eighth-tier, and from what he could sense of his aura, Leon didn't think the King was ever going to make it to the ninth. He'd made too little progress in the past seventeen years.

Leon and the King spoke with each other about not much at all for a while before August joined them, along with his wife, the former Duchess of Vesontio, and their daughter, a girl born only two years before. She was a little timid around Leon, but August and the Duchess both greeted him warmly.

August had made quite a bit of progress, Leon noticed. Not only was he acting more like a Prince—his time as Crown Prince and having won the civil war apparently having given him far more confidence than Leon had ever seen in him—he'd also ascended to the seventh-tier. Leon was a little surprised, but was happy for the man. If he was anything like his father, though, his Royal duties would eventually

grow too cumbersome for him to make much more progress, unless he reformed his government and delegated much of his power and responsibilities.

After everyone was done praising each other for their magical accomplishments, Leon spoke of the south, and to a slightly lesser extent, what Cristina had been getting up to down there. She'd been thriving down there, and the King and August both were quite grateful to the work she'd done in raising opinions of the Bull Kingdom, directing more trade to their Kingdom that helped them rebuild after the civil war, and in acquiring for them skilled workers and various technical designs for them. She had, almost single-handedly, cut years off the estimate that the Bull Kingdom had for how long it would take to rebuild, and provided the Bull Kingdom additional resources with which to strong-arm the few remaining landed nobles into giving up their land and titles.

Leon's meeting with the Royals on their own couldn't last forever, and after a few pleasant hours spent with them, the Paladins that he was familiar with arrived. Brimstone, Bronze, and Penitent he was passingly familiar, and on good terms with, but it was Roland more than anyone that he'd been interested in seeing again.

The man had only been sixth-tier when last Leon saw him, far too weak to hold his position as a Paladin. August had appointed him to his position, but after the King awoke, Roland was kicked from his position, becoming just a high-ranking knight in August's retinue.

Leon remembered Roland expressing some insecurity about this in a couple of the brief meetings he'd had with the man, and felt some remorse in hindsight about how wrapped up in his own business he was to overly care about Roland. He was greatly surprised and happy to see that, in the past seventeen years, Roland had managed to ascend to the seventh-tier and join the Paladins properly, with the full blessing of the King.

Three more Paladins had been added to their ranks in the past few years, all knights who'd distinguished themselves in the civil war—which Leon understood, for nothing built power faster than fighting in a magic-rich environment, like a battlefield. However, he wasn't personally familiar with them, so he understood why they mostly stood off to the side while he caught up with the other Paladins.

Leon was invited to stay for dinner, which he and Anzu gratefully accepted. Throughout his conversations that day, everyone had commented on his albino friend, with Leon having to explain just who Anzu was, and that he'd taken the griffin as his little brother. There was quite a bit of confusion and happiness, with Minerva, Roland, and August in particular having been relatively well-acquainted with Anzu before Leon's departure from the Bull Kingdom. As a result, Anzu had had to suffer through some embarrassing stories of his childhood several times that day.

But all that faded away for a new embarrassment as the King threw a feast to celebrate their visit, and made Anzu just as much of a center point for the local aristocrats and high officials to take notice of. Leon had improved his mingling skills a bit since his time in the Bull Kingdom, but he still stuck close enough to Anzu to almost burst out laughing every time some aristocrat tried to bribe Anzu into reproducing with them or a female family member, clearly hoping to bring some kind of Inherited Bloodline into their family.

Anzu wasn't having any of it, though his response was far more anxious than angry, and he did his best to fend off the hordes seeking his seed.

Fortunately, Leon was able to get them out fairly quickly. They were still Heaven's Eye, after all, and couldn't associate too closely with those in politics. Besides, while Leon was interested in catching up with everyone, the nostalgia of returning to the Bull Kingdom was quickly wearing thin as King Julius' courtiers did their level best to suck up to him more than their peers.

By the time Leon and Anzu returned to Ajax's palace, they were both mentally exhausted, and each decided to actually get some sleep the rest of the night. When morning came, they returned to the Bull King's palace for only two things: to say their goodbyes, and to request permission to wander around Argent Palace for a while.

Julius, of course, gave his permission, and while he was clearly disappointed Leon had only stayed for one day, he gave him a Royal sendoff, having his Royal Guard accompany Leon out to the front courtyard and personally flying with Leon until he and Anzu had left the capitol island.

As the Bull Kingdom's capital vanished behind them, Leon sighed. His time there was short, and it was good to understand that these people hadn't completely collapsed in his absence—and were, in fact, seemingly thriving—but he had no intentions of stopping back there on his way home. He intended to fly in something of a circle, stopping in Teira as he went north, then in Vale Town, then turning east and hitting the Forest of Black and White. Once he was done, however his quest for the Iron Needle went, he intended to fly almost directly south, through the Frozen Mountains and into the Border Mountains, to visit the stone giants. A day or two in their presence, and then it was back to the Ilian Empire and Occulara.

A good plan, he hoped, and one that shouldn't be disturbed.

He rather felt like kicking himself when that thought crossed his mind, but he ignored it and focused instead on the flight ahead of him.

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Teira was, just as the capitol, essentially identical to when he'd last seen it. The city just as lavish and Argent Palace just as ruined. This time, however, Leon didn't bother giving anyone a heads-up that he was there. Instead, he flew down directly into Argent Palace.

As he entered the seat of his family for at least twenty-five thousand years, and probably since the fall of his Clan eighty-thousand years ago, he took notice of the security enchantments. They'd gotten him into a spot of trouble when last he was here, but now that he was older and more skilled in enchanting, he was easily able to subvert them without setting any of them off. As far as the soldiers in the ruined palace's various security stations around its perimeter were concerned, Argent Palace was just as deserted as it had always been.

Leon had no practical reason for coming to Argent Palace. Xaphan was in a healing trance, the Thunderbird wasn't around, and Nestor was back in Occulara, so the only one Leon was sharing this moment with was Anzu, who had less knowledge of his Clan or this palace than even Leon did. The archives were empty, and the buildings a crumbling ruin.

Still, Leon walked around the shattered paths and broken pavilions, between obliterated buildings and gardens that had gone for more than three decades without care. He committed every broken stone,

every destroyed statue, every smashed mosaic to memory, marveling at how colossal the complex was even as devastated as it were. Not for the first time, he wished he could've seen it in its prime.

It wasn't even close to being feasible to rebuilding it, and Leon didn't think it was possible, but there was a large part of him that wanted to try. He hadn't the resources or the land to do so, but that didn't change anything. He felt little when visiting the ruins of his Clan elsewhere, but walking around Argent Palace, poking his head in and around the ruins, he could almost feel the his Ancestors watching him, walking with him, helping him to feel like he wasn't alone, the last of his Clan in all the universe.

Anzu didn't say much during their stop in Teira, and when Leon expressed interest in staying the night in the ruins, he didn't object. Together, they sat on the biggest pile of rubble and watched the sun set. They watched the moon dance across the sky, stared back at the unmoving stars, and waited for the sun's return.

As the sky in the distance started to brighten, Leon decided he'd had enough, and with only one backward glance, urged them onward. The Iron Needle wasn't going to claim itself, after all.

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In a welcome break, Vale Town as not as Leon had left it. His father had died and Leon had gone south more than twenty years ago, and the steady trade with the Bull Kingdom had livened the place up considerably. The Bull King had affirmed the Kingdom's longstanding alliance with the Brown Bear Tribe, and upheld August's trade agreements. Hakon Fire-Beard was dead, and no tribesman had managed to unite the Valemén in the other Vales enough to threaten anyone else.

In these two decades of relative peace, Vale Town had thrived. It looked larger by half than when Leon had last seen it, and from what he could sense, the subordinate Greenhand Tribe had gotten quite a few additional farms going to feed all the new people without doing appreciable damage to the vale. The markets were livelier, most of those people Leon saw were dealing in silver rather than bronze or copper or kind, and there was quite a bit of silkgrass on sale.

Turning his gaze to the expanded upper district that lay around the large hill in the center of the city, Leon noticed that there were quite a few large homes; no longer could barns be found around the Torfinn's longhouse, just waiting for Bull Kingdom knights to visit and be insulted by, but instead there were small, rustic manors encircling the longhouse.

Also encircling the longhouse was a far more robust wall of stone than the one that had been there before, looking almost like Legion engineering to Leon's eyes. Torfinn's longhouse, too, had been somewhat renovated, with the addition of several large outer buildings that Leon guessed were granaries and a new, larger barracks.

Leon landed in front of the longhouse with Anzu at his side in griffin form, unconcerned with the weak Tribesmen around him who reeled back, startled at his appearance. He recognized none of the warriors who stood guard, those he remembered from his childhood nowhere to be seen, but within the longhouse, he did recognize the Chief of the Brown Bears, and his Thanés. They were all considerably older, now, with Torfinn's fourth-tier thanés looking fairly elderly. Torfinn himself seemed still hale and hearty, though his brow was a little more wrinkled, there were crow's feet around his eyes, and there were a few wisps of gray in his beard.

But as Leon strode unchallenged into the longhouse, it almost felt like he was walking back in time. The familiar smell of mead and roast chicken, the sounds of warriors boasting of their accomplishments as they feasted, and the dull thumps of fists on flesh as two third-tier warriors decided to solve some disagreement with violence.

Most of all, Leon heard Torfinn's bombastic laughter as Freya whispered something to him at a table. Freya had aged quite gracefully, her golden-blond hair only having a few wisps of silver in it, the scars on her face joined by only a couple of subtle wrinkles, and her mannerisms were significantly less flirty than they had been.

Asbjorn and Harald, whom Leon hadn't seen in even longer than Torfinn and Freya, were in a corner quietly drinking from curved horns, the new lines on their faces much more distinct than Freya's. They were clearly slower and more affected by time than Freya was—which tracked with Leon, as they were older. They were all fourth-tier mages, so they likely had quite a few years left, but to Leon, it was yet another reminder that time spared no one.

And yet, as his aura subtly flexed and waved, Anzu at his side, both of them standing in the door, the longhouse went silent and Torfinn glanced in his direction. The fifth-tier Chief of the Brown Bears smiled in glee, sprang to his feet, and shouted, "The little lion is back!"

And for the first time since reaching the Bull Kingdom, Leon felt just a little bit like he was being welcomed back home.