

Storm King 171

Chapter 171: Southern Cruise

It was the night before Leon and Alix were scheduled to leave the capital and continue on their journey to the Bull's Horns. They were going to take another galley south along the Naga River, switch to a ship more suited for the waters of the Gulf of Discord, and continue east until they reached the southeastern-most tip of the Bull Kingdom.

To ensure he was ready for the trip, Leon had laid out all of his things before packing. First, and most importantly, was his combat gear, his armor and sword. His armor wasn't enchanted yet, as he'd decided to make a few adjustments after testing the bracer Elise had given him a little more. He did, however, pack some of the special—and mind-bogglingly expensive, he guessed—paper that would burn the enchantment into the metal.

Next came his books, which were neatly stacked next to his armor. Next to the books was all the rest of his enchanting supplies, of which he'd restocked. In fact, he'd gotten so much more spell paper and ink that he had to buy a separate pack to carry all of it. Then came his clothing. He'd bought a fair amount of plain clothing at Elise's tailor, and the custom and much fancier clothes had been delivered a few days before. The fancier clothes were primarily black and had silver trimming, which he thought paired quite well with his snow lion coat.

Once all of this was packed into a pair of bags that he wasn't looking forward to carrying, he turned his attention to a leather bag, within which was all of his ID documents as well as his gold card. He quickly went through it, to make sure everything was still there; most of those documents identified him as a scion of House Raime, so he had to make absolutely sure they were accounted for.

Leon started to pull things out of the bag and put them on a nearby table. There weren't that many documents, but he still carefully scrutinized them as he pulled them from the bag, ensuring nothing was gone. He placed the supposedly empty bag on the table, and it made a muffled clunk sound, indicating he'd forgotten something. With narrowed eyes, Leon searched the bag again and found a thing he hadn't thought about in over a year, not since he buried Artorias and left his home behind: the black Heartwood seed. The pitch-black seed was cold in his hand, far more than it would be if it were dead, and it emitted a steady aura that he hadn't noticed when it was concealed in the bag.

When he pulled it from the bag, his free hand instinctively twitched toward the lion's tooth necklace around his neck. For a moment, it was as if Leon was back in the Forest of Black and White, sitting dazed with his back against the obelisk in the center of his and Artorias' fortified compound, while Artorias lay dying in his house.

[What is that?] Xaphan asked in wonder from Leon's soul realm, abruptly distracting the latter from his rapidly escalating depression and grief.

[A seed my father found a while back,] Leon answered. [It came with another seed, only that one was gold.]

[Where is that other seed?] asked the demon.

[I cut open my father's chest and planted the seed within his heart. Then I buried him,] Leon said bitterly.

[Don't lose that seed,] Xaphan said carefully. He could hear the sadness and grief in Leon's voice, and he wanted to step lightly.

[Do you know what this is?] Leon asked.

[Nope,] Xaphan answered. [I know about a great many species of flora, especially about those suited for fire magic, but that is something I've never seen before. What's it called?]

[It's the seed of a Heartwood tree,] Leon replied.

Instantly, Xaphan went quiet. Leon waited for the demon to say something for a long moment, and just as he was about to ask what was up, Xaphan said slowly and deliberately, [I take back what I said. I have heard of this thing before. The Primal Gods and Devils would bury their most powerful and fervent worshipper with one of these implanted in their chest.]

[Why would they do that?] asked Leon in fascination.

[I... I'm not entirely sure. But, don't lose that seed. There's power in it, though that should be obvious to anyone who sees it. If you can, don't tell anyone you have it. I doubt they'd recognize it, let alone know what to do with it, but it's always better to err on the side of caution...]

[... All right,] Leon responded, and he carefully put the cold black seed back in the leather bag, right next to his gold card.

Only a few seconds later, Elise entered the room. "All ready to leave?" she asked teasingly. When she got closer, though, she saw that Leon's eyes were a little watery, and her playful demeanor vanished. "Is everything all right?"

"I'm fine. Or, as fine as I can be right now," Leon answered. He walked forward a few steps and pulled Elise into his arms, whispering, "I love you," into her ear.

Elise shuddered in his arms, from both hearing those words and feeling his breath on her ear. For a few more moments, she enjoyed just standing there quietly with Leon. When those moments were over, she pushed herself up on her toes and gently kissed him, then took his hand and led him back to her bed. They laid there quietly for a while, merely embracing and making sure each knew the other was there for them. They didn't start anything more intimate for over an hour until their arousal that was slowly building from being in each other's arms finally became too much for either to bear.

The two lovers made love rather gently at first, but after a while, they went at each other so vigorously that Leon was still thinking about it several days later on the galley heading south. His depression at being so reminded of his father's death had been greatly lessened, and he had spent the past few days diligently working on his planned edits to the enchantments he was placing on his armor.

His cabin on this galley was much like the one he and Alix had on the way from Cyrene to the capital: small and cramped, but much nicer than the hold that the rest of the crew slept in. There was plenty of privacy for him to work, and for Alix to voraciously read her way through the books she bought in the capital.

Her books and his enchantment work had been all they had done for the past few days, so it came as something of a surprise to him when Alix suddenly closed the incredibly thick book she was reading and asked, "Mind if I ask you a few things, Sir?"

Leon was placing the finishing touches on his enchantment, so he said, "Give me five more minutes..."

Five minutes later, once Leon was finished, he turned to Alix and nodded. "If it's all right with you, I'd like to ask a bit about House Raime..." she said.

Slowly, Leon nodded. He and Alix had been through a few life-threatening situations together, and he trusted her, but that didn't make him comfortable talking about his family.

"You mentioned your father and your grandfather before, but do you have any other family? Anyone else you could go to for help in taking revenge?" Alix asked. Most noble Houses had extensive family trees and blood connections with other Houses, which would provide support to the main branch of the family in case of an emergency.

"None that are worth mentioning," Leon answered simply.

"None?!" Alix asked incredulously. "Your family was one of the oldest in the entire Kingdom, and you have no branch families?!"

"None that are *worth mentioning*," Leon repeated. "There are a few cadet families of House Raime living on the Great Plateau, but there are other circumstances that lead to them not really being considered true members of my House..."

'Not the least of which is having gone enough generations without awakening their blood that such a thing is no longer possible...' Leon finished in his mind.

"Huh..." Alix responded. She sat there quietly for several more moments, thinking and hesitating about whether to ask her next question or not. Eventually, her curiosity won out over her caution, and she asked, "If you don't mind, could I ask about the specifics that led to House Raime's collapse?"

"Why are you so interested?" Leon asked instead of answering her question.

His counter gave her pause. "I'm curious. House Raime was the strongest noble house in the entire kingdom. How can anyone hear of its fall and not be fascinated?"

"Is it really so fascinating?" Leon inquired. "It's not too common, but the rise and fall of noble houses is hardly something unique in history, and the Bull Kingdom has had its fair share of strong and venerable noble houses falling to ruin."

"And none of those other noble families very suddenly fell when they were at the height of their power, or had the Royal Family go to such great lengths to suppress information about what happened. I doubt there's anyone in the entire Northern Territories who hasn't wondered what happened, especially since no one knows anything more than one day, Archduke Kyros Raime was alive, and the next, both he and his son were dead. His younger son, too, was widely believed to be dead, killed months before."

Leon frowned as he pondered what to say. After a few quiet moments, he decided that there wasn't much he could say that wouldn't put him at any more risk than he already was with Alix knowing the truth.

"My father, Artorias Raime, moved to the capital after marrying my mother, who my grandfather didn't approve of. He and my grandfather were supposedly not on speaking terms because of this and is why my father didn't return to Teira when his villa was attacked. Instead, he took me and went north, into the Northern Vales, where we stayed for years," Leon explained.

Alix's eyes almost glittered in excitement as Leon continued to tell her his entire story, from when Artorias ran from his home to when he was forced to leave the Forest of Black and White. Her mood was dampened a little when he got to the part where the assassins entered their home, poisoning Artorias, but she still couldn't help but stare in fascination as Leon spoke in detail about his life.

However, a few things that Leon intentionally omitted were the prison where he found Xaphan, the archives under the palace in Teira, and the ancient history of his family. She already knew he was of House Raime, but he was neither going to tell her what he'd learned of the Storm King from Xaphan nor about his Inherited Bloodline from the Thunderbird.

"So, you're the last heir to a venerable noble house, on a quest for revenge against those who attacked your family!" she said, barely able to contain her voice from the sheer excitement.

Leon was struck speechless for a few moments, unable to respond. He was completely taken off-guard at her enthusiasm for his situation now that she had the full story. When he finally found his tongue again, he said, "... I wouldn't say that, exactly..."

"What do you mean? You already told me that you're seeking strength so that you can get your vengeance, you haven't changed your mind, have you?" Alix incredulously asked, as if the concept of Leon walking away from the entire affair was completely and utterly alien to her. And, she quickly revealed why, when she added, "That would be so boring!"

With teeth clenched in agitation and anger, Leon said, "Well I'm hardly here for your amusement, am I?"

Hearing his tone, Alix quickly averted her eyes in shame and didn't say another word.

"My father," Leon reminded, "was approaching the threshold of the eighth-tier when he was killed. By assassins, who I think probably had bosses. Bosses, I assume, must be stronger than they were. I'm only a *fourth-tier* mage! Those odds are far longer than I'd be willing to gamble—it's going to be a long time before I can start my investigations in earnest..."

"... I'm sorry," Alix apologized. "I was just caught up in your story and lost my head a little. It's just, your life is practically out of a story!"

Leon clearly didn't think that way, as he subtly glared at Alix. "I've been thinking that lately, I've been going too soft on you during training. Why don't we fix that tomorrow?"

"Shutting up now!" Alix said, hurriedly returning to her book, while Leon turned back to his enchantment work.

After about half an hour, Leon finished up and sat back to look at his work. He'd made his adjustments and copied the enchantment onto two of the sheets of enchantment paper he received from Elise. Neither he nor Xaphan saw any problems with the enchantment, so with great trepidation, he began to wrap the papers around his gauntlets.

The papers began to quietly burn, the glow illuminating the cabin more than the cabin's magic lanterns. Alix looked over a few times, but she kept her silence.

It would take a while for the enchantments to burn onto the metal of the gauntlets, especially since they were made of Magmic Steel. Leon had been thinking that he was a little too much of an asshole when he was talking to Alix earlier, so to pass the time, he decided to try and mend bridges, so to speak.

"What are you reading?" he asked, keeping his tone as light and jovial as he could.

Alix looked up from her book. She hadn't actually been reading, only staring at the page as Leon's enchantment procedure was too distracting, but hearing Leon's friendly question, she eagerly launched into an explanation of her book, the epic tale of a knight that tamed a wyvern and rode it into battle. Leon was quite interested, as he hadn't been able to indulge his own interest in literature since his classes early on in the Knight Academy before he stopped going to them in order to make time for more training.

The two chatted for hours about books, all while the paper continued to burn on Leon's armor.

Chapter 172: The Bull's Horns

Two weeks after leaving the capital, the Bull's Horns appeared on the horizon. First came the city on the Gulf, then the southern Horn behind that, and then finally, when the galley was sliding into port, Leon could see the northern Horn five miles away through the haze and smoke of the hot day.

Few other kingdoms had such robust natural defenses as the Bull Kingdom had in the Frozen Mountains to the north, the Border Mountains to the east, the Endless Ocean to the west, and the Gulf of Discord to the south. For these other states, a fortress complex as large as the Bull's Horns would be an extravagant waste of resources, as there were few locations that could truly make the most of it.

For instance, the Talfar Kingdom east of the Border Mountains was primarily flat plains, and as such their border defenses were comparatively light, as any potential enemy could easily bypass them. The Bull Kingdom, however, only had one land route into their territory large enough for armies to march along and for trade to flow, this five-mile-wide passage between the Gulf and the Border Mountains. As such, the fortress guarding it had been built, rebuilt, and extensively added to countless times over the Bull Kingdom's five thousand year history, and had become one of the largest and most heavily defended places outside of the Central Empires.

Ariminium, the city to the south, was equally impressive. It had been first constructed to house the families of the soldiers who guarded the pass, but there were now three full combat Legions stationed at the Bull's Horns, sixty thousand soldiers, along with tens of thousands more for supply and logistics. Their families had to live somewhere, and that somewhere was in the city. Artorias had told Leon that this city had the third highest population in the entire kingdom, behind only the capital and Teira, with over a million people calling it home.

The port was suitably impressive for such a large and important city. The city had been built on the river delta and had several enormous canals flowing through it. However, to enter these canals, a boat would have to sail or row past a half dozen towers on small islands in the gulf that could raise a gigantic chain to enclose the port; if the Legion didn't want someone to approach the city from the Gulf, then said approach wasn't going to happen.

Leon and Alix marveled at the size of these towers as the galley sailed past them. They had come to the deck so they could see the city, and so far, it hadn't disappointed.

"Look!" Alix shouted, pointing to three enormous banners that were easily seen even hundreds of feet out into the Gulf, where they were. She was so excited that she was almost jumping up and down, taking in the sights of the city and happily pointing them out to Leon, and appeared much younger than her nineteen years. "What do those banners mean?" she asked.

"The one on the right," Leon answered, nodding towards one that was dark red with a golden eagle emblazoned upon it, "is the sigil and colors of the Royal Legions.

"And the middle one?" Alix asked, pointing to the largest of the three. It was dark green, with a bright silver bull charging and brandishing its horns.

"That's the sigil of the Royal House, and the banner for the entire kingdom," Leon said.

"But then what's the one on the left? I thought that one was the Royal Family's..." Alix inquired, tilting her head in confusion. The indicated banner was the exact same as the middle one, only with the same colors as the Legion banner—red, with a golden bull.

"That's the personal standard of Prince Trajan, the king's older brother. And, the Consul of the East, based here at the Bull's Horns."

"Oooh..."

"Haven't you ever seen the Royal standard before?" Leon asked. Alix had lived her entire life in the Bull Kingdom, so Leon was quite surprised that she had gotten the Royal standard confused with Prince Trajan's.

"There aren't many standards hung in the mines and lumberyards in the Northern Territories," Alix responded.

"Still, we were in the capital for two weeks," Leon pointed out.

That did give Alix some pause, as the Royal Family's banners were hung everywhere in the capital. "... I guess I must have missed it; there was quite a lot to see," Alix said with a shrug and a cheeky smile.

Leon chuckled a little, then said, "All right, we can sightsee when we're settled in. For now, we should get ready to go. Let's head back to the cabin and make sure we have everything."

"Right!"

—

It took another hour for the galley to finally reach their docking area and have all the paperwork completed for the passengers to disembark. That was plenty of time for Leon to put on all of his armor, though he had to do so in front of Alix. She respectfully averted her gaze, and he got it over with as quickly as possible.

When it came for them to leave the galley, they were both fully dressed and packed, and they quickly got off the galley. Leon, especially, was grateful to be back on dry land, as it meant he didn't have to use

Xaphan's technique for countering motion sickness every waking moment. Alix, on the other hand, seemed quite at home at sea, so her enthusiasm stemmed more from being able to see the city than from any specific desire to get off the ship.

Much like when they arrived in the capital, the first things the two of them saw after disembarking was the dry, boring, depressing offices of a Legion port station. Fortunately, though, they didn't have to stay long, only long enough for one of the knights to look over Leon and Alix's orders, check them with the copy he'd received several weeks prior, and send them on their way with directions to where they should report in next.

That place ended up being another office within the walls of the massive southern Horn, which acted as the citadel of the city. This gave them plenty of opportunities to admire the city, and Alix took full advantage, swinging her head around to delight in every marble statue, immaculate garden, and monumental piece of architecture on their way. Leon, on the other hand, rarely lifted his eyes up from the street.

Eventually, the two started to approach the southern Horn. It towered over the city, ensuring that no matter where they were, neither Alix nor Leon could ever get lost. The Horn was a massive castle, with the central keep large enough that Leon guessed it could contain thousands of rooms. Surrounding it were five white marble towers, each capped with a dome of blue tiles reminiscent of a Heaven's Eye Tower.

To reach the castle, one would have to enter the citadel and pass through more than a dozen internal walls. As a result, Leon thought the architects might have gotten a little bit lazy and decided to lay off the fortifications a little, as the gatehouse of the last internal wall was a pair of pylons at the foot of a staircase leading up to a propylaea, without even a portcullis between the pylons.

The Horn was built atop a massive hill on the northern side of the river delta the city had been built upon, and as Leon and Alix steadily climbed it, they saw the massive black granite walls that protected the keep and other castle buildings. The outer walls of the citadel were three layers deep, with the smallest, shortest, and outermost layer being more than a dozen feet thick and almost glowing with magic power from the enchantments in the stone. The boxy towers along the wall were gigantic, easily able to fit two hundred or more archers, and capped with red ceramic tiles.

Leon and Alix approached the Legion soldiers standing guard at the immense outer gate and presented their orders. The huge drawbridge over the moat was already down and the massive portcullis had been raised into the gatehouse—the drawbridge was only ever raised and the portcullis lowered if the castle were under siege, as there were thousands of people coming and going from the citadel every day.

Following their passing of the first gatehouse, the two had to pass more than five additional gatehouses and cross another drawbridge before they were in the first of dozens of the castle's outer baileys. They made their way through the streets and passed through a number of gatehouses for internal walls—aided greatly by the fact that the entire citadel had been built in as much of a grid as the hill allowed—until they arrived at their destination, a big whitewashed limestone building with a monumental arch over its entrance.

"This should be the place," Leon said.

"That is a seriously intimidating building," Alix muttered. The arch was more than fifty feet high, and the building was higher still, with a stark and cold façade.

"Not as much as *that* one," Leon responded, nodding toward the keep higher up the hill.

Stepping through the open door beneath the arch, the two found that inside, the building was far more inviting with thick carpets, marble statues set into decorative alcoves, and long rows of plants illuminated by the glow of the nature enchantments that kept them alive. In the center of the spacious entry hall were a pair of knights who were working behind a large mahogany desk, who Leon approached.

"How may we help you?" asked the older of the two, a third-tier mage. He was the picture of respect and courtesy, smiling and waiting patiently for Leon's response.

"I'm looking for Sir Marcus Aquillius," Leon stated.

"Ah, you must be Sir Ursus! And his young squire, miss Alix!" the receptionist immediately replied, startling Leon into silence.

A quick glance to his side told Leon that Alix was just as surprised as he was, but her expectant look helped him to recover and say, "You were expecting us?"

"We were," the receptionist proudly admitted. "Sir Aquillius sent word to expect a young knight and his squire arriving sometime this week!"

"Can you point us to him? We're supposed to join his unit..." Leon asked.

This time, it was the receptionists turn to stare in surprise. He'd only been told to expect Leon, not why he was there. The receptionist certainly wasn't expecting someone so armed and armored as Leon to be joining the Diplomatic Corps!

"Yes... Sir, please follow me," the receptionist replied, recovering his composure quickly. He muttered a few words to his younger colleague, then started to lead Leon and Alix to the back of the spacious hall, where four magical lifts could be found. The group entered one and shot straight to the second highest floor.

When the doors of the lift opened, the three were greeted with the sight of an open and airy lounge, filled with couches, tables, and even a bar and kitchen in the corner with their own staff. The lounge had been decorated to the nines, but there were only about half a dozen extremely well-dressed people relaxing in the dozens of couches and armchairs, most of whom were hunched over nearby tables staring at various documents.

None of these people looked up from their work to see the receptionist leading Leon and Alix through the lounge. Leon was a little distracted by the delicious scent coming from the kitchen, especially since neither he nor Alix stopped for food after leaving the galley several hours before, but the receptionist didn't slow down in the slightest, forcing him to keep moving.

On the other side of the lounge was a long hallway with both walls covered in painted sculptures, and the door Leon and Alix were led to was at the very end, which was labeled with 'Sir Marcus Bellius

Aquillius'. The receptionist knocked, waited for the gruff, "Come in!" and opened the door for the other two.

"This is where I'll leave you," he whispered.

"Thanks," Leon replied. He then took a quick breath and walked into the room. Alix hesitated a little longer, but she followed only a moment later. It was time for them to meet the knight whose unit they'd be joining.

Chapter 173: Diplomatic Corps I

Leon walked into the office of Marcus Aquillius, closely followed by Alix. The first thing they saw was the back wall of the spacious office, which was entirely made of crystal-clear glass. In front of the wall was Marcus Aquillius himself, sitting with his back to the windows and leaving himself completely obscured by the relatively bright outside light.

The shadow of Aquillius looked up from his desk, and said, "Are you two just going to stand there? Take a seat."

Leon and Alix sat down in the comfortable armchairs in front of the desk while Aquillius finished what he was working on.

"Please forgive me," he said, "but this letter can't be postponed. I'll get right to you two in a moment."

"Don't worry about us, Sir, please take your time," Leon said politely. His response brought a subtle smile to Aquillius' face, who was expecting an angry and insulted retort from the seventeen-year-old knight.

The three sat there in silence for ten more minutes while Aquillius deliberately took his time putting the finishing touches on his letter and re-reading it several times. The room was filled with the sound of his pen scratching on the paper, which Aquillius hoped would create an oppressive and tense atmosphere.

After the diplomat finally set aside his pen and carefully folded the letter into an envelope, he turned his shiny blue eyes to his guests. He was pleasantly surprised to see that neither Leon nor Alix seemed impatient with his little bit of theater. In fact, both seemed quite calm, with Leon quietly meditating in his chair and Alix staring out of the windows behind Aquillius, admiring the beautiful view that an office in such a tall building provided.

'Well, this is encouraging,' Aquillius thought. 'I almost thought this boy would arrogant beyond belief, after achieving the fourth-tier and knighthood at only seventeen...'

"Now then," he said out loud, "let's talk for a few minutes."

His words brought Leon and Alix out of their distractions, and they turned their eyes back to him.

"Do you both know what it is we do here?" Aquillius asked as he carefully brushed a few strands of his relatively long brown hair out of his eyes.

"This is the Diplomatic Corps," Leon answered.

"Yes, that is what we *are*, but what do we *do*?"

"You go out and talk to foreign people, make treaties, and negotiate things," Alix said.

"A wonderfully non-detailed answer, but not inherently wrong," Aquillius said quietly. "The Bull Kingdom has only two direct neighbors: the Talfar Kingdom to the east, and the Samar Kingdom to the south. The diplomatic corps is headquartered here in Ariminium because this is where the borders for all three kingdoms meet."

Leon frowned slightly. He didn't quite know what the geography lesson was for, but he was sure that he didn't need it.

Seeing Leon's reaction, Aquillius decided to get to the point. "Because of our relative isolation, our kingdom doesn't have much contact with foreigners outside of here, the capital, and the trade cities on the coast of the Gulf. But, what few foreign relations we do have, are managed by the Diplomatic Corps. We negotiate everything from non-aggression pacts to trade treaties."

"But those two kingdoms aren't the only foreign relations we have," Leon said quietly. "There are also the Valemén and the stone giants..."

Aquillius was about to say that the Valemén weren't organized enough to warrant attention from the Diplomatic Corps, but he caught himself just in time. He judged that the sentiment wouldn't be well received with a pair of survivors of a fort that was just nearly wiped out by a Valemén raid.

"I'm glad you bring up the stone giants," Aquillius said, deflecting away from the topic of Valemén, "because right now our focus is on ending the frequent raids they launch on the Eastern Territories. To that end, you two will be helping in our endeavors, assuming I don't send you back to the regular Legion."

"We don't have any experience or training with this kind of work," Leon warned.

"And I'm not sending you to go out and make peace with the stone giants alone," Aquillius said. "You two will accompany me and several of my more experienced knights as we do the work. We can arrange specific training later, but for now, your only job is to watch and listen. The stone giants aren't particularly proud, so they're hard to insult, but I still don't want you two to talk more than you have to, just in case."

"Are the stone giants really that big of a threat? How hasn't the Legion ended their raids by now?" Alix asked. She was a Northern girl through and through and had little knowledge of the threats in the Eastern Territories.

"Stone giants are incredibly dangerous," Aquillius answered, with all the patience of a lifelong diplomat. "By the time they reach adulthood around the age of twenty, they're invariably of the fourth or fifth-tier. They rarely advance any further, but they live in tribes of hundreds and thousands. *Hundreds and thousands* of fourth and fifth-tier mages, alongside a few sixth-tier leaders, and all the added strength of a giant more than twenty feet tall.

"Making matters worse is their mastery of the terrain they live in. It's incredibly difficult for humans to get through the Border Mountains, but the giants have little trouble. They can move quickly, while the Legion can't get enough soldiers into the mountain range to properly bring an end to the raids. That's

why this is a job for the diplomatic corps. All the Legions in the Bull Kingdom can't end this threat, so it's up to us."

"What, specifically, are we to do?" Leon asked.

"First of all, I haven't decided to allow you into the corps, yet. I can quite easily issue you new orders and have you seeing to the defenses between the Horns."

"What would you need to convince you not to assign us such a menial task?" Leon inquired. He wasn't thrilled about being in a job where he had to talk to and negotiate with other people, but he still considered that a far sight better than wasting his days sitting in a watchtower.

"I'm going to be heading into the Border Mountains in a few weeks. I've been making some headway with the strongest tribe of stone giants in the region," Aquillius explained. "You two will accompany me, and I will evaluate you, to see if you've the temperament to be in this corps. I don't much care that you've no training or experience in this field, as those will come with time, but not everyone is made for the finer points of diplomacy, and I want to see if the two of you can handle this."

"So just watch and listen, as you said before?" Leon asked.

Aquillius smiled and nodded.

"We'll depart in... nineteen days," Aquillius said, after quickly checking his calendar. "So, for the time being, I'll arrange for you two to be assigned your quarters. You won't be sleeping in the regular barracks with the other soldiers, but I would advise you not to get too comfortable—you're in your probationary period, and if I decide that you're not suited for this line of work, you'll have to move."

"We'll keep that in mind," Leon said, appreciating Aquillius' honesty.

"Now then, are there any questions you might have?" the diplomat asked.

"Who else should we watch out for? Like, other high ranking knights here that we should be mindful of?" Alix asked.

"And just some general specifics of how many people are here, and what our position is relative to theirs, unless you think we should just learn as we go," Leon added.

"These are good questions, and I'd be happy to answer them for you," Aquillius said. "For starters, there are three senior diplomats in the city, including myself, and we're all of the sixth-tier. We're all ranked equivalent to a Legate. I report directly to Prince Trajan and assist him in matters he needs doing, such as the negotiations with the stone giants. The other two senior diplomats are in charge of relations with the Talfar Kingdom and the Samar Kingdom, respectively. They don't report to the Prince, but to the King. I doubt you'll have too many interactions with them, as you'll be working under me.

"Moving on, there are more than three hundred additional diplomats assigned to the three of us, and they're the ones who do most of the actual legwork in ironing out the specifics of our treaties. I, personally, have eighty of them working for me. Then, there are perhaps two or three thousand others who take care of other necessary duties, mostly having to do with dealing with our Kingdom's bureaucracy."

"Any need for knights whose skills start and end with the sword?" Leon asked sarcastically.

“Not really, as the Legion assigns us a battalion of guards whenever we leave Ariminium. In the case of the stone giants, however, we will only have about a company’s worth, as any more would cause us to move too slowly within the mountain range.”

“Well, that’s unfortunate,” Leon muttered.

“I’m sure you’ll do fine,” Aquillius said. “Not many people can get such a glowing recommendation from Clovis.” After a confused look from Leon, Aquillius then added for clarification, “Sir Clovis is the Consul of the North. He used to command the battalion that guarded me years and years ago.”

“I see,” Leon responded. He’d wondered how the Consul of the North knew a diplomat on the other side of the Bull Kingdom, but not so much that he was actually going to ask about it.

“Anything else?” Aquillius asked.

“I have nothing that can’t wait,” Leon replied. Alix shook her head, indicating that she had no other burning questions, either.

“All right, then. Head back outside and wait in the lounge; I’ll have one of my assistants come along in a few minutes and help you two get settled into your quarters. He’ll also give you further instructions, but since there isn’t much for you to do, the next few weeks will largely be yours to do with as you please.”

“Understood,” Leon said, and he and Alix rose to their feet and walked out of the office.

“Hmm,” Aquillius hummed in thought once the door closed behind the other two. “That went *much* better than I expected it to...” He glanced down at a letter that was still on his desk, amidst the other papers that he had pushed off to the side. This was the letter that the Consul of the North had sent him, describing the events at Fort 127 and how Leon had reportedly conducted himself.

“I guess you’re not as much of a liar as you used to be, Clovis,” Aquillius said to himself with a laugh.

Outside, Leon and Alix walked back to the lounge. Leon was intent on getting some food, while Alix was lost in thought.

“What’re you thinking about?” Leon asked curiously.

“Nothing really,” Alix replied. “It’s just, I’m not looking forward to heading into the Border Mountains—I kind of got my fill of mountains in the Northern Territories...”

“I understand. I’ve lived my entire life around mountains, and it’s a bit frustrating that even coming south hasn’t changed that,” Leon responded with a nod of his head. “Did you know that the Knight Academy actually had earth mages build artificial mountains for training purposes? Of course, after I left the Frozen Mountains, I had to end up in the *one place* in the plains of the Central Territories that had fucking mountains! I’m beginning to think that I’ll never get away from the damned things!”

Alix chuckled, then said, “Well, I’m not so passionate about it, I’m more concerned about the stone giants. Dealing with hundreds of fourth and fifth-tier mages doesn’t sound like something I can handle...”

“We made it through that Valeman raid, I think we can make it through a few conversations,” Leon stated.

"Hmm, I guess it's good to have some perspective. Hopefully, these stone giants won't be trying to kill us like the Valemens were..."

"Sir Aquillius mentioned that they were making progress with the giants, so I assume that means they've spoken before. They shouldn't be too hostile..."

"*Shouldn't be* isn't too reassuring," Alix replied.

"No, but it's better than knowing the giants will be outright hostile. Ultimately, we'll just have to wait and play it by ear. For now, let's get some food!"

"Sounds like a plan!"

Chapter 174: Diplomatic Corps II

Fifteen minutes after they sat down in the lounge with a couple of snacks, one of Aquillius' assistants approached Leon and Alix and, after identifying them, curtly said, "Follow me."

The assistant was a gruff and serious man, but neither Leon nor Alix minded. They immediately rose from their seats, grabbed their bags, and made to follow the assistant.

They ended up going back into the magic lift, returning to the ground floor and making their way toward a back door to the building. It was a big building, so it took a few minutes to get there, during which the assistant didn't offer a single word. He did, however, in his own terse manner, answer their questions.

"Where are we going?" Alix asked after they got off the lift.

"The neighboring building houses all the diplomats," the assistant replied.

"What's your name?" Leon inquired.

"Why do you want to know?" the assistant defensively shot back. He was only a second-tier mage, so Leon was almost taken aback at how confrontational he was in the face of a fourth-tier mage.

"... Because I'm curious," Leon said with some confusion, but not backing down and even glaring at the assistant a little.

[This guy's an asshole,] Xaphan muttered. [If he gives you any more sass, I'll expect you to straighten him out!]

[I'm not going to get violent in the *headquarters for diplomats*!] Leon retorted.

[And I'm not suggesting you get violent! I'm saying you should *straighten him out*, in any way you deem most appropriate!] Xaphan responded. [Although, if you did beat the living hell out of him, I certainly wouldn't lose any sleep over it.]

"Over-privileged lordlings don't need to know my name," the assistant venomously spat.

"Who are you calling an over-privileged lordling?!" Leon demanded, grabbing the assistant's arm and forcing the group to a halt.

"Get your hands off me, rich boy!" the assistant shouted, attempting to wrench his arm free of Leon's grip. However, Leon's grip was like steel, and the second-tier assistant couldn't break free.

"You will explain your attitude to me," Leon ordered, "and you will tell me your name!"

For the first time, Leon began to emit a degree of killing intent, and the assistant froze in fear. Glaring at him, Alix coldly said, "You're speaking to a knight and a fourth-tier mage. He's a Valeman, not a spoiled son of a lord."

"I don't need to justify myself to this guy," Leon said quietly, cutting Alix off before she could continue. "However, you need to justify yourself to *me*."

The attendant glared at them, then cast his gaze around at their surroundings. They were in a nondescript hallway in the back of the diplomatic corps' building, and there wasn't anyone else around that he could see.

"I'll drag you back to the reception desk to make a formal complaint, if you would prefer," Leon threatened.

Seeing no other way to get out of this, the assistant reluctantly said, "... Gerold."

"Is that it? Just Gerold?" Leon pressed.

"Gerold Abramson!" the assistant shouted.

Though he had no way to verify it, Leon now had the assistant's name, so he released his arm. The assistant jerked back from the pair and glowered at them, but he remained silent.

"By the Ancestors, man! Was that so damned hard?" Alix asked. "Sir Leon was only asking for your name!"

"Whatever..." Gerold growled. "I have to take you to the residential building. Follow me."

The rest of the walk was quiet, as neither Leon nor Alix had any questions that they needed answering so badly as to ask Gerold, and Gerold certainly wasn't speaking, either. In fact, the latter was pointedly not looking at either of them, and his face burned in anger and humiliation.

[You'd better watch this guy,] Xaphan warned. [He has it out for you, for some reason.]

[Might as well try finding out what for,] Leon responded.

Finally breaking the silence once the three were outside and moving toward the residential building, Leon asked, "What's your problem with me?"

Gerold was quiet for a while, long enough that Leon was about to impatiently ask his question again. However, just as he was opening his mouth, the assistant said, "You're an asshole."

"Is that why? You just met me!" Leon indignantly replied.

"You walk into the diplomatic corps like you owned the place, wearing inappropriate armor, lording your superiority over the rest of us! I don't need to meet the seventeen-year-old knight wearing *your* fucking armor to know you're a waste of life!"

Leon hopelessly glanced over to Alix, who quietly said, "Wow, you're just digging yourself deeper, aren't you? That's some strong language that you can't back down from, guy."

“And you’re a knight who parades around your beautiful concubine and making her carry your shit for you! Forcing the entire world to stare as you abuse this girl!” Gerold said intensely, prompting Leon and Alix to stare at each other in confusion again—especially since they were both carrying their own bags.

“You already knew who I was when I arrived, did you not know who Alix was?” Leon asked in disbelief. “She’s my squire! Not my concubine!”

“Sure, like I believe *that!*” Gerold replied.

“You’re making a lot of assumptions, Gerold,” Alix whispered in a dangerous voice. “You work for diplomats, have they never taught you that assumptions and preconceptions are incredibly dangerous?”

Gerold turned and glared at Alix and was about to try and use his aura to apply pressure to her, but he could still see Leon in the corner of his eye, and he didn’t dare try it.

“This is as far as I’m going to take you,” the assistant said once they had pushed open the heavy oak door of the neighboring building and walked inside. “Go talk to the people up front, they’ll get you sorted out.”

With that, he immediately turned and left out the door they had just walked in from.

After few moments of Leon and Alix left standing in the small entry hall in quiet disbelief, they turned to each other and Alix said, “What was *that* all about?!”

“No idea, but he’s got a weird head on him,” Leon replied while shaking his head. “Whatever, let’s just try and forget about him, and get our room.”

As the two started exploring the building, trying to find the main reception desk, Alix suddenly asked, “Wasn’t he supposed to tell us what our duties were supposed to be over the next few days?”

Leon frowned and said, “That’s what Sir Aquillius said...”

“Should we go back...?” Alix asked with uncertainty in her voice.

“... Let’s get our sleeping arrangements made, first,” Leon said, pointedly adjusting the pack on his shoulders as he did.

After a few more minutes of wandering, the pair managed to find the front desk. The two first-tier mages behind it were a little surprised to see the two of them come in through the back but were nonetheless accommodating.

“Hey, we could use a little help,” Leon said to the receptionists.

“What do you need, Good Sir?” one of the receptionists asked.

“We just transferred into the Diplomatic Corps, and were told that is where we go to get assigned our quarters,” Alix said.

There was a short back and forth with the receptionists getting their identities straightened out, but it turned out that they had been told that Leon and Alix would be assigned their room today, so everything worked out after a few minutes.

Leon and Alix's quarters were on the fifth floor, in a building almost twenty floors tall. One of the receptionists led them to their room and gave them their keys, but as the young man was about to leave, Leon said, "Can you wait a moment?"

"Are you concerned something might be wrong with your quarters?" the receptionist asked.

"No, I'd just like to send a message to Sir Aquillius, and I was wondering if you could arrange for it."

"I can, indeed, Sir Ursus. We can't transmit spoken messages, but if you were to write it down, seal it, and bring it to the front desk, we'll have it delivered once Sir Aquillius arrives."

"Thank you," Leon replied, dismissing the receptionist.

He and Alix then turned their attention to their quarters. Leon unlocked the door and pushed it open, but he didn't make it far in before he was stunned motionless; the quarters they were assigned were gorgeous!

The floor was tiled in white marble, streaked with an artfully asymmetrical black pattern, though much of it was covered in a rich dark red rug so thick and high-quality that Leon almost felt like he was bouncing off it. The walls were painted in a bright red, matching the carpet, and much of the furniture was made from a dark red wood and covered in bright red velvet.

In the center of the spacious main room was a section cordoned off by a rectangular row of white granite columns. This section was lower than the floor by two steps and filled with sand. It was closer to the back of the room than the front, where the living area and the kitchen were located—to the right and left of the door, respectively. There were two more doorways, one on either side of the room that led to the bathroom and bedrooms.

Leon's bedroom had the same style of furnishings as the main room, with a huge bed and more than enough storage space for all of his clothes and books. There was even a small office space in one corner. Alix's room was slightly smaller, as it lacked the office space, but still had plenty of room for her to feel almost too comfortable.

The bathroom, too, was quite well appointed. It lacked the carpets the other rooms had but retained the clean white marble for its giant bath, sink, and toilet.

"Is this really our place?" Alix asked in wonder. She had gotten somewhat used to luxury in Elise's estate, but she had never once thought that she would live in a place like this.

"I guess..." Leon muttered. "Perhaps we ought to take Sir Aquillius at his word and not get too comfortable for the time being..."

"... That's for the best..." Alix responded. They were both stunned at the opulence of their quarters, and neither thought for a moment that it would last, as it was just too good.

After placing his things down in his room, Leon removed his armor and started writing a quick letter to Aquillius detailing what had happened with Gerold. As he wrote, he reflected on his own actions and admitted that he didn't think he handled the situation well—particularly, his grabbing Gerold's arm was something that Leon regretted. He laid it out as truthfully as he could, asked as respectfully as he could for further instructions, then left to return to the front desk.

When he got there, the receptionists didn't look busy, so he walked up and asked, "Are you guys sure we got the right room?"

The receptionists looked at each other in slight confusion, but they nodded, and the man in charge asked, "Is there something wrong with the place you've been assigned, Sir?"

"No, nothing!" Leon hurriedly said. "If anything, it's almost *too* much! It's certainly not what I was expecting to be assigned when I arrived..."

"All the diplomats live here in this building, and all of their rooms are of similar quality, or better," the lead receptionist informed. "While it's true that you're new, Sir, you're still a knight, so of course we weren't going to put you up in some sty."

Leon frowned a little, but he quietly accepted it. He didn't object to it, but he still wasn't used to being treated as a knight.

"Did you bring your message?" the other receptionist helpfully asked.

"I did," Leon said as he turned it over.

"We'll hand it over once Sir Aquillius returns," the lead receptionist said. Leon quickly thanked him and went back to his and Alix's room.

"Looks like this is indeed our place," he said.

"You won't hear me complain," Alix responded, a big smile breaking out over her face. She was already changed into some clean clothes and was lounging out in one of the comfortable looking couches with a book in hand. "So, do we have the rest of the night to ourselves?" she asked.

It was clear to Leon that she wanted to relax and keep reading, so he said, "I suppose we can do some light training in a couple hours, but other than that, I think we're on our own until someone comes to get us..."

It had been a long day, from the galley, though all the paperwork in the port, to the Diplomatic Corps, and finally to their rooms. It wasn't quite dinner time yet, but it was already late afternoon, and both of them needed their rest. To that end, Leon made like Alix and broke out a book to relax with.

But, their relaxation was interrupted only a few minutes before they began their training by the sound of knocking at their door. When Leon walked over and opened it, he found Marcus Aquillius staring back at him.

Chapter 175: Anna

Several hours after sending Leon and Alix on their way, Aquillius put his work down and called it a day. He hadn't gotten word back from Gerold about whether the former two had been settled in or not, which brought a smile of anticipation to Aquillius' face.

'I wonder how that young knight dealt with Gerold's behavior... No diplomat worth his salt would ever lose his cool when confronted with someone antagonistic, so hopefully, he conducted himself well. I guess I'll find out tomorrow...'

Aquillius happily left his office and descended to the ground floor, then turned and made his way over to the diplomat's quarters. He rarely got any correspondence sent to the residential building, so he was quite surprised when the receptionist knocked on his door and gave him Leon's message just before dinner time. His curiosity was piqued, so he took a seat in his favorite armchair by the fireplace and opened the message.

"Hmm," he hummed in thought. His forehead creased slightly as he re-read the message. He'd known that Gerold would be abrasive, but not outright insulting. Leon's response to Gerold's terrible attitude wasn't what he expected of a diplomat, but the fact that Leon was owning up to it was a promising start.

The message closed with Leon giving his and Alix's room number, and a request for further instruction, so Sir Aquillius rose from his chair and left his quarters. A quick minute in the magical lift brought him to Leon's floor, and soon enough, Aquillius found himself loudly knocking on Leon's door.

The door opened in seconds, and Leon was brought face-to-face with a stoic and serious Aquillius. The latter was a career diplomat, and if he didn't want someone to be able to read his expression, it was an easy thing for him to wipe his face of all emotion. He did this now, so Leon wouldn't realize just how much pleasure he was taking in seeing the younger man's surprise and momentary panic.

"Sir!" Leon said. He stared for a second before stepping to the side and saying, "Please, come in!"

Aquillius availed himself of Leon's hospitality and entered the room.

"I received your message," the diplomat said sternly, "but I want to hear what happened from you." He took a seat at one end of the dining table and asserted himself by gesturing to the seats at either side of him, inviting Leon and Alix to join him.

Alix hurried over, while Leon took a moment to steady himself and regain his own normal stoicism. Once he sat down, Aquillius stared at him expectantly, so the younger mage launched into his explanation of what happened. He started with Gerold's brusqueness when picking them up, to their confrontation that started over his name, and ended with when Gerold left them at the doors of the residential building.

"I see..." Aquillius muttered. He watched Leon speak the entire time, and he didn't see any obvious moment where Leon lied. He also kept an eye on Alix, and she didn't react in any way that made Aquillius think Leon was telling an unexpected lie. Him showing up unannounced was mostly because he wanted to catch them off-guard and disturb any coordination the two might have put into lying, yet he didn't see a single instance where he would've guessed Leon wasn't being honest.

For almost half a minute, the three sat there in silence. Leon and Alix were slowly getting more tense, though neither showed it, while Aquillius was perfectly comfortable, yet neither did he show it.

Finally, the diplomat said, "You're no diplomat, that's for sure. No true negotiator would've lost his head and laid hands upon someone insulting them."

"I'm aware of that, Sir," Leon said, only showing his regret by averting his gaze.

"And you're owning up to it. Taking responsibility for your mistakes is a quality that I value," Aquillius stated, bringing Leon's eyes back to his own. "You're not a diplomat, but you've got the potential to be

one. I will speak to Gerold about this matter, but for now, you two may consider yourselves *not* in trouble.”

“Thank you, Sir!” Leon and Alix said in unison.

As Aquillius stood up, he continued, “However, my mind may change after my conversation with Gerold, and if there is a punishment that needs to be meted out, you can rest assured that kicking you out of the Diplomatic Corps will not be it.”

Aquillius calmly walked back to the door, but as Leon opened the door for him, he turned to the younger man and said, “Oh, and come to the lounge tomorrow around ten in the morning. I’ll have one of my junior diplomats give you two a tour of the place. Get you acquainted with the post, and all.”

“Yes, Sir!” Leon acknowledged. And with that, Aquillius departed.

As he walked down the hall, Aquillius allowed his serious face to drop, and he almost split his face in half with his smile.

‘Yes, he has some potential, but only if properly nurtured,’ he thought to himself.

—

Leon stood there with the door open in shock for several moments before he closed it behind the diplomat.

“That was...” he began.

“... unexpected,” Alix finished. “But, at the same time, relieving. We have new instructions, and we’re not in trouble over that whole thing.”

“Yet. Not in trouble *yet*,” Leon corrected.

“I suppose...” Alix muttered. She preferred to be more positive, but she had also gotten to know Leon well enough to know that he preferred to examine the negatives.

“Anyway, let’s get to training,” Leon said, leading Alix over to the sandpit.

—

After they were finished with training, Leon and Alix had to find themselves some food, as the kitchen was devoid of any. Fortunately, there had been a map of the citadel waiting for them on the kitchen counter when they had arrived, so finding a place for dinner wasn’t that difficult. Of course, they then had to do the same the next morning for breakfast.

So it was with a full stomach that they made their way to the lounge on the fourteenth floor of the diplomatic building, only to discover that the lounge’s kitchen was still serving breakfast. Leon was a little regretful that they hadn’t come here for free food, but the place they’d gone to wasn’t that bad, so he put it behind him—though the delicious smell was making doing so difficult.

He and Alix didn’t have to wait in the lounge long before a young woman almost seemed to bounce over to them. She appeared to be in her mid-twenties, with a headful of shining gold hair, and a smile that lit

up her cute face. However, Leon barely registered her looks, as he had noticed her fourth-tier aura and realized that she wasn't one to take lightly.

"Hi, there!" she said enthusiastically. "You two are Sir Ursus and Alix, right?"

"That we are," Alix replied, matching the other girl's chipper smile.

"I'm Anna, one of the knights assigned to Sir Aquillius' diplomatic team! He asked me to show you two around and to introduce you to the team we're going into the mountains with!"

"Well, then lead on, Dame Anna," Leon responded.

"You can just call me Anna, *Sir Ursus*," Anna said with a wink.

"Call me Leon," he bluntly replied.

"Good to meet 'cha!" Anna said with a smile and a laugh. She then reached out and grabbed one of Leon's and Alix's arms, and started pulling them to the magical lift.

"We don't need to be led around like pets," Leon muttered.

"But you don't know where you're going!" Anna insisted. She pulled them into the lift before she let go. She then mashed the runic circle that would bring them down one floor almost a dozen times.

"Is there some kind of hurry?" Alix asked.

"Oh, no hurry!" Anna replied. "I just don't like wasting time!"

"It shouldn't be a problem to relax and take things a little slower," Leon said.

Anna's smile grew a little strained, and she said, "I *really* don't like wasting time!"

As soon as the lift doors opened, she grabbed their arms again and started half-dragging them across the hall, without giving them much time to stop and examine their surroundings.

The lift had opened into a long hallway with dozens of doors, almost all of which Anna completely ignored as she pulled Alix and Leon along.

"This floor is entirely made up of our offices! But, this is the only room you need to know for now!" Anna said as she stopped them in front of one particular door. She pushed it open and led Leon and Alix in, giving them a quick glimpse of a large stylishly furnished room with three other people within. There was barely enough time for Leon and Alix to get a good look of those three people, or for them to give the two newcomers a look of pity before Anna dragged them back to the magical lift.

"Is there anyone we should meet right now?" Alix asked, in a subtle protest to try and get Anna to stop.

"Nope!" Anna said as the magic lift doors opened and she dragged them inside. "There's another floor we need to see, and *then* we can go and talk to people!"

This time, they went down five floors, and the lift opened into a large lobby with more than a dozen different hallways branching off. But, again, Anna barely gave the two time enough to get their bearings before her hands were on their forearms and she was dragging them down one hallway in particular.

"This is one of the floors with all the scribes who keep track of all of our logistics! This floor also houses our archives, where copies of every treaty, agreement, official piece of correspondence, and all the rest of the stuff that comes in and out of here is kept!" Anna explained.

She had them stop in front of a door, but she didn't open it; rather, she simply said, "Remember this room number! These are our archives! If you're ever given something to bring down here, just poke your head in and give it to one of the scribes inside!" She then turned to Leon and said, slightly quieter than usual, which was still her speaking at a relatively normal volume, "But, you don't need to worry about being used as a gopher! Knights aren't given such mundane tasks!"

Alix frowned a little, guessing that she, as the squire, would be used as the gopher in this situation.

Anna then began dragging them back to the magic lift. Once they were inside, she mashed the runic circle to bring them back to the lounge on the fourteenth floor.

"Do you two have any questions?" she asked on the way up.

"What are the other floors in this building?" Alix asked.

"The first few floors are, as I said, scribes, bureaucrats, and archive storage. Then, the top few floors are the diplomats' offices, with the higher floors for the highest ranked knights."

"What about the top floor?" Leon asked. "Sir Aquillius made it seem to us yesterday that he and his two other sixth-tier colleagues are the top guys here, so who works on the fifteenth floor if they're on the fourteenth?"

"That's a guest floor, for visiting royalty," Anna swiftly answered.

"You mean they don't stay in the castle?" Alix asked with some slight disbelief.

"The Bull King and his relatives stay in the castle. If any visiting royals from other Kingdoms come here, then they stay here on the fifteenth floor. Or, if any high nobles from any Kingdom visits Prince Trajan, they will stay up there as well," Anna informed.

"I see..." Leon muttered.

"Now, if there isn't anything else, let's meet the people Sir Aquillius is takin' with us into the mountains!" Anna exclaimed with her usual enthusiasm.

After they arrived at the lounge, she pulled Leon and Alix toward Aquillius' office. However, her actual destination was a meeting room just off to the side, where there were about half a dozen other people—four men and two women—who were going through a stack of paperwork together, all of whom looked up in curiosity when Anna burst in, dragging Leon and Alix behind her.

"Heeeere's the new guys!" she announced.

"Dame Anna, you are a knight, please act with a little more of the grace and dignity expected of your station," said one of the people in the room, a woman with black hair neatly tied up into a proper bun and wearing a pristine dark blue formal dress that didn't have so much as half a wrinkle.

"And how am I not acting dignified?" Anna asked good-naturedly.

The serious woman narrowed her eyes in displeasure, but before she could speak, the other lady in the room said, "Please, Dame Anna, introduce the newcomers to us, we'd like to learn their names before we delve into boring talks of dignity and grace!"

Chapter 176: Meeting the Diplomats

Anna, Leon, and Alix stood before the group that Aquillius was either going to take into the Border Mountains with him or had some role in planning the diplomatic mission. They were four men and two women.

"This is Dame Juliana," Anna introduced, indicating the woman who had chastised her, "and Dame Eleanor," nodding respectfully to the woman who had asked for introductions. The latter was relaxing in her armchair with her long blonde hair cascading over her shoulders, leaning over to one side to better see the new arrivals in stark contrast to the former, who had her black hair tied back and was sitting straight as a board with absolutely perfect posture.

"A pleasure to meet you," Leon said, using all the etiquette Artorias had taught him. Which, granted, wasn't that much to begin with, but he made a reasonably good impression on Juliana, whose chilling dark blue eyes sparkled in curiosity.

Eleanor, however, wasn't so subtle, saying, "Now that's certainly a proper response, Sir...?"

"Oh! This is Sir Leon, and his squire, Alix!" Anna said.

"Ah, Sir Leon," Eleanor continued, "Your manners are quite something, not what I'd expect from a Valeman."

"Manners shouldn't be praised," Juliana said with a glare, "they should be expected of *all* knights, no matter their origin." Her eyes flickered over to glare at Anna as she said this, but the latter either didn't notice or didn't care, as she continued to smile and almost vibrate with energy.

"Let's not get too carried away, there are still introductions to be made," said one of the men, an impeccably well-dressed fifth-tier mage with brown hair and eyes, sharply chiseled features, and an easy-going smile on his face.

Leon and Alix looked to Anna, as did everyone else in the room.

"Sir Leon, miss Alix, please meet Sirs Antonius, Helvius, Viridius, and Lucilius!" Each one of the men sitting around the meeting table nodded in turn, with the man who spoke up being the last.

Both Leon and Alix's minds were spinning a little as they tried to memorize everyone's names, something which Lucilius seemed to pick up on, as he said, "There's no need to remember everyone's names right this moment, we've at least three weeks for that."

"Anyone in our field should at least be able to remember a few names and faces," Juliana said disdainfully.

"A few, sure," replied Eleanor, "but I'm also sure that they've had to meet a great many people in the past few days, and I think it's understandable if they might need a reintroduction or two before they've got everyone's names down."

"Moving on," Lucilius said, interrupting before the two ladies' disagreement turned into an argument, "Sir Leon, why don't you join us and tell us a little about yourself?"

Lucilius gestured toward an open seat, which Leon hesitantly lowered himself into, while Anna sat down opposite from him. Alix, however, stood by the wall, as none of the knights offered her a seat and she didn't think it would be wise to sit at the table without an invitation.

After taking his seat and sitting for several silent moments, Leon looked up to meet the expectant gazes of the other knights. "So, what would you like to know about me?" he asked after being unable to decide where to start.

"Tell us about the Valeman attack!" Anna cheerily demanded, causing Juliana to glare at her.

However, before the latter could say anything, Lucilius added, "Yes, we've heard a few scattered reports of what happened at the northern border, but nothing concrete. I think we're all quite curious to hear about the incident from the mouth of someone who was actually there."

Leon thought for a moment, then began by explaining his assignment to Fort 127. This raised a few eyebrows, but no one interrupted. He then continued by describing the fort and giving his disappointed first impression, Jean assigning him to Sam, and the supply mission that ran into the invading Valemen. He recounted his and Alix's retreat south, the attack Jean led on the Valemen camps, and then finally the battle itself, ending with the Consul of the North's timely arrival.

"Well, that's a hell of a story," said Antonius. "I've been to the Northern Territories and seen some of the fortifications that have been built to guard the passes... To have nothing more than a fort of five hundred to watch for Valemen is negligence at its highest."

"Oh? You were sent somewhere before you came here?" Helvius asked.

"Yes, for my first command as a Centurion, I was at Clear Ice Fortress on the Great Plateau. After I achieved the fifth-tier and became a Tribune, I was reassigned down here."

"Sir Antonius isn't a diplomat, he's the commander of our guard detail," Eleanor quietly explained to Leon.

"Anyway, I'm impressed you managed to survive such long odds," Antonius continued, turning back to Leon.

"It was only because the Consul of the North arrived when he did that I'm alive now," Leon replied.

"Hakon Fire-Beard had my throat in his hands and was closer to ending my life than I think anyone else has come before. I survived by luck, not skill."

"Still, from the sound of it, you acquitted yourself well," Lucilius praised.

"At the end of the day, that's all we can do, to do the best we can with what we're given," Viridius added.

"Oh?" Eleanor asked, raising her eyebrow at Viridius. "So when I had to literally drag your lazy ass out of your room this morning so you wouldn't be late for this meeting, that was you 'doing the best you could with what you were given'?"

“Hey!” Viridius almost shouted back. If Leon wasn’t able to see their friendly expressions, he’d think that Viridius was about to fight Eleanor. Instead, he said, “I can’t be held accountable for what just-woken-up Viridius does! That guy’s an asshole!”

As most of the other knights around the table chuckled, Juliana straightened the perfectly arranged papers in front of her and coolly said, “If it’s not too much trouble, could I request that we return to the task at hand?”

“Why the rush? We should be welcoming to our new member!” Eleanor replied.

“There is a time and place for such things, and the middle of a meeting isn’t it!” Juliana insisted.

“Levity is good for a person. You should try it, maybe then you wouldn’t be so uptight all the time,” Eleanor muttered.

Juliana glared at Eleanor, then turned her eyes toward Lucilius, who sighed and said, “I suppose we should get this done. It won’t take long, and it would be best to just knock it out. Eighteen days from today, Sir Aquillius will be taking myself, Eleanor, and Juliana with him as he goes north.”

“And Sir Leon,” Anna reminded.

“Right. Antonius, you’ll be accompanying us, as usual, with a company of soldiers. Everyone else, we’ll need you to be organizing our supplies and gifts to the giant chieftains and hammering out the last few details of our proposed treaty.”

“What should we get these chieftains?” Viridius asked.

“No raw goods, they have little need for anything that isn’t granite or basalt, from what little I understand,” Helvius said.

“Then, food?” Viridius suggested.

“I’m not sure what they eat, so maybe we should just get something made of gold or silver, hard to go wrong with that,” Helvius said with a troubled look.

“What do the giants typically go raiding for?” Leon asked.

“Depends on the tribe. The stone giants further north tend to steal food and livestock, though they take so much it’s hard to tell if they look for anything in particular. Those closer to the Horns typically take slaves and treasure,” Anna answered.

“Then some gifts of gold and silver should be enough,” Lucilius decided. “This will get easier after we get our non-aggression pact sealed, and we start talking about trade...”

The discussion about specific logistics continued. Leon paid as much attention as he could, but the diplomats eventually transitioned to an in-depth discussion about what future treaties they would attempt to negotiate with the giants, and his eyes started to cross. Fortunately, the discussion was over after about forty-five minutes, and the meeting was adjourned.

“Sir Leon!” Lucilius called out as everyone was leaving the room.

“Sir,” Leon answered, stopping near the door to wait for the older knight.

"Let's walk for a little while," Lucilius suggested.

"Sure," Leon replied. He and Alix then followed Lucilius out the door and back toward the magical lift. As they walked, Leon saw Eleanor and Juliana walking together, with the latter trying to persuade the former to tame her loose hair.

"You really should tie your hair back, it makes you look sloppy and disheveled when you don't!" Juliana said.

"Are you saying I look sloppy and disheveled?" Eleanor asked combatively.

"No," Juliana replied, "but I am saying your hair would look good tied up."

"I'm not tying it into a bun!" Eleanor replied with a playful laugh.

Seeing that Leon noticed the ladies' friendly disagreement, Lucilius chuckled and said, "I hope you didn't take any of our disagreements back in the meeting room too seriously; we're all friends, so we know how far we can push each other without going too far."

"I wasn't too concerned about it, you seemed like you were keeping everyone in control," Leon stated.

"Good," Lucilius responded. "You know, despite your lack of diplomatic training, it's comforting to know that you not only graduated from the Knight Academy but are also a combat veteran. We don't get many people transferring in who are either..."

"Well, my combat experience isn't as extensive as some, and I didn't *exactly* graduate from the Knight Academy," Leon said.

"What do you mean you didn't graduate? You went through the Academy, and now you're a knight!" Lucilius responded.

"I was supposed to have a two-year-long squireship after my time in the Academy. The Consul of the North sped that up by knighting me barely a month into said squireship, and essentially forced the both of us to give the Academy the finger in the process," Leon explained.

"Hmm. Good to know, I'm not as well-versed on many aspects of the Legion as I'd like to be. In fact, I don't think many people here have ever been in a fight, and even less have been through any of the myriad knight academies around the Kingdom, let alone *the* Knight Academy. Having you here will bring in some valuable new experiences to our corps."

"Huh," Leon said with some slight confusion. He, Alix, and Lucilius had passed through the lounge by this point and arrived at the magical lift, and Lucilius immediately took them down toward the entrance hall.

"I would have thought that the Diplomatic Corps would be a post that many nobles would strive for," Leon continued on the way down. "Being assigned here seems prestigious enough, and there are more than a few high-ranking knights around..."

"It's certainly prestigious, but not in the same way that leading soldiers into battle is prestigious," Lucilius explained. "Negotiating the finer points of a trade agreement doesn't have the same visceral satisfaction as swinging a sword into a monster's face or stabbing a power-mad mage in the chest. It also requires a lot of sitting in tight, stuffy rooms with many boring people."

Leon frowned. The magical lift arrived on the ground floor, and Lucilius started to lead him and Alix back to the residential building.

"Would you two like to get lunch with me? The chefs in the residential building really know their business."

"Sure!" Leon and Alix answered in unison.

"I didn't even know there was a cafeteria in the place!" Alix said with glee.

"It's not quite a cafeteria, despite the name; think more in line with a private restaurant," Lucilius said.

As they walked, Leon picked up from where their talk ended, saying, "I think this corps is probably more influential than being a Centurion or Tribune, as a trade agreement or non-aggression pact will change the Kingdom in ways that a low or mid-ranked commander never could."

"I'm glad you see it that way," Lucilius said with a smile. "However, I've been working as a diplomat for over forty years now and have brokered no shortage of agreements between our Kingdom and various other parties. In doing so, I have won no medals or ribbons, and no triumphs have been held in my honor. A diplomat's job is honorable and influential, but it doesn't afford the glory and prestige that most young people yearn for, I'm afraid."

Leon went quiet for a little while. Their conversation was certainly giving him plenty to think about.

[Xaphan,] he said.

[What is it?] the demon asked.

[Is your pride marred by my working in the Diplomatic Corps?]

[Not at all, young mage. I'd say that those who perform the diplomatic jobs aren't appreciated nearly enough by most of those they serve. I know that I certainly relied heavily upon my own subordinates who could speak well when I was back in the Void, and I doubt I gave them enough recognition for their work.]

[He's right, though,] Leon stated. [There's a small part of me that's regretting not simply getting in contact with Roland and asking to join his retinue, or at least asking for a more dangerous and glorious post from the Consul of the North.]

[Isn't that Roland guy someone who might be trying to kill you?] Xaphan asked incredulously.

[Maybe...] Leon muttered. [My gut says no, but he's certainly connected to someone who took part in my father's murder so it's best not to take the chance.]

[Then you didn't make a mistake; you're right where you should be. Never consider joining anyone that puts either of us at risk!]

Leon sighed. He knew Xaphan was right, but those 'what ifs' weren't too far from his mind. Still, he pushed them as far away as he could and returned his attention to Lucilius and Alix.

"Well, I think that's enough on that topic," Lucilius said as they entered the residential building. "Let's move on to something more interesting. More specifically, I'd like to know more about you, miss Alix."

“Me?” Alix asked a little nervously. “I’m no one, Sir, just a village girl from the Northern Territories...”

“You’re a Legion veteran, a soldier who survived a battle that was stacked heavily against you!” Lucilius said. “Besides, you weren’t given that great of an introduction, and I must admit that I’m a little curious about you.”

Lucilius eventually managed to get Alix to talk a little more about herself, much to the latter’s embarrassment. The three had a pleasant lunch together, and when it was over, Lucilius departed back to the diplomatic building, while instructing Leon and Alix to report back to the meeting room at the same time the following morning, just in case there was any work they needed to do. He assured them that there probably wasn’t going to be any, but to check in regardless.

Chapter 177: Magic Senses

Leon breathed deep, allowing his magic to flow unimpeded throughout his body. He’d been a fourth-tier mage now for over a month, but he still reveled in the feeling of control over the magic power he now had—he could feel every single drop of mana within him and knew that he could manipulate it in ways that he never could have when he was only a third-tier mage.

After separating from Lucilius, Leon and Alix returned to their rooms and spent some time in combat training. Alix was growing quite proficient with her sword, and with her diligent use of the breathing techniques Leon taught her, she was getting closer to ascending to the second-tier.

Leon himself could feel the progress he was making, as the amount he could compress his magic power was growing at an almost noticeable rate. He called forth his power to do so again, letting it fill his chest until it felt like he was about to burst, then he began to compress. He’d learned in the past couple of weeks that compressing his magic was far more about control than it was about strength, so he tried to compress as fast as he could without straining himself. It was still difficult, and the more he compressed, the wilder and more uncontrollable the ball of magic became, but he held on as long as he could.

Finally, when he could take the pressure no longer, he allowed the compressed magic to burst out of his chest. However, he didn’t just let it go wherever it pleased, he sent it hurtling down his arms as fast as it could. His muscles bulged and his veins and arteries almost glowed from the magic power, but it still wasn’t enough to conjure lightning.

Looking up at a nearby clock in his bedroom, Leon noted that he had been practicing his lightning techniques for about an hour and a half, so he switched over to practicing fire. He gathered as much of his power as he could, compressing it as needed to fit more in his chest, then he allowed it to slowly leak out and fill his body. Xaphan had told him that the magic in his chest was like an inner fire, and the magic should leak out like heat radiating from that fire, to slowly fill his body. Again, Leon wasn’t able to conjure any fire, but after another hour and a half of training, he was satisfied with his results.

[Xaphan, I’m ready now,] Leon said after a ten-minute water break.

[Finally!] the demon exclaimed. [I’ve been sitting here bored as hell!]

[Sorry to hear that, but there isn’t much I can do about your boredom,] Leon replied.

[You can hurry up to the sixth-tier, so you can start building your mind palace! At least then I won’t have to sit here like an ass on your diminutive little rock!]

[I'll have my proper magic body then, too, so I'll be able to enter my soul realm and give you a few good hits for your disparaging remarks,] Leon said, relishing every word as he thought about the possibilities.

[Your empty threat is empty,] Xaphan drily remarked. [Form your magic body first, and then *maybe* I'll take you seriously.]

[To that end, I think it's about time we got started on magic senses, no?] Leon said.

[Right. Get yourself situated, this'll be easier for the time being if you're not moving. You'll need to learn how to project your magic senses when moving, but for now, sitting down is fine.]

Leon was already sitting down, so he said, [I get that, so let's just get on with it.]

[Patience is a virtue, young mage,] Xaphan said with a mocking sage-like tone.

[I prefer brevity,] Leon countered.

Xaphan sighed, then continued, [All right, so the key to magic senses is to understand that they're an active power, not a passive power—you must consciously use them, they're not like your eyes or ears that are always on.]

[Right.]

[So, summon up your magic power, and channel it into your brain and spine. Do it slowly, straining something in either of those places would mean suffering a nightmarish injury. Show a little patience and keep a tight control over your power.]

Leon did as instructed, allowing his power to slowly pour into his head and back. He'd done this sort of thing often enough when training to ascend to the fourth-tier, but now that he had, he could do significantly more damage to himself if he wasn't careful and re-learned the process.

[What's next?] Leon asked as he continued to concentrate his magic power in the key areas.

[This will be incredibly difficult for you, as a fourth-tier mage, so temper any expectations you might have,] Xaphan reminded.

[I'm hoping for at least five feet—if I'm able to get a handle on this technique before I ascend to the fifth-tier...] Leon responded.

[Not an unrealistic expectation,] Xaphan admitted.

[Moving on...] Leon said, urging Xaphan onward.

[Moving on, then. On a fundamental level, magic senses aren't that different from your aura; the key here is that your aura—the magic you emit unconsciously—is something that you have to actively hold in, and once emitted it's essentially out of your control.]

[So I have to project my aura?] Leon asked.

[Yes, but in a controlled way. Project your magic, let it slowly pulse, and you should feel what I can only describe as 'resonance' with the power within your spine.]

Leon did as instructed and tried to push his magic out of his body. This wasn't nearly as easy as Xaphan made it sound, and after several minutes, Leon hadn't managed it at all.

[This is something that tends to come naturally to fifth-tier mages, though their range will rarely grow beyond forty or fifty feet,] Xaphan explained. [You'll get a hold over this power eventually.]

[You say that as if I was about to give up,] Leon said. [I've only given this a few minutes of effort, I'm not done yet!]

Leon spent the next hour or so attempting to project his magic senses, but if it were so easy to do, it wouldn't be a power associated with fifth-tier mages; he was unsuccessful in his efforts, but he at least had an idea of what to train and how.

[Oh, what a shock, you couldn't manage to pull it off,] Xaphan sarcastically mocked.

[Funny, I don't recall ever saying I would,] Leon calmly replied. [I've been practicing for an hour! I'll get it down eventually, no doubt in my mind about that, I just have to keep working at it.]

Xaphan was quiet for a moment, eventually saying, [... You know, young human, it's not satisfying mocking you when *that's* how you react...]

Leon burst out with a few laughs so strong that he almost snorted. [You know, demon, there's something I've been wanting to ask you for a while, now.]

[What is it?]

[Are all demons like you?]

['Like me' can mean quite a few things; be more specific,] Xaphan demanded.

[Well, the stories my father told me, and from what I could glean from books, demons are hardly the most friendly of creatures. And yet, you don't really treat me that bad, you're plenty willing to talk to me, and not just about things that concern you. You don't fit into the mold of what I've been taught, and I'm wondering if what I was taught was wrong.]

[Well, that makes me curious, young mage; according to your own preconceptions, how am I, a demon of flame revered as a mighty Lord of Flame, supposed to act?]

[I guess, aloof? Distant, not speaking much, always trying to impress your will upon others. Oh, and haughty beyond measure, along with a tremendous helping of pride and arrogance—though, I'd say you have the latter parts down pat.]

[Hmm,] Xaphan murmured. He took a few moments to think a while before he gave his answer. [... No, most demons are nothing like me. In fact, you're not too far off the mark, especially with the haughty and arrogant parts. Most demons are incredibly prideful, and why shouldn't they be? Humans kill each other in droves just to obtain fragments of our power! Arrogance and a sense of entitlement is, I think, something to be expected from a demon when so pursued.]

[You can add a certain amount of self-awareness to the list of traits I didn't think a demon would possess,] Leon quietly added.

[I've had a *long* time to think about these things, young mage. I'm old enough that those eighty thousand years I spent in that prison was hardly much compared to the entire breadth of my life, but I would never call it an insignificant amount of time. Other demons are arrogant, but most demons don't spend eighty thousand years trapped by those who summoned them. They don't spend millennia humiliated by members of one of the most powerful Nexus clans in existence! They don't have to suffer the indignity of having your life and liberty demanded as payment to be free of your restraints!]

Leon's eyes widened in slight alarm, as he could feel Xaphan's mounting rage. He had no idea what he was unleashing when he asked his question, but he also felt like this might have been something that his demonic partner might have been holding in. And now that he had started to release some of his frustration, Xaphan wasn't stopping.

[I was imprisoned! Forced to kneel to my captors! Deprived of all movement! My power was leached away to help power the prison's enchantments, so that I was still useful to them, even in my refusal! And, because I continued to reject their contract demands, they abandoned me! They *forgot* about me!]

Xaphan seemed to stop for breath here, and Leon didn't even try to interrupt.

[I'm different, young mage, because I have had a *long* time to reflect on my life. What once interested me, the dogged pursuit of power at all costs, no longer holds the same charms. I will regain my old strength, and I *will* reclaim my Lordship, but it will be at *my own* pace! No one will ever dictate to me how I should live! I will take life as it comes and enjoy it when it does. I'm different, young mage, because there are things I want to enjoy. I will not take what few freedoms I still possess for granted ever again.]

Silence fell between the two after Xaphan's rant. The demon's words gave Leon some things to think about, and drove all thoughts of training from his head.

[Well, I think that certainly answers my question,] Leon muttered.

[I guess,] Xaphan said. [Also, don't forget that we forged a bond, formally acknowledging the other as our equal. With that bond comes understanding, and with understanding, a feeling of familiarity. With that familiarity comes more understanding, and it makes relaxation around each other easy. For as long as this contract remains to bind us together, Leon, I will always know you better than anyone else, just as you will know me better than anyone.]

[I don't really know that much about you, though,] Leon responded.

[I'm not talking about personal history, or the names of our parents, or other asinine facts like that. What I *am* talking about are emotions, what we feel, when we feel, and why. If something makes us happy, then we both experience it, to a degree. If something infuriates one of us, then the other will feel that anger and fury as our own. That makes it hard to not be familiar with each other.]

[Makes sense,] Leon said. He'd certainly felt more than a few of Xaphan's emotions on multiple occasions, and it was easy for him to guess that Xaphan felt some of his. [Out of curiosity, demon, how is the recovery of your power going? Need any terrible and painful potions?]

[Not at the moment, but that could change,] Xaphan answered. [For now, just continue to gain power in your own right. I'm rebuilding my own power base, and the more power you have, the more I can use to heal.]

[A candid answer, as expected,] Leon said with a chuckle. And with his questions answered, he and Xaphan fell back into silence. Leon continued to sit there not doing anything for a few more minutes before he turned his attention back to his training.

Chapter 178: Diplomatic Mission

Over the next couple of weeks, Leon and Alix were allowed to do their own thing for the most part, which mostly consisted of Leon getting the two to stay in their room and train. They were taken around to meet many of Aquillius' other subordinate diplomats, but that hardly took much out of their day, so there was plenty of time to also explore the city and the citadel.

But, the relatively laidback days quickly came to an end the morning that Aquillius and his team were to depart for the Border Mountains, with Leon and Alix in tow. To that end, the two left their rooms early in the morning, ate a hearty breakfast in the private cafeteria, then made their way over to the neighboring building. They had spent the previous day packing, but since they were only scheduled to be gone for a week at most, their packs were fairly light.

However, Leon had also done some work on cleaning and polishing up his armor, so the black Magmic Steel gleamed in the light of the morning sun. He hadn't gotten around to doing any more enchanting work on the armor, but he'd made the time to inscribe the bow over his shoulder with three runes forming an enchantment that more than doubled his effective range.

There was a dedicated room on the ground floor of the diplomatic building for gathering a team together before departing. When Leon and Alix arrived, the entire team save for Lucilius had beaten them there. Aquillius was near the front, chatting with Eleanor, Juliana, and Antonius, while their squires and the one hundred-man company that would act as their guards were sitting on the ground and resting up before the mission got underway. Just behind the soldiers were three wheel-less carts loaded with supplies, including the presents that had been bought for the giant chieftains.

"Sir Leon! Miss Alix!" Aquillius called out once he saw the two. Leon walked over and joined the conversing knights, while Alix took a seat next to the other squires.

"Ready for your first diplomatic expedition?" Eleanor asked Leon with an encouraging smile.

"As I'll ever be," Leon answered.

"You made it through a Valeman invasion, I think you can handle some reasonably friendly giants," Antonius said.

"We're going to get moving as soon as Lucilius arrives," Aquillius said. "I sent him off to finish a few last bits of paperwork to inform Prince Trajan of our departure, and he should be back shortly."

Leon guessed the second part of Aquillius' statement was for his benefit, as he couldn't imagine the others didn't know where Lucilius was.

"Is there anything in particular I should be on the watch for in the Border Mountains?" Leon asked.

“Hmm,” Antonius said with a thoughtful expression. “There aren’t a lot of predatory creatures up there, but there is the odd mountain lion and a great many griffins. They *rarely* mess with humans, so no particular need to watch out for them. The real threat in those mountains are the stone giants, and I’m not expecting them to give us too much trouble.”

Leon nodded, feeling some slight relief. The Frozen Mountains in the north were exceptionally dangerous, being filled with all manner of monstrous beings, and so Leon had long since come to associate mountains with grave danger. Still, he didn’t imagine he’d be getting too much sleep until they returned to the Horns despite Antonius’ assurances.

About fifteen minutes after Leon and Alix arrived, Lucilius returned. As he handed a few papers to Aquillius, all of the resting soldiers and squires got to their feet and started to pick up their packs. Several soldiers tossed their things onto the carts and grabbed a pair of handles on the sides. The giant air runes carved onto the bottom of the carts made them almost trivial to transport, despite their heavy load. However, Leon did note that the soldiers didn’t look too happy to be pushing carts, regardless of how easy it was.

After another couple of minutes, Aquillius turned to the entire group and said, “Let’s get moving!” He then led the knights and their squires out the front door while the soldiers and the carts went out the back.

“Are we not going as one group?” Leon asked curiously, seeing the soldiers departing through a different door.

“The carts won’t fit through the front, and a sixth-tier knight is hardly going to go out the back, is he?” Eleanor whispered.

“We’ll meet up again outside the citadel,” Juliana curtly added.

“The walls extend from here all the way to the Northern Horn, so we’ll be walking across its battlements to reach the Border Mountains,” Lucilius explained.

Leon blinked in confusion and asked, “How big are the walls that they allow for foot traffic?!”

“The last wall is the biggest at seventy feet tall and more than forty wide,” Lucilius answered. “More than wide enough for us to walk across.”

Leon had to agree, thinking to himself, *‘Forty feet wide might as well be a raised road instead of a wall!’*

The group made their way through the streets and open baileys of the citadel until they found themselves at the northern gate. As he did upon arrival at the port of Ariminum, he marveled at the tremendous defenses of the Bull’s Horns. The north side of the hill had been sculpted by earth mages into a mesa-like formation, so the group had to pass through two massive portcullises defended by an equally massive gatehouse, across a drawbridge to a tall tower, then take a hard right and over another drawbridge to reach the top of the wall. They had to pass through two additional portcullises in the tower, and another two portcullises in the gatehouse on the wall. Looking back, Leon could see that there weren’t any other gates on the north side of the citadel, leaving that one deathtrap of a route to get past the citadel’s walls.

But, once they were past all those bridges and portcullises, they were on the wall. Unlike the black stone of the palatial keep in the citadel or the whitewashed limestone bricks of the diplomatic building, the entire wall had been constructed out of concrete mixed with volcanic ash. This made it extremely strong, as well as resistant to most fire magic, which was the element of choice for most besieging armies when trying to penetrate walls.

Leon's previous thought of the wall almost being a raised road wasn't too off the mark, as there was a clear path made of light grey stone tiles running down the center of the dark grey ramparts for people to walk along. Taking a glance over the east side of the wall, Leon could see the other two walls that formed the border of the Bull Kingdom. There were only about thirty or forty feet between the walls, and each one was shorter than the one directly to its west, allowing each wall to fire down upon the one to its east if an enemy ever managed to seize one of them. Leon also noted battlements on both sides of the ramparts in case an enemy were to gain access to the area between the walls, as well as small machicolations for archers to shoot anyone at the foot of the wall.

"This place really has been fortified..." Leon said.

Hearing him, Antonius said, "Of course it has! What you see is the cumulative efforts of more than a thousand years of hard work! I don't think there's a Kingdom in Aeterna who could make it past these walls!"

"Careful there, buddy," Lucilius cautioned, "saying such a definitive thing all but guarantees that our defenses will be breached!"

"Since when were you so superstitious? Oh, don't look now, Luc, but I think I see a cracked mirror!" Antonius sarcastically responded.

The group continued on, walking the entire five-mile length of the wall in about an hour and a half. They passed through dozens of towers that doubled as gatehouses and Leon saw that there were thousands of men on the wall—the Legion clearly wasn't understaffing this place as they had at Fort 127.

The Northern Horn was much the same as the Southern Horn, only without the city. The main castle was up on a large hill close to the mountains sculpted into a mesa, and within its gigantic walls were more than a dozen baileys forming what might as well have been a small city by itself. From what little he could see of it as Aquillius' group passed through, the only thing that was missing from the Northern Horn that the Southern Horn had was the titanic palatial keep and the diplomatic building.

By noon, the group had made it all the way to the western gates of the Northern Horn. Leaving the northern half of the fortress was just as much of a chore as entering the Southern Horn had been, with multiple portcullises, gatehouses, and drawbridges, as well as a long concrete ramp down to the plain between the Horns, interspersed with yet more gatehouses. But, once they were through, they were finally close enough to the Border Mountains for Leon and Alix to get a good look at them.

Immediately, Leon found some of his assumptions being challenged, as the Border Mountains barely resembled the Frozen Mountains that he knew so well. Instead of great boulders, immense lumps of earth, snowy peaks, and the occasional mountain forest, the Border Mountains were comprised of millions of towering hexagonal basalt pillars. Most were fused and twisted together, forming steep cliffs and deep crevices.

The group halted near the bottom of the ramp and waited for the supplies and Antonius' company of soldiers to catch up. Fortunately, they only had to wait for a few minutes before the carts and soldiers appeared on the road heading toward the ramp.

"Is everyone here?" Antonius asked the company Centurion, who responded in the affirmative. "Good, then get those supplies off the carts and let's get into those mountains!"

The soldiers grumbled a little about being used as pack mules, but they did as ordered and started to unload the carts and carry everything themselves. The carts were left at a Legion post house near the ramp and the group started walking into the mountains.

They barely walked a quarter mile before the dirt and grass beneath Leon's feet gave way to the hexagonal basalt pillars, which were short enough to almost be steps leading upward. However, there was a large amount of winding the group had to do in order to keep going, as there were many taller pillars forming sheer cliffs that blocked their way.

An hour into their trek, they entered the mountains themselves. There was some dirt here and there with weeds and grass, but for the most part, the only thing that could be seen were black pillars. Their path was rough and narrow, only allowing for one person to continue at a time in many places. More often than he cared to count, Leon had to proceed with one shoulder pressed up against a cliff, and the other hanging over the dark abyss of a deep crevice.

Eventually, the group arrived at the top of a mountain where the pillars formed a reasonably flat surface and stopped. Leon noticed six particularly large pillars on the rim of the mountaintop that didn't look natural.

Seeing Leon walk up to one for examination, Aquillius said, "This is where we're meeting the giants. It's a meeting place they established to be neutral ground and is actually where we met for our first talks."

"I thought these looked a little out of place," Leon said as he reached out and lightly touched one of the large pillars.

Just as his fingers brushed up against the pillar, the group heard a deep rumbling coming from somewhere in the cliffs further down the mountain. For a moment, Leon thought that he had accidentally caused something to happen, especially when, several minutes later, the ground began to shake. He quickly stepped back away from the pillar and started to look around with a not insignificant amount of panic, but he quickly calmed himself when the diplomats seemed completely unfazed.

"The stone giants are coming," Aquillius said, casting his gaze down the mountain at a specific rocky passage between the cliffs.

Leon followed his eyes and saw, emerging from the crevice, six stone giants appear.

Chapter 179: The Crater

Much like the Border Mountains themselves, the Stone Giants looked nothing like Leon imagined. He'd thought they would appear to be extremely similar to humans, only much taller and with an exterior similar to when an earth mage uses their magic to harden their skin into stone.

However, the six Giants that emerged from the dark crevice only resembled humans in the most general sense; they had two arms, walked on two legs, and had a 'head', but they lacked visible sensory organs. Their bodies were entirely made up of boulders that groaned and crunched with the Giants' every move, creating a noise that reminded Leon of a distant avalanche. Their height also greatly varied; the smallest being around ten feet tall, and the tallest towering over the rest at what Leon estimated to be more than twenty feet.

The Giants moved relatively slowly, with the ground shaking beneath their every step communicating their immense weight and power. As they walked closer, Leon tried to see if there was anything between the boulders that made up their body, but he couldn't see anything; the Stone Giants appeared to actually be big stones stacked in a bipedal form and somehow animated.

'What are *these things*?!' Leon asked himself as he stared at the great lumbering creatures. After a few brief moments, he decided to ask that question to Xaphan.

[Hmm,] the demon thought. [It's hard to say without taking some time to properly study them, but I'd guess that those things are earth wisps inhabiting stone bodies. Just a guess, though, it's not like I'm the font of all knowledge, despite my undeniable greatness.]

[An 'earth wisp'? What's that?] Leon asked. He remembered Xaphan saying something about wisps before, back when he saw the bronze golems in his family's archives beneath the palace in Teira, but with the flight from the archives, Leon had completely forgotten about it until now.

[A sufficiently powerful mage can split off a portion of their power and use it to animate some kind of artificial body, like a suit of armor or something. However, it requires an *extreme* amount of power to do so, enough that I doubt anyone on *this* plane could ever hope to create one. Anyway, if the wisp is left in its body for long enough, it can potentially develop a modicum of self-awareness and sentience. If I could hazard a guess, I'd say that's what these Giants are.]

[So there might be some cataclysmically powerful mage creating these Giants?] Leon asked, his eyes starting to widen in panic and his hand starting to twitch closer to his sword.

[Mmmmm, not likely,] Xaphan answered. [Creating a wisp and allowing it to grow to full sentience is a lot like creating life, which is why it requires a mage of extreme strength to do so. I've never done it, as I've never had the need to, but I've heard stories that occasionally these wisps grow smarter and eventually figure out how to reproduce.]

[And that's what these Stone Giants are? Self-aware wisps of magical power capable of thought and reproduction?] Leon asked.

[That's indeed what I suspect they are. Probably left over constructs from when your Thunderbird Clan was here. The mage that created them is probably dead, and the constructs slowly developed self-awareness over the resulting millennia, creating the Giants you see before you.]

The massive Stone Giants continued to lumber forward until they arrived at the mountaintop. There, they stood motionless, creating the same atmosphere as if they were staring unblinkingly at the hundred or so soldiers and diplomats.

Aquillius walked forward and said, “Lapis! It’s good to see you again, my friend!” His tone was light and seemed to Leon to be genuinely happy and cheerful, but given that it was a diplomat speaking, Leon took his impression with a grain of salt.

The giant responded with a series of low rumblings that sounded like rocks crushing and grinding against each other, which Leon had no hope of understanding.

Aquillius, however, seemed to understand the giant perfectly fine, as he laughed good-naturedly and said, “We’re committed to peace between our peoples! Something like that is hardly enough to scare us off!”

The Giant rumbled again, then it and its comrades turned to start walking back toward the crevice.

“Let’s go!” Aquillius ordered, and the entire group started following.

The mountaintop was relatively flat and open, but the crevice was much narrower, though still big enough to allow the largest Giant. Still, the group only entered two or three at a time, and Leon noticed that the diplomats were spreading themselves out among the soldiers. Aquillius led the group accompanied by the company Centurion and a Prefect, Lucilius walked with Antonius in the center of the group, and Eleanor and Juliana walked near the rear with the other two Prefects.

Most of the diplomats’ squires joined Lucilius and Antonius in the center, but Leon and Alix walked near the back, just ahead of Eleanor and Juliana.

“This is so cool!” Alix gushed to Leon. “It feels like we’re on our way to a hidden village!”

“A hidden village filled with Giants made of stone that could crush us all with little effort,” Leon cynically reminded her.

“They don’t seem that scary to me... Besides, Sir Aquillius and Sir Lucilius have stated multiple times that they’ve made a great deal of progress with them, so there shouldn’t be any violence,” Alix said.

“What should be and what is aren’t always related,” Leon countered. “Look, just don’t let your guard down too much until there’s an actual non-aggression pact in place. Until then, there’s no guarantee that the Giants will remain so cordial.”

“You *really* need to lighten up,” Alix stated with a slight pout.

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m certainly excited to see where we’re going,” Leon said, “but I’m also trying not to make any assumptions that might put us in danger. I’d rather any surprise I suffer to be pleasant, as opposed to not.”

From behind them, Eleanor spoke up, saying, “A wise policy, but don’t forget that levity always has its time, and it’s oftentimes best to take the opportunity to relax when it presents itself.”

“Levity is all well and good,” Juliana said, glancing over at Eleanor as she did, “but so is caution. Technically speaking, we’re still walking into enemy territory, at least until our non-aggression pact is finalized.”

The two lady knights then began a heated debate over whether they should be cautious, or relaxed. After walking a mile into the crevice, neither had managed to gain any ground against the other and yet

they argued with such passion that Leon and Alix were hardly able to get a word in edgewise. Eventually, the latter two simply accepted that they were no longer a part of the conversation and turned their attention back to their surroundings.

The crevice eventually turned into a long tunnel. The walls weren't smooth and had a kind of zig-zag pattern from the hexagonal basalt pillars that were present even here. The ceiling was more than three stories tall, and the Giants had built the tunnel in such a way as to leave the ceiling stylishly vaulted from the remains of cut pillars.

The group continued down this tunnel for more than half an hour. Leon was starting to wonder just how long it was when he saw a faint light at the end. That light was the exit, and it opened onto a platform that overlooked an enormous crater in the side of a basalt mountain.

The platform was more than large enough for the hundred soldiers, diplomats, and Giants, and the group paused there to wait. Leon and Alix took the opportunity to walk closer to the edge, as the view was spectacular, and they wanted to drink it in—despite Leon's words about remaining cautious.

The crater was deep and unnatural; it seemed to be entirely of the Giants' making, as it was a long oval shape and had hundreds of caves cut into its sides. But, to call them caves would be something of an understatement, as they had elaborate entrances that suggested something more than just a dark damp cave, something closer to a bright, spacious, and comfortable home cut into the side of the mountain. Many of the entrances had covered stone porches, with the coverings held up by gigantic pillars covered in the giant's strange script.

Leon soaked in the sight, but when his eyes drifted down to the bottom of the crater, he froze. He saw a large formation of pillars serving as the foundation for a building that, based on the architecture, anyone could tell hadn't been built by the Giants. However, Leon didn't need to compare architectural styles to know that the building hadn't been built by the Giants, as it was possessed of a style familiar to him.

It had been built in the shape of a cross, with an enormous dome at the center and entirely made up of black granite. There was an entrance at each end of the cross, sealed with a trapezoidal plate made of grey metal that had a gently blinking dark red runic circle in the center. However, the building wasn't in great shape, as the roof had a great many dents and damage marks and one entire branch of the cross had collapsed.

Around the edges of the entrances were friezes and sculptures that Leon had to squint and channel some magic into his eyes to see, but he could tell were depictions of numerous birds of prey. In several other places around the building and on the roof above the entrances were huge stone statues, each showing a predatory bird in a different pose. Some of the statues had been broken when portions of the building collapsed or worn down with age, but Leon could still tell what they were supposed to be: Thunderbirds.

"What is *that* place...?" Leon wondered aloud.

Aquillius, who was not too far away, heard him and came over. He quickly placed his hand on Leon's shoulder and said, "Stay away from that place, Sir Leon. The Giants call it something like 'The Cradle', and it is an extreme taboo for them. If any outsider were to approach, the Giants would fly into a rage and kill them instantly."

"I see..." Leon muttered, but his eyes never left the building, and he began to unconsciously rub the ring of invisibility on his finger. He had already made the decision to investigate the ruined building at the first opportunity, despite Aquillius' warning and direct order to stay away.

While they were staring at the building, another group of Giants approached. Leon was able to easily guess that the Giant leading them was someone important, as its limbs were studded with thousands of tiny rubies and flecks of gold.

Aquillius hurried over to the giant while saying, "Rakos! Wonderful to see you, it's been too long!"

The giant responded with its deep and rumbling voice, then turned around and began to walk away. Aquillius turned and gestured to the rest of the group, indicating that they should follow this important giant.

"I'm guessing that's the chief of the Giants?" Alix asked, whispering to Eleanor.

"Chief of this tribe of Giants," Eleanor corrected. "There are dozens of tribes in the Border Mountains, but this one is the closest and arguably the most powerful of the tribes for hundreds of miles. Many of the other nearby tribes are even subordinate to this one, which is the main reason why we're here instead of somewhere else."

As he listened to this, Leon glanced over the side of the platform again. When he'd heard that the Giants had formed tribes, he'd been expecting something akin to the Valeman tribes, but the architecture and building materials, at least, gave Leon enough of an impression of organized civilization that he wouldn't describe the Giants as tribal. He had to admit, though, that he hadn't much of an idea of how the Giants governed themselves. He'd been assured in the last few weeks, though, that had he arrived a few weeks before he'd have gotten a comprehensive briefing on the situation, instead of just a crash course in the Diplomatic Corps' standard practices.

Along the edges of the steep crater were pillars that had been cut into stairs, facilitating travel between clusters of cave-houses. Since they had been sized for Giants, even the narrowest set of stairs were several dozen feet wide, making for a relatively comfortable journey for Aquillius' party. They eventually arrived at the bottom of the crater, with the raised platform the Cradle was on to one side, and the crater wall to the other. Here, the largest and grandest of the cave-houses was found.

This was the home of the Giant chief. The roof over the doorway was supported by more than a dozen pillars, and many pillars more had been left artfully cut in a half-circle around the door, with the shortest pillars up front and the taller decorative pillars closer to the door. The door itself was an enormous slab of black basalt and looked like it weighed more than all of Aquillius' party combined, but the Giant chief pushed it open with apparent ease.

Leon clenched his teeth at the show of strength. It may not have been the chief's intention, but it clearly demonstrated its titanic strength that far exceeded even Leon's own fourth-tier strength. This gave Leon the impression, despite his inability to read most of the Stone Giants' auras, that the chief was probably stronger than even Aquillius, the only sixth-tier mage in the entire party.

The group hurried inside, and Leon was in for another surprise, as the immense entry hall had been built in an enormous trapezoidal shape, extremely reminiscent of Xaphan's prison and his family's archives, if fairly crude. There weren't any bright white fires lit in the bottom corners—Leon guessed this was

because the Giants didn't have eyes—and there were dozens more hexagonal pillars holding up the crater wall above them along the upper corners of the trapezoid.

The group was escorted about a quarter mile underground. The hall was staggeringly large and much longer than a quarter mile, but that was where their guest rooms were. The guest room had been built for visiting Giant Chiefs, so there was more than enough space for the entire group to comfortably set up camp.

"Rest up," Aquillius said. "We'll be speaking with Rakos again in several hours, and it'll be all business for a long while, so don't plan on getting much rest tonight."

Leon's thoughts turned back to the Cradle. He, for one, wasn't planning on getting any sleep that night, as it was an enormous building and just begging for some exploration.

Chapter 180: Exploring the Crater

[This place is truly *awful*,] Xaphan remarked.

[Too much like that prison?] Leon asked.

[Too much like that *fucking* prison...] Xaphan muttered.

[Well, we'll only be here a few days,] Leon said.

[But there's still the worst place to see before we can go,] Xaphan said bitterly, causing Leon to frown a little. [Whatever,] Xaphan continued, [don't mind me, do what you will.]

Leon could understand Xaphan's antipathy for the Giants' sense of architecture, as they seemed quite taken with the trapezoidal hallways he'd seen in the prison and archives. This extended to more than just their hallways, too, as much of the furniture the Giants built for themselves had slightly wider bases to ape that style. Of course, it was all built out of black and grey basalt and the odd piece of shiny granite rather than the clean grey metal of the prison, but Xaphan still couldn't help but hate that shape.

But the demon would have to suck it up, as there was no way Leon was going to miss out on the chance to explore the Cradle, no matter what the Stone Giants had to say about it. However, he wouldn't be able to go anytime soon, as the diplomats had gone into a flurry of activity upon getting settled into the guest room in Rakos' hall. Alix and all of the diplomats' squires were organizing papers and putting the finishing touches on the sleeping arrangements while Leon and the diplomats were sitting around a table going over their negotiation strategy—as well as giving Leon a late introduction to Giant politics.

"The Stone Giants are relatively simple, politically speaking," Aquillius explained to Leon. "Rakos is their Chief, though I suppose it might be more correct to translate their word for his title as 'King', but our official word is 'Chief'. Here in this crater, his word is law."

Picking up on something Aquillius just said, Leon asked, "Is it 'he'? Do Stone Giants even have definable sexes or genders?"

"Oh," Aquillius said, slightly surprised at Leon's question. "Actually, I don't think they do. I just said 'he' because it's easier, I suppose. Regardless, you are to treat Rakos like royalty, even if you don't follow his directives."

“Got it,” Leon responded.

“Good. We call this the ‘Crater Tribe,’ and it has more than eight subordinate tribes of Giants underneath it. They collect tribute from these subordinate Giants, though we’re not sure what form that takes. It could be the reason for many of the raids on the Eastern Territories is these subordinate tribes need to pay tribute to the Crater Tribe, but again, we’re not quite sure. I do know that the occasional human slaves they take certainly aren’t kept here...”

“I would suppose any slaves they take wouldn’t last long here,” Leon said. “There are hardly many farms in the area, so what would they eat?”

“A good point,” Aquillius replied with a smile, glad to see that Leon was thinking about the problem. “Assuming we’re able to clinch this non-aggression pact, the next treaty we hope to get with the Crater Tribe is the repatriation of these taken slaves, if any are still breathing.”

“Would this non-aggression pact with the Crater Tribe extend to the subordinate tribes?” Leon asked.

Rather than Aquillius, it was Lucilius who replied, “Yes. You can think of these subordinate tribes as a lot like the noble vassals of the Bull King: semi-independent, but still subject to the decrees of the Crater Tribe. If Rakos orders them not to attack our Eastern Territories, then attack our Eastern Territories they will not.”

“Mmm,” Leon hummed, absorbing this quick briefing as best as he could.

“We would’ve given you a much more comprehensive briefing if time allowed,” Aquillius said, “but unfortunately, you came to us quite late. So, we’re going to have to leave this where it is for now. Sir Lucilius, I’m going to put you in charge of getting Sir Leon up to speed once we return to the Horns.”

“Yes, Sir!” Lucilius responded.

“Good. Now, it’s getting to be about time for us to meet with the Giants, make our formal introductions, and give our gifts. This should probably take three or four hours. We’ll convene here afterward and go over our agenda for the next few days.”

Everyone nodded in acknowledgment of Aquillius’ schedule, and soon enough, a Stone Giant opened the door of their guest room and it was time for them to go. The soldiers stayed in the room, while the diplomats and their squires departed. Their destination was the throne room at the end of the hall, with a throne carved out of the same trap rock pillars that the mountains were made of, and merging seamlessly into the gigantic wall behind it. This wall sparkled with bits of granite, and the pillars were warped and distorted, creating spectacular waves of glittering pillars behind the throne.

Upon the throne was Rakos, waiting for them in a pose that Leon honestly didn’t think the Giant could make, given that its body was made entirely out of rock—one arm rested on the throne, while Rakos rested its head on the other. It even had one leg crossed over the other, with what Leon identified as an ankle resting on what passed for Rakos’ knee.

The Giant rumbled in its language as Aquillius slightly bent at the hip with his right hand over his chest and his left hand behind his back in a respectful—but not submissive—bow.

“Chief Rakos,” Aquillius began, “I, Marcus Bellius Aquillius, Knight of the Bull Kingdom, present to you my party...” Aquillius quickly listed off all of the names of the diplomats and their squires. “... and humbly thank you for your generous hospitality.”

The Giant on the throne rumbled again and almost seemed to shudder in laughter. Or at least, so it seemed to Leon. The Giant spoke for several long minutes, occasionally gesturing with its enormous arm and causing every ruby embedded in its stony skin to sparkle in the light of the four massive pits of fire flanking the throne and door that illuminated the room.

Leon and the diplomatic party were there for as long as Aquillius guessed, a little over three hours. Aquillius was the only diplomat who spoke, but Rakos’ throne room was filled with several dozen Giants that often quaked and rumbled with their Chief at certain things either Aquillius or Rakos said. Leon tried to follow their conversation as best he could, but since he could only understand Aquillius and Rakos seemed particularly verbose, he quickly found himself lost and struggling to keep his attention focused.

Finally, though, after presenting the gifts of gold and silver to Rakos and several of the stronger Giants in his ‘court’, the diplomatic party left the throne room to return to the guest room.

“Man, how much did those things cost?” Leon heard Lucilius wonder out loud, referring to the gold and silver bands that, to a human, would be an absurdly ostentatious crown, but were barely rings to the Stone Giants.

“If it helps us buy peace, then it doesn’t matter,” Aquillius said, hearing the junior diplomat and shooting him a glare to shut him up until they returned to the guest room.

Lucilius quickly quieted down, but he glanced over at Eleanor, who had arranged for the gifts, and she mouthed, “*More than twenty million.*”

The former diplomat almost reeled in shock at the staggering sum. The Giants had seemed pleased with the gifts, at least.

Aquillius sat all the diplomats down and began their post-introduction meeting. There truly wasn’t much to say, as everyone already knew the agenda, but Aquillius liked to make sure everyone was on the same page. Half an hour later, the meeting was adjourned.

As the other diplomats went their own ways with their squires, Leon quickly caught up to Aquillius before he could disappear somewhere in the enormous guest rooms.

“Sir Aquillius!”

“Sir Leon, is there something you need?” Aquillius asked politely.

“Actually, Sir, there is,” Leon answered.

“What is it?”

“Well, I’m not too comfortable being this far underground, Sir, so I was wondering what the rules were regarding whether or not we could go outside.”

Of course, despite asking this, Leon wasn't going to stay there if Aquillius said he couldn't go for a walk, but it was always better to ask first, he thought. If something went wrong, it would be better if someone knew where he was, and that he had someone's permission to be out there.

Aquillius thought for a moment, weighing the risks. After several quiet moments, he said, "... It... *should* be fine. The Giants here aren't particularly hostile, especially with our negotiations and friendly meetings lately... Sure, you can go outside. Just be sure to be back before... let's say ten o'clock."

"Got it, Sir," Leon agreed. That would only give him about three hours, but they would be there in the crater for several days, so he suppressed his impatience and accepted the time hack.

But, just as Leon was about to end the conversation and head outside, Aquillius said, "Oh, and make sure to check in with me when you get back."

Leon had to fight to keep his face in its usual stoic expression instead of frowning, but he managed a "Yes, Sir."

Aquillius then nodded to him, and Leon turned to go. On the way, he stopped to tell Alix to relax and meditate, and that he'd be back in a few hours. His squire wasn't happy being left behind, but she accepted his order and went back to their tent.

With everything taken care of that needed to be taken care of, Leon hurried out of the door and walked as fast as he could down the hall without seeming suspicious. He passed a few Giants in the hall, and though they gave him odd looks—or, at least, their 'heads' seemed to track him a little—they didn't stop him, and he soon found himself back outside of the hall.

The crater stretched out before him, and he took a few minutes to just stand at the edge of the entryway and admire what the Giants had built. Their 'tribe' was, Leon guessed, as big as the entire noble quarter of the capital, and every cave that the Giants had cut into the walls of the crater would be considered a palatial estate in human civilization. But, Leon hadn't gone outside to sightsee, as he reminded himself when his gaze eventually wandered back to the raised platform in the center of the crater where the Cradle sat waiting for him.

Leon's instinct was to immediately run over and begin his exploration, but there were still plenty of Giants milling around the stairs and platforms around the edge of the crater, despite the sun having set more than an hour before.

'If these things don't go to sleep at night, then this'll not be easy...' Leon thought to himself in dismay. As he thought more about it, he didn't even know if the Giants needed rest at all, let alone stick to a human-like sleep schedule. Needless to say, Leon quickly found himself rubbing the emerald ring on his hand, fighting the urge to disappear right then and there.

The bottom of the crater was a rough and broken landscape, which only grew more so the further away from the crater walls one would go. Leon decided to leisurely stroll around the fissures, crevices, and pillars for a while, and if he felt like he could get away with it, then he'd activate his ring and make for the Cradle. It was only the approach to the Cradle, where the landscape evened out, that was off-limits to outsiders.

He started walking away from Rakos' palace. The entrance was large enough that Leon had no fears of getting lost, as he could simply climb up one of the bigger pillars in the crater and check his bearings—plus, the Cradle platform loomed over everything, so he figured he'd always have a landmark in sight. Leon was grateful for these things, as the center of the crater turned out to be a warren of cracks and crevices in the mass of pillars, and Leon found himself turned around more than once whenever he took his eyes off the Cradle for too long.

There weren't any Giants in the pillar-maze, and the noise of the tribe didn't penetrate that far into the maze. This silence nearly brought a tear of joy to Leon's eye as he felt himself unconsciously relax in the darkness. The only thing he could hear was the sound of his own footsteps on the step-like basalt hexagons beneath him.

After about ten minutes of wandering, Leon realized that he was deep enough in the maze that he could activate his ring and none of the Giants would notice. Or at least, none of them could see him, assuming they had eyes.

He began to channel his magic power into the ring. He hadn't used it since leaving Fort 127, so he was looking forward to seeing how long he could hold the invisibility almost as much as he was looking forward to exploring the Cradle. The emerald flashed green, light bent around him, and he slowly faded from view.

With a smile on his invisible face, Leon began to quickly walk in the direction of the Cradle.

However, barely five minutes before he arrived, a massive shadow passed over him, blocking the moonlight for a brief moment. Leon froze, his first thought being that a Giant had seen him and come to stop him. A few seconds later, he heard a dull thump come from not too far away, and with his eyes now turned to the sky, he saw what had made that shadow: a massive griffin.

He only got a quick glance at the beast, but he could still tell that it was strong and powerful, with an aura that was far too strong for Leon to make an accurate guess as to its relative tier. It had the body of a lion more than twelve feet long, with claws that looked like they could shred steel, a lustrous golden coat, and a deep brown mane. The mane slowly gave way to the golden-brown feathers that covered the griffin's eagle-like head and wings.

Leon could only stare and mutter, "Shit..." at the majesty of the creature that was strong enough to fly through the middle of a tribe of Stone Giants with no obvious fear. But, as beautiful as the beast was, Leon considered it no more than a mere distraction that he could tell Elise about when he saw her again rather than a thing of any consequence. And then he heard some shuffling and pained squeaks coming from where the griffin had momentarily landed.

The sounds didn't seem to be coming from too far away, so Leon decided to indulge his curiosity and check them out. He took a turn away from the path he was following, squeezed through a pair of pillars blocking his way, and emerged in a small clearing. In the center of the clearing was a tiny white bundle that twitched and squeaked; whatever it was, it was clearly in pain and started to panic, but it wasn't strong enough to do more than lay there.

Leon apprehensively approached the bundle, and his eyes widened when he got close enough to clearly see what it was: a newborn griffin, white as fresh snow and no larger than a house cat.

