

Storm King 301

Chapter 301: An Easy Hunt

"So, what's the situation?" Grim asked as the group of knights entered the guardhouse with Odulf, the third-tier guard captain.

"About two weeks ago, a pig went missing from one of our farmer's pens," Odulf explained. "We didn't think too much of it at the time, it was only a single pig, right? There was a hole in his fence, so everyone just assumed that the pig ran off. But then more pigs went missing, and then chickens, and then four days ago, we found one of our prized stallions dead in the field after grazing time. It was torn apart quite gruesomely."

"But why would you send word about a werewolf?" Grim asked as he did his best to conceal his doubt. "Did someone catch a glimpse of the monster?"

"No, but our community has been here for centuries, now. We know how to defend our animals from natural predators!" the guard captain said with pride and some slight offense at Grim's lack of confidence in his village's report. "We can accept a few mistakes made here and there that lead to the loss of an animal or two, such as the lack of maintenance causing a section of fence to collapse and letting in a predator, or simple miscounts when taking stock of animals. Whatever has been killing our livestock is both intelligent enough to get past our fences, and to evade us when we went out to search for it. Only one thing would be so interested in our animals and be possessed of such intelligence: a werewolf."

"Werewolves aren't the *only* things with those traits, though I suppose they are the most likely," Grim conceded. "Regardless of what it is, we're still here to deal with it. Where are the villagers themselves? I happened to notice that the village seemed rather empty when we were riding through."

"Most of the men are out looking for the beast killing our animals," the guard captain explained. "I stayed here just in case the beast attacked while everyone was out, and to wait for all of you—I can't tell you how grateful I am that the capital sent so many powerful mages, by the way... Other than our hunting parties, our women and children are staying inside, as are most of the rest of our horses and livestock."

Grim nodded as he analyzed what the guard captain had just told them. This was a small village, and even the rich landowner whose villa they were at was probably second or third-tier at best, let alone the rest of the village, especially as the guard captain was only third-tier. A third-tier werewolf, which is what Grim thought they were most likely dealing with, would be far beyond almost everyone within the village.

"I don't suppose you kept the dead horse?" Lothar asked.

"I'm afraid not," the guard captain answered. "We didn't want lycanthropy to spread, so we burned the carcass. Besides, even if we did keep it, it would've begun to rot by now."

"We could've examined the corpse for a more detailed idea of what we're dealing with, but not having it isn't that great an issue," Grim said as he sat back in his chair and stared at nothing in particular as he thought about how to proceed.

"Which of the ranches were attacked?" Leon asked.

"Uuuh, there was Everard's place, and Sigismund, and of course, Sir Clodio's horse..." the guard captain listed, though it didn't tell Leon the information he wanted to know.

"Can you show us on a map or point them out to us outside?" Grim asked, picking up on what Leon was going for.

"Sure," the captain said as he went rummaging through some nearby papers. Eventually, he retrieved a rough map of the surroundings, though none but the villa owner's property was marked on it. The captain quickly drew some crude borders around the village, and then around each of the farms and ranches so that the knights could understand the scale of the village.

"That's a lot of space..." Lothar whispered as he stared at the map. The entire footprint of the village, despite how few people lived within it, was close to a hundred square miles of grazing land.

"This one, this one, and here," the guard captain indicated, pointing to the three ranches that were the farthest to the east, including the villa's accompanying grazing field.

"The village seems too big to me for the beast we're hunting to have gone completely around it, so it must have come from the east," Leon said.

"Makes sense to me," Grim agreed, as a rabid third-tier werewolf running dozens of miles out of its way for food didn't seem likely to him. "We'll start our search to the east, but we should keep in mind the possibility that we're wrong."

The rest of the knights nodded their understanding, and Grim turned his attention back to the map. There was no place close to the village for the werewolf to hide, as it was mostly flat plains that had been cleared of all large vegetation so that animals could graze there. However, just beyond the borders of the ranches was a forest that extended off the map.

"I'd bet money that our quarry is somewhere in that forest," Leon said.

"That makes sense to me, Sir Clodio took most of our best fighting men that way," the guard captain said.

"Then we'd best get to work," Grim said as he rose to his feet. "We'll meet up with Sir Clodio and the others, then work together to find this thing and put it down."

"The forest is quite extensive..." the guard captain said with some concern.

"It won't be too difficult to find who we're looking for with eight fifth-tier mages," Grim confidently replied.

"Right..." the guard captain sheepishly responded. He was so used to being one of the strongest in his small community that he completely forgot for a moment how much stronger these knights were than him.

Grim and Leon's party ventured back outside, and after grabbing Anzu, they then started making their way to the east, toward the thin forest at the eastern edge of the village. They passed huge chicken coops filled with massive numbers of the animals and barns that reeked from hundreds of feet away

with the stench of great quantities of pigs. Since the animals hadn't been let out in a while, the places they'd been corralled in were clearly beyond filthy.

Fortunately, the smell faded away as the knights pressed further east. They didn't want to waste time, so they set a fast jogging pace and reached the forest's tree line less than three minutes after leaving the villa.

"All right, now where did they go...?" Grim wondered aloud as he searched for signs of where the villagers had gone. They had followed a small path between two of the farms, which had seemed to be the most used path for going east from the village, so Grim felt it reasonable to assume that Sir Clodio had taken this path as well.

The other knights began to spread out, but Leon took one look at his surroundings and said, "They went that way," and pointed north-east.

Not seeing any reason to doubt Leon, Grim started heading in that direction, and as the group proceeded, they began to pick up on the same signs that Leon had seen; a footprint here and there, some snapped twigs and other disturbed flora. But whereas they needed to pay attention to find these signs, for Leon, who had spent his childhood hunting and tracking, these signs were so blatant that he couldn't miss them.

Once on their trail, the group of knights quickly caught up to the villagers. A group is only as fast as its slowest members, and the villagers were largely composed of mortals, with Clodio and his guards being the only mages among them. Even with the relatively light and thin forest in their way slowing them down a bit, the fifth-tier knights caught sight of the villagers not even minutes into their pursuit.

"Hail there, friends!" Grim shouted while they were still a ways off. They were approaching from behind and he didn't want to startle them when they were hunting a possible werewolf.

The party of thirty villagers turned and several of them brandished weapons at the knights for a moment—most of the villagers were armed with spears and bows, but Clodio and his five guards were armed with swords and dressed in gambeson, so they were easy to distinguish from their equipment alone.

Clodio himself was quite striking, being a third-tier mage surrounded by first-tier mages and magic-less mortals. He had a head full of gray hair, his body was thin but still strong, and his pale face was covered in wrinkles. "Who are all of you?" he asked in the gravelly voice of a man who had spent most of his life shouting.

"We're knights from the capital!" Grim responded.

The guards and villagers looked to Clodio to figure out what to do, but as he couldn't make heads or tails of the auras of the eight knights and he could tell that most of their equipment was expensive and well-made, he decided to take Grim's explanation at face value. He nodded to his group, and they lowered their weapons.

Grim smiled and began leading the group of knights over to join the villagers.

"They seem a bit jumpy, so keep your hands off your weapons," he whispered. With a suspected werewolf on the loose, he understood why they would be mistrustful of eight heavily armed and armored mages and a griffin showing up out of nowhere.

"I'm Sir Adalgrim, a knight in the service of Prince Trajan," Grim said once he got within comfortable speaking range of Clodio.

"And I'm Sir Clodio," the elder knight replied.

"Good to meet you. We were sent from the capital to deal with your monster problem," Grim explained. "We were told you went this way by your guard captain, Odulf."

At the mention of his guard captain, Clodio visibly relaxed. He doubted any enemies would know the man's name, after all.

"It's good to finally see you all," Clodio slowly said. "We've been tracking this thing for hours, but we haven't had much luck in running it down."

"So you've seen the werewolf?" Grim asked.

"We did, about four hours ago not long after we entered the forest. However, it ran off and outpaced us, we haven't been able to close that distance despite it leaving a clear trail behind."

"Ursus," Grim said, calling Leon forward. Grim knew that Leon was the best tracker out of the entire group of knights just from the way he had so quickly identified the direction the villagers had gone, so he trusted the young knight to get them on track. "We'll go and deal with this, please don't be too concerned if we leave you behind," Grim said to Clodio.

"Please, don't mind us," the old knight replied. "If you can kill this thing that's been harassing our village, then all the better, don't let us get in your way."

"This way," Leon muttered, pointing directly north. The werewolf was clearly panicking, as it had been running so fast it hadn't even bothered to try and cover up its tracks.

"All right, just remember not to get too close; use magic or ranged weapons, I don't want to have to treat lycanthropy out in the field. I don't even think the healing spells I have on me would get the job done..." Grim said as he took on a thoughtful expression, momentarily contemplating how little he had actually prepared for this mission.

The group of knights then sped off into the forest, leaving the villagers behind.

"What should we do?" one of the guards asked Clodio.

The old knight sighed and said, "We'd probably just slow them down and get in their way. It's better that they do this themselves. Let's head back home, our job now is to just wait for them to bring back word of victory."

With that, the villagers began their trek back to the village. Some were skeptical and suspicious of the knights, as the latter hadn't shown any real identification, but since Clodio had decided to trust them, the villagers could hardly complain.

The knights, however, pushed deeper into the forest. They were rapidly approaching their prey and were about to get close enough to see it with their magic senses.

Chapter 302: Swift End to the Hunt

The werewolf tore through the underbrush in its wild attempts to get away from those who were hunting it. It could hear its pursuers closing in on it, which only increased its frenzied attempts to escape. Any intelligence it once had long since vanished from the ravages of lycanthropy and from its sheer terror.

But it was only a third-tier monster, and there were eight fifth-tier knights almost within striking distance.

As he led the knights, Grim finally caught sight of their prey with his magic senses. Sparing only the time it took to smile as he identified the werewolf as barely being the estimated third-tier, he summoned an ice spike and launched it through the trees directly into the back of the monster's head. The werewolf fell with a muted yelp and didn't move again.

The knights surrounded the fallen creature, covering it in their magic senses and watching for any sudden movements. Even a third-tier werewolf could still spread lycanthropy, so they kept a reasonable distance from the monster. But there it continued to lie, unmoving, as its lifeblood soaked into the ground beneath it from the massive hole in the back of its head.

It had clearly once been a young man, with wide shoulders and relatively short legs. His dark brown hair had grown long and had begun to sprout further down his neck and back, while his nails lengthened and hardened, forming sharp, vicious claws. His back was slightly arched, and his nose and mouth protruded from his face in what would've been a snout had the lycanthropy spread further. His lifeless eyes were still open in shock, his left eye still appearing human with bright blue irises, while his right iris had grown to fill his entire sclera and turned pitch black.

"Cyricus," Grim said, glancing at the old knight. "Keep your distance, even a drop of its blood can spread the curse."

Cyricus nodded in understanding, summoned a fireball, and tossed it onto the motionless werewolf. Its corpse didn't even twitch as it burst into flame.

"Hot damn, you killed it in one shot!" Lothar cried as the fire consumed the body and the knights subsequently relaxed.

"Lucky shot," Grim said with a sarcastic smile. He and the rest of the knights breathed deeply with their mission complete, though it was a terribly anti-climactic ending, even given what little they had done that day.

"I guess that's it, then?" Fara asked as she adjusted her brown ponytail that had almost come undone during the run. The knights were so supremely confident that helmets wouldn't be needed that none of them had bothered to put them on in the first place. Still, if the need arose, then their helmets could be summoned from their soul realms in an instant.

"I guess that's it," Grim replied with a shrug and a half-suspicious, half-accepting look.

"I guess Sir Caelestius was right, we were far too much for a single werewolf..." Olympia muttered. "Kind of a waste of our time to come all the way out here just for this..."

"I suppose..." Grim agreed, and he almost gave the order for them to return to the village when Leon suddenly approached the werewolf's corpse. "Careful there, Ursus! Don't touch that thing until that fire has thoroughly cleansed it of its curse!"

"Mm," Leon hummed in acknowledgment, but he didn't back away. The fire had almost completely consumed the werewolf, and peaking out through its blackened skin was something shiny that had caught his eye, something that radiated dark red light. He almost didn't see it within the red-orange flames, but see it he did, and it piqued his curiosity.

Leon crouched down and grabbed a stick, then began poking at the burning corpse.

"What are you doing?" Lothar asked in shock, and the rest of the knights stared at Leon, silently asking him the same question.

"There's something in there," Leon answered as he managed to dislodge the glowing object from within the werewolf's ribs. *'From where its heart should be...'* Leon noted.

The object was perfectly spherical, about the size of a strawberry, and now that it was free of the werewolf's torso, it pulsed with a red light that seemed quite familiar to Leon. In fact, the werewolf's orb bore a strange resemblance to the core of the ice wraith that Artorias had used to power the ritual that awakened Leon's blood years ago, though the ice wraith's core was an icy blue, not dark red.

"What is *that*?" Olympia asked in disgust as she took a few steps back.

"Don't touch that!" Grim shouted as he pulled Leon away from the red glassy orb. "That thing is filled with demonic magic!"

Instantly, Leon knew why the thing seemed familiar: the dark red light that shone from it gave him the same feeling as Xaphan's dark red demonfire.

[You paying attention here, demon?] Leon shouted at Xaphan as he took a few more steps backward.

[Hmm? What?] Xaphan asked in a slow, sleepy cadence.

"Why in all the fucks does this thing have a... what is that, a demonic core? Why did it have a fucking demonic core within it?!" Lothar shouted as he made like Olympia and backed away from the orb.

"Who can say?" Grim muttered as he summoned a glove and a small wooden box—both covered in runic glyphs—from his soul realm. The knight removed a gauntlet and replaced it with the glove, then gingerly picked up the core and placed it in the box. Once he closed the box, he said, "This box was built for handling sensitive materials but isn't really designed for demonic objects, so let's hurry and get back to the capital! This thing needs to be properly quarantined! No telling what it can do or how dangerous it is, but if was in the body of a werewolf, then it's undoubtedly dangerous!"

[Hmph, not an unwise strategy, but that box won't do a damn thing to help,] Xaphan murmured with some amusement.

[You know what that thing is?] Leon asked.

[Of course, I do, it's a demonic core,] Xaphan replied. [It seems to have been torn from a weak demon, though, so it's hardly powerful.]

[If you don't think it's dangerous, then why is it wise to quarantine it?] Leon asked as he unconsciously lowered his center of gravity in anticipation of a fight.

[Didn't say it wasn't dangerous, I said it wasn't powerful. The core has runes embedded within it, like those runes that were beneath the platform back at the Cradle,] Xaphan answered.

It took Leon a moment to realize what the demon meant, until he remembered that the platform in the center of the Cradle's rotunda had been like a mirror, only the reflection showed runes floating above Leon that weren't there—or at least, that he couldn't see. Though now that Xaphan mentioned it, Leon guessed it could've just been an optical illusion due to seeing both the runes and the reflection at the same time, but he hadn't the requisite knowledge in enchanting to say for certain.

[Can you guess what the purpose of it was?] Leon inquired.

[Could be a number of things, maybe someone was trying to make that thing stronger? Maybe that thing was trying to cure its curse back when it was still lucid? I've no idea.]

Leon sighed as he wracked his brain trying to think of a reason for a demonic core to be planted in a werewolf. Moreover, it was in its chest where the werewolf's heart was supposed to be. Every possibility he could think of was just as unlikely as the last, and without studying the core itself, he didn't think he'd ever know why the core was there.

[Hey, watch yourself, boy,] Xaphan said with a hint of warning in his voice. [Demonic cores don't just materialize out of nowhere, summoning even a weak demon would require resources that I don't think some random werewolf out in the country living off poached pigs would have access to. So just... watch yourself...]

[I'll keep my eyes open,] Leon said as he quickly examined the immediate surroundings with his magic senses. He didn't notice anything strange, but with Xaphan's warning in mind, it did make sense to him that the werewolf might not be working alone.

"Leon, what's up?" Grim asked, noticing Leon releasing his magic senses.

"Just a bad feeling," Leon said. He then relayed Xaphan's warning, though he phrased it as a mere suspicion of his rather than advice he received from a demon. He felt Xaphan's frustration and slightly wounded pride that Leon was making it seem like it all came from him, but the demon decided to stay silent unless something actually came of it. His pride demanded credit, but he didn't want to take any blame if his and Leon's suspicions were wrong.

"I've never known werewolves to run in packs," Grim said as he thought about it. "They're pretty solitary creatures, so I can't imagine this one had any accomplices. Hells, even when they spread the curse, it's usually accidental..."

"The Valemén that attacked my first post were accompanied by a werewolf that seemed fairly in control of himself, enough to work with the raiders," Leon mentioned. "I'm just saying I wouldn't be surprised if this guy wasn't alone..."

Grim frowned, but he nodded and said to the rest of the knights, "Be on your guard, just in case."

The knights nodded, but Leon noticed that it was only Cyricus and Olympia that seemed to actually be more alert. The rest continued to relax with the werewolf dead.

Leon sighed once more, but he didn't say anything else. He just kept a close watch on the surrounding forest to ensure that they weren't going to be attacked by anything hidden among the trees and foliage. He'd said his piece, if the knights wanted to relax, then that was their prerogative.

After a few more minutes and another blast of fire from Cyricus, the werewolf's body was reduced to little more than a half-melted skeleton and a few small pieces of charred meat. There was no blood left to pass along the curse, meaning the corpse wasn't any more dangerous than the ground it lay upon.

"Regardless of anything else, we've done our job. If the villagers continue to have problems, then we'll just come back," Grim stated. "We can't stick around and protect them all the time, we can only make sure they know to keep alert for anything werewolf-y for the foreseeable future."

The rest of the knights, including Leon, nodded or otherwise communicated their understanding. It was a reasonable position for Grim to take, even if it might not quite feel right leaving the village when there was the possibility of another werewolf running around in the forest. But since this werewolf was so quickly killed, no one was going to insist that they stay with the village until they could confirm that there wasn't another monster out there, assuming it was even possible given their low numbers.

"Now, then," Grim said, "I think we've all had a nice, relaxing day-long vacation in the country, but it's time to get back to the capital!"

A few of the knights chuckled at how easily the mission was completed, and the group began their journey back to the village to report their success to Clodio. Leon, however, remained on relatively high alert the entire way back.

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Lewis could only sigh when he finally found the corpse of the werewolf an hour or so before sunset.

"Oh, Etienne, you really shouldn't have run off like that..." the tall, thin, and inhumanely pale man muttered in grief. "Now I'm going to have to find a new research subject! And summon a new demon!"

He spent another few seconds silently contemplating the werewolf's death, then began to poke around in its scorched corpse, clearly looking for something. He was unable to find what he sought, though.

"Where did it go?" he asked himself out loud. From years of living alone out in the secluded forests of the Bull Kingdom, he had taken up the habit of talking to himself, and despite having become marginally more sociable of late, he hadn't quite gotten around to dropping it.

"Where's my core? What happened to it?" he wondered before he suddenly realized what had happened and felt like an idiot. "Whoever killed you took it, didn't they?" he asked the charred corpse, though he at least didn't expect an answer.

Lewis gave a resigned sigh and said, "I guess it's gone now, no use drawing attention to myself trying to get it back. Probably better to simply acquire another."

He clicked his long, sharp teeth and began to walk back into the forest, though he effortlessly covered so much ground between each step that he almost seemed to be skipping.

Mere seconds after he left the corpse behind and right before he forgot about Etienne's existence entirely, Lewis came to a startled stop and looked back over his shoulder.

"Why should I go back for it?" he asked as if expecting an answer from the silent forest around him.

His eyes narrowed and he leaned back against a tree as if listening to something inaudible, then clicked his tongue in dissatisfaction.

"I don't need it, if you don't like what I do, then take it back! I am not about to announce my presence in this Kingdom by challenging a group of knights from the capital just for a third-tier demonic core! And certainly not because you ask me to!"

Lewis went silent again as he listened.

"But I *don't* need you, you barely give me any power at all! And the 'advice' you give me is barely even worth what I have to do to get it!"

Again, he listened.

"This sounds personal, why do you want these ones dead? And that one in particular?"

Silence followed, and the voice that Lewis was hearing didn't break it.

"Fine, don't tell me! But if you want me to go and kill a squad of powerful knights, you'd better be giving me more than just orders!"

This time, after the whispers in his ear stopped, Lewis' mouth turned upward into a broad smile, but it quickly vanished as he thought about the problem ahead of him. For decades, he had avoided any attention from the Kingdom's officials, and attacking this group of knights would more likely than not render all of his caution moot. Still, the price he was offered was tempting.

"Very well," the extraordinarily pale man said, "if that's the price you're willing to pay, then I will kill these knights for you."

Chapter 303: A Reasonable Request

Grim, Leon, and the knights returned to the village as quickly as they could. They were so quick, in fact, that they even beat Clodio on their return. The old knight and the villagers he had taken with him had turned around to go home once Grim's team had gone off into the forest in search of the werewolf, but with most of the villagers being mortals, they took far longer to return to the village than Leon's team.

Upon returning home, Clodio dismissed his villagers, sending a few off to fetch the rest of the villagers who were searching in other directions and bring them back to the village, he walked through the gates of his villa and instantly froze in shock. Waiting for him in his courtyard was Grim and the rest of the knights. Grim was speaking with Odulf, the old guard captain, while Leon quietly meditated in a corner with Anzu at his side, and the rest of the knights chatted amongst themselves.

Grim noticed Clodio's return immediately, and he chuckled a bit to himself at the man's astonished expression.

"The werewolf's dead!" Grim shouted to the elder knight. "We burned its corpse so the curse wouldn't spread!"

"That's... good news," Clodio said as his brain processed both the knights' presence and the news they brought back.

"Huh... I was expecting something a little more enthusiastic, but I suppose that's fine," Grim said with a shrug as he approached Clodio. "I guess it doesn't matter. We're done, so we're going to head home now."

The sun was setting, and no one in Grim's team wanted to spend the night out in the rural village.

"Uh, thank you, Good Sir," Clodio said, momentarily forgetting Grim's name in his shock.

"If you have any more trouble, be sure to let the capital know. We..." Grim said, pausing for a moment as he debated about telling Clodio about Leon's suspicions of someone else being involved. In the end, he thought that having Clodio be at least partially informed would be safer than simply not telling him anything, so Grim continued with, "... we're happy to have been of help. We picked up some circumstantial evidence of demonic activity, not enough to warrant a full investigation, but be sure to keep an eye open for anything suspicious."

"*Demonic* activity?!" Clodio asked in shock.

"Yes, we found a weak fire demon's core on the werewolf's person. Wasn't any stronger than the third-tier, but I still recommend staying alert and cautious for the foreseeable future."

"I understand," Clodio said as he ran his hands through his gray hair.

"Good day, Sir Clodio," Grim said as the team's horses were finally brought out of the stables and he took a few steps toward them.

"Oh, where are my manners?" Clodio suddenly said. "Your team has done a great service for the village, you would be most welcome staying the night in my home and sharing in my dinner."

"We appreciate the offer, but we're going to have to decline," Grim said with a smile. "I'd personally like to get these guys home to their families and their own beds as soon as possible."

"Can't argue with that," Clodio said with a smile.

The two knights clasped each other's wrists, and then Grim and the rest of his team finished getting ready to leave and began mounting their horses.

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Lewis stared at the village in front of him. He wasn't going to get too close. Being around other humans had always made him feel like an outsider, like an *other*, as if he didn't belong, even long before he left human civilization for the wilds.

"No, I can't get too close..." the pale man muttered out loud. "I'll wait for them to come to me, instead. They have to go south to go back to the capital, anyway... If that's where they're going... If they don't come this way, I can always catch up..."

His anxious rambling continued. Despite the noise he made mumbling to himself, none of the villagers noticed him as they returned home. A few of them even passed by his hiding place, but still saw nothing. He had hidden in the tall grass by the road and was keeping an eye on the village with his prodigious magic senses, but he didn't want eyes on him until he was ready to be seen.

There he sat for what seemed to him like an eternity until he finally heard the sound of beating hooves, but a quick glance upward at the sun showed that he'd only been there for half an hour at the most.

"It's about damn time," Lewis grumbled as he rose to his feet, just barely poking his head above the grass.

He sighed as he saw the knights leave the village. It had been long enough that his determination to attack the knights had begun to waver, long enough for him to think over the consequences of what he was about to do and to begin to think that nothing was worth the trouble it would bring.

"This is a mistake," he thought out loud. "If I kill them, then there will be more to investigate their disappearance. I would have to pack up and leave! I would be hunted! I don't want that kind of attention!"

Despite this rambling, Lewis didn't make any moves to leave. In fact, in the time that he had spent thinking out loud, the knights had come close enough to see his head sticking above the tall grass. For a moment, he made eye contact with the knight in the lead, and Lewis knew that his opportunity to turn back was gone; he could see the light of recognition in the knight's eyes. With that one look, the knight knew what Lewis was.

Lewis clenched his fangs and leaped out of the grass directly into the path of the knights. He raised his arms to the side and let loose with a blast of intense dark red demonfire, setting the dry grass on either side of the dirt road ablaze and bringing the approaching knights to a skidding halt and terrifying their horses. The lead horse even reared up and almost threw the knight in front onto the ground.

"Hello!" Lewis said with a dissonant closed-lip smile on his face as the other knights summoned their weapons and armor from their soul realms. Two even conjured a blade of light and half a dozen ice spikes, respectively, but Lewis was unfazed.

"Identify yourself!" the knight in the lead loudly demanded, projecting an air of power and authority—plus a healthy dose of killing intent—but Lewis could see the fear in his eyes.

"You may call me Lewis if you must call me anything at all," the pale man calmly said, as if he hadn't just set a raging fire in a pastoral village. His fire burned hot, so much so that the knights' horses were panicking, and the inferno was already spreading across the dry grass, through the fencing that was only designed to keep predators at bay, and into the pastures of the village.

"Be careful, this one's a vampire!" the lead knight shouted, and the rest of the knights formed up into a more defensive formation. Even the white griffin that was accompanying them got low to the ground and began to wiggle like a lion preparing to pounce on prey.

"I don't think it matters how careful you are, given that you're all only fifth-tier mages," Lewis responded, still with a strange, dissonant smile plastered on his face. "But we don't have to be enemies, I simply want you to return my property!"

"I don't have anything of yours!" the lead knight replied as he fought to regain control of his horse. Lewis saw with his magic senses the knight make a subtle gesture to two of his comrades behind him, and they instantly sprang into action. They started to summon big globes of water in the air—one of them letting his ice spikes fall to the ground as he redirected his magic power—and then began to toss them into the blaze that Lewis had started.

Unfortunately for them, demonfire wasn't so easily extinguished, and the water vaporized on contact with the fire and had little dousing effect.

"You have my core, and I would like it returned, please!" Lewis shouted back, his face the picture of polite entreatment, but the effect was ruined somewhat with the continued spread of his demonfire.

Demonfire was incredibly hard to put out unless the mage or demon that conjured it specifically didn't want it to spread—only if it encountered something nonflammable would it stop, but few things couldn't burn in demonfire. At the very least, the knights would have needed a mage as strong as Lewis that was dedicating their power to extinguishing the inferno, but Lewis was also aware that if he died, then the demonfire would quickly go out.

And yet, he wasn't worried. In fact, he barely even cared that his fire was still burning, which was why it hadn't vanished by now to conserve the magic power he was expending to keep it under his control.

The lead knight seemed momentarily conflicted, as if he were deliberating on what to say. In the end, after staring at Lewis for a long moment, he decided not to lie and asked, "That demon core was yours?"

"It *is* mine, it took a lot of effort and resources to acquire, and I would appreciate having it back!" Lewis responded as his gaunt face contorted in irritation, finally dropping his veneer of congeniality.

"I can't allow you to have it!" the knight shouted.

"Come now, Sir, you don't have to be that way!" Lewis exasperatedly responded. "All I want is my property returned to me, not so unreasonable a request, is it?"

"That 'property' of yours was found within a werewolf!" the knight replied. "What connection did you have with it?!"

Lewis sighed in dejection. He wasn't great with people, but he could see that as the knight kept talking, the others in his party were spreading out and summoning their magic. Already, they had surrounded him as best as they could with Lewis' demonfire continuing to advance across the pastures on either side of the road.

They wanted to keep him talking while they got in position to attack him.

To a certain extent, Lewis could understand, but it just aggravated him.

"Why isn't he just accepting?" he wondered out loud as he stared off the side. "Can he not see how outclassed he is? Is he overconfident? There's no need to risk his life for such a small thing as a demonic core..."

“What is your justification for not returning my property to me?” Lewis demanded to know.

“Because you’re a vampire!” the knight replied with a look of disgust and hatred.

Lewis grimaced in distaste, briefly flashing his fangs in the process. He was about to respond, but his eyes glazed over for a moment as if hearing a voice from far away and tuning out everything else around him in order to understand it.

“I have exposed myself because I didn’t want things to progress to the point of violence,” he said with his eyes still unfocused and wandering around, making it clear enough that he wasn’t now speaking to the knights. “If I were to kill these knights here, then the Bull’s response would be overwhelming. I don’t want to invite that kind of attention, I would prefer to simply take back what is mine.”

He paused for a moment as he listened for a response, and the knights glanced at their leader as if asking him what to do. The leader gestured for them to wait, he was reasonably confident that they could take the vampire if they worked together, so he took the risk of not attacking at this moment even though the vampire was distracted.

“I know what I said, but I don’t care about that!” Lewis bitterly spat. “If I don’t do this, then you simply don’t give me the reward! It’s my prerogative to act upon the offer, not my *duty*!” Lewis then suddenly turned his eyes back toward the lead knight and stared into his eyes from across the fifty feet or so between them. “I want my core returned!”

“What is your intention in regard to its use?” the knight asked again.

“I’m experimenting with how demonic power can be used to stimulate blood! That ‘werewolf’ wasn’t such a thing at all, it was simply a man I spliced with a Canid Wolf!” Lewis shouted back.

With his magic senses, Lewis could see the knight’s face contorting in shock and horror at the implications of what he had just said.

“Probably shouldn’t have said that. That was a mistake, stupid mistake, stupid mistake,” the vampire whispered in growing agitation. Suddenly, he turned his face skyward and roared, “SHUT UP!” His aura exploded out of him, submerging the knights in his killing intent and causing their horses to collapse from the pressure. One of the horses even outright died, its heart simply stopping from fright.

The knights fell off, but they were still able to stand, and if they could stand, then they could fight. The griffin, though, joined the horses on the ground, to the obvious anger of the young knight in black armor next to it, who began to spark and crackle with brilliant golden lightning.

“THIS IS YOUR LAST CHANCE!” Lewis bellowed at the lead knight in a voice that shook the ground and noticeably caused the air temperature to rise. “RETURN TO ME WHAT IS MINE!”

The knight seemed unfazed, though Lewis could see the subtle wobble in his knees that betrayed the truth. Still, the knight, mustering as much confident serenity and poise as he could, raised his sword and shouted, “Let’s kill this monster!”

Chapter 304: Familiar Eyes

“Let’s kill this monster!” Grim shouted. He couldn’t give away the demonic core, but he also knew just from his inability to understand Lewis’ aura that the vampire was much stronger and likely much faster

than any of the knights; he didn't think they'd get away if they ran, and that left one option. Given the vampire's obvious reticence to fight them, Grim was betting that he wasn't that skilled of a fighter and that he had nothing more than raw strength, so he was confident that the eight knights would be more than enough to take him down, even if he were a seventh-tier mage.

Unfortunately, it wasn't the knights who moved first.

Faster than any of their eyes could track, Lewis lunged forward and extended his right hand toward the closest of the knights, one of the water mages who had been trying to extinguish the fire he'd started. Demonfire burst from his palm, completely enveloping both the knight and his horse lying unconscious from the pressure of Lewis' aura just behind him, killing the knight and his horse instantly. And yet, there was no satisfaction upon Lewis' face, no sign that he was relishing the fight. Instead, there was only profound disappointment.

"It was a good deal, that one was foolish not to take it..." the vampire muttered, but before he could say anything else, a bolt of golden lightning exploded on his back while a pair of spears rocketed towards his midsection, one coated with sharp wind magic and the other with bright white light.

However, both spears bit into nothing but air, and Leon's lightning bolt had little effect apart from tearing into Lewis' animal skin shirt and leaving some superficial burns. But none of that mattered to the knights; whether it was due to anger at the loss of their comrade, their duty to kill the vampire, or a simple desire to not be themselves killed, they pressed on, regardless of the difference in power. There was no room for them to run away now, even if they wanted to.

Lothar appeared in a flash of light behind Lewis and slashed at the vampire with his arming sword, but a swift yet intense blast of demonfire left the knight a charred corpse on the ground. Lewis then pivoted and let loose with standard red-orange fire, which kept the knights at bay since they weren't strong or suicidal enough to charge into the vampire's fire. Lewis then spun his hands around himself, creating a small cyclone of flame that completely obscured his form within.

"Fire into that tornado!" Grim shouted as he conjured half a dozen ice spikes and fired them into the cyclone. Blades of wind from Fara, more ice spikes from another knight, and two of Leon's lightning bolts soon followed. Olympia used her earth magic to telekinetically lift a stone about the size of her head off the ground by the road and caused it to explode, sending hundreds of sharp rock fragments flying into the cyclone like shrapnel.

Cyricus, however, was a fire mage, so he refrained from attacking to keep his magic from adding to the conflagration in front of him. Instead, he tried to wrest control of the fire that was rapidly spreading into the pastures and put it out, but the closest flames did little more than gently flicker when his magic passed through it. These flames were still Lewis', through and through, and Cyricus couldn't gain control.

Suddenly, Lewis burst out of the cyclone faster than any of the knights could react and arrived in front of Cyricus. The vampire wrapped his hand around the elderly knight's throat and squeezed. Cyricus' gorget strained against the pressure, but the steel soon snapped, quickly followed by Cyricus' neck.

Upon hearing the snap, Lewis dropped Cyricus to the ground like a piece of trash, where the old man twitched and sputtered as he tried and failed to move or to draw breath.

Leon, Grim, and the others were beginning to feel real panic, now. Almost half of their number had been killed in less than a minute, and they hadn't yet managed to inflict any serious wounds upon their foe.

Grim could feel nothing but fear and regret for not choosing to attack the vampire before when he had seemed distracted, but regrets wouldn't help get him and his fellow knights out of this situation, so he forced them out of his mind. There would come a time for regret, self-hated, and self-doubt for letting his arrogance get several of his comrades killed, but while the vampire was still in front of him was not it.

'This thing must be seventh-tier!' Leon thought to himself. He, like Grim, had initially been hopeful that the vampire was only of the sixth-tier or had little skill in combat, but they had clearly been mistaken.

But Leon wasn't going to stop here. This wasn't the first seventh-tier vampire he'd faced, though the Legion was forced to utilize overwhelming power to kill Bran, and none of the knights here had such power at their command.

Then again, with all the demonfire around them acting as a reminder, Leon realized that he did actually have power enough to possibly deal with this monster. Xaphan had recovered enough power to reach the equivalent of the eighth-tier.

However, all it took was a quick glance at Grim and any thoughts of using demonic magic vanished from Leon's mind, even in this situation.

Channeling lightning through his legs, Leon charged at the vampire's flank. At the same time, Grim and Fara attacked his front, while Olympia and the last remaining knight went for the opposite flank.

With a quick blast of demonfire, Lewis blocked Olympia and the last knight's charge, then swept his hand along toward his front, creating a wave of fire that blunted Fara and Grim's charge. He then raised his other arm and effortlessly deflected Leon's blade away from his body while ignoring the lightning that burned his arm. He followed through with this movement, swiping the back of his hand across Leon's helmet, sending the young man reeling backward.

"Hmm? Why that one?" Lewis asked out loud with an eyebrow raised in curiosity. He didn't have much time to listen for an answer, though, as Grim and Fara used their ice and wind magic to force a path through the flames.

Grim thrust toward Lewis' chest with his two-handed sword, but the vampire took a single step and dodged. Fara maintained her distance and sheathed her sword, but she wasn't giving up, she just wanted to free her hands so she could summon even more wind. This wind sped around Lewis, creating a more traditional cyclone in an attempt to trap the vampire and keep him relatively immobile.

Unfortunately, Lewis simply stomped on the ground and set the ground beneath him on fire. The heat warped Fara's wind, wresting it from her control and quickly dissipating the cyclone.

The vampire spared no more thought for the knights, as it was now Leon that he targeted. He lunged at the young knight while using a wave of demonfire to force the other four back.

Leon regained his balance just in time for Lewis to grab him by the cuirass and raised him into the air.

"I have no idea what you did, but your death has been demanded," Lewis said, giving Leon a look of pity.

But Leon wasn't the type to sit around and wait for death. He let loose with a bolt of lightning right at Lewis' head. The two were so close together that not even Lewis could move out of the way and ended up eating a face-full of golden lightning and earful of tremendously loud thunder. The vampire dropped Leon and the young knight sprang backward. Lewis' face was badly burned, but it wasn't anything he couldn't recover from. The more pressing issue was the extreme disorientation he felt from having his ears blown out by the lightning bolt's accompanying thunder.

Lewis groaned in pain for the first time, and the knights moved to take advantage of this. Grim and Fara launched more magical attacks at him, with wind blades and ice spikes. Olympia and the fourth knight conjured an earth spike and hurled a spear, respectively. Leon also got in on the action, hurling another lightning bolt at Lewis' head.

But all these attacks were for naught when Lewis summoned another cyclone of demonfire. The magical attacks either dissipated completely or were weakened to the point of harmlessness as they hit the cyclone.

There was a moment where the knights were helpless to do anything, so they could only stand there and wait for the fire to die down, but Lewis wasn't waiting. Without any warning, he burst from the opaque cyclone and gave Grim a blast of red-orange fire right to the face. Grim was wearing a helmet, but he was still blasted backward and didn't move again.

Lewis then pivoted and fired off another blast directly at Fara. The brown-haired woman was tossed back like a ragdoll, her armor smoldering and her body limp. The vampire then turned his attention to Olympia and the other knight. He tossed a fireball at them like he was pitching a fastball, and it exploded in between them, knocking both to the ground. Neither made another move, even as the padding beneath their armor began to catch fire.

This left Leon and Lewis alone. The former shook, but he didn't back down. The latter breathed deeply, as he wasn't used to fighting and found it taxing, despite his power advantage and obvious skill.

"I just... wanted... my core!" Lewis grumbled as he took a few shaky steps toward Leon. His balance wasn't the best after taking Leon's lightning bolt to the head, but he was still more than capable of killing the younger man.

Leon, seeing that the other knights were down for the count, decided to hold nothing more back. It was always a risk doing so, but in this situation, keeping even a fragment of his power back was probably going to prove fatal. With a quick thought and some quickly channeled magic power, the runes on Leon's black gauntlets briefly glowed white; the enchantments helping him mask his signature silver lightning were deactivated and he prepared to continue the fight.

He could feel a few bruises forming and he was pretty sure he had one or two fractured ribs, but he ignored the pain as he called upon his magic. He put everything he had into one last bolt, a glittering silver-blue lightning spear that sparked and crackled with furious lightning. He put so much of his power into it that he had nothing left to begin healing or to dull his pain. He didn't even notice the demonfire around him shrink back from the spear's brilliance.

As Lewis continued to stagger towards him, Leon could see the vampire begin to regain some balance, and he knew that he had no more time left. He hurled the lightning spear with all the force he could,

focusing on his throwing arm and his aim so much that he felt more than he heard the thunderclap that came with it.

The lightning spear crossed the distance between Leon and the vampire in an instant, there was no time for the staggering Lewis to dodge. The demonfire in the way parted before the bolt like the waves before a warship, and the bolt exploded into a fountain of silver sparks as it hit Lewis in the chest. The vampire was thrown backward with extreme force, hitting the ground and rolling as if he had just been hit by a meteor.

Leon stood there, the last of the knights still on his feet, and watched the vampire. He could still feel the pressure of Lewis' aura, and he knew that the vampire was still alive. He drew his sword with a wince of pain and began to advance on the fallen monster.

But before Leon had taken five steps, Lewis began to rise. He was even more unsteady than before, but he was still able to stagger to his feet. His clear grey eyes focused on Leon, and Leon could see all the fury of mankind within.

Lewis didn't say a word. He just acted.

With what seemed like a single step, he crossed the several dozen feet between himself and Leon and slammed into the knight. Leon was thrown to the ground, and Lewis appeared crouched over him, his hand on Leon's chest keeping him from moving.

And then the vampire began to press down on Leon's armor. The Magmic Steel plates shuddered and groaned under the strain, and the air was pushed out of Leon's lungs. His mind exploded with pain as first his cracked ribs were pressed upon, and then the rest of his ribs began to crack.

'This can't be it!' Leon silently screamed to himself. If he had the air to spare, he would've bellowed for all the world to hear, but his lungs were empty.

He could see Anzu's white body where the griffin had collapsed after Lewis let loose with his killing intent. The flames had already taken half of the horses, but fortunately, they hadn't gotten to Anzu yet. Even then, Leon didn't know if his little buddy was even still alive.

What was more, there was still so much that he hadn't done, yet. He had to find out what happened to his mother, who ordered his father's death, and Justin and Valeria Isynos' connection to them. He still hadn't yet spoken to the Thunderbird, and the mystery of what was in the Forest of Black and White was still unresolved. Xaphan wasn't healed yet-

Xaphan.

As Leon thought about the demon, he pulled on the thread that bound them and found that the demon had already begun sending his power to him. He felt like he could hear something screaming at him in his mind, but it was distant and indistinct. Still, he felt like he knew who that voice belonged to and what he was trying to say

Leon felt his chest heat up and more pain went through his brain like a lance. He limply propped up his left arm and pushed on Lewis's chest, the vampire's translucent skin burned and slightly melted from Leon's lightning, but he was so weak at this point that the vampire didn't even bother shaking him off. Lewis just pressed down harder on Leon's torso.

With as much strength as he was capable of, Leon invoked Xaphan's eighth-tier power and channeled it as best as he could down his left arm. The demonfire exploded out of his soul realm and ravaged his muscles, arteries, and veins. The bones in his hand and arm were charred black almost instantly, and his skin slid off the bone like meat from perfectly cooked barbecue ribs. The Magmic Steel gauntlet, bracer, and pauldron kept his arm in shape, but the Skyflax padding beneath caught alight, and it was only then that the tired Lewis realized something was very wrong.

The vampire's eyes widened in surprise as fire exploded from Leon's hand, taking most of the meat in the latter's palm with it. Skin and muscles were ripped from Leon's hand, and the bones themselves fused together in the heat, but eighth-tier demonfire hit Lewis in the chest and the vampire was hurled backward in a terrific blaze.

Lewis was a fire mage and a user of demonfire himself, but this was the first time he had ever been on the receiving end of such a horrific power. He felt his skin melt and the fluids in his chest boil. Not even his innate resistance to fire helped him; Xaphan's demonfire ravaged him as it would any other mage, and Lewis let out a ghastly scream of pain.

What remained of the vampire's clothes were incinerated, his skin blackened and slipped off him like a loose robe, and his muscles tightened and forced him into a twisted fetal position. By the time the demonfire reached his bones, scorching and splintering them in the heat, the vampire was beyond saving.

Lewis' body exploded with deep red fire, and a deep, booming voice echoed across the burning pastures.

"YOU HAVE FAILED ME, LEWIS. I WILL TAKE YOUR FLESH AND YOUR POWER AS PAYMENT FOR YOUR FAILURE."

This voice was the only thing that kept Leon conscious. He saw the vampire's body burst into flame, and within the dark red fire, he saw a pair of eyes, shining a sinister white, that were staring right back at him. Within those eyes, Leon could see nothing but hatred, malice, and the desire to kill, and all of it was directed at him. Or, perhaps more accurately, at Xaphan within his soul realm.

These were demon eyes. What's more, Leon recognized them as the eyes of Amon, the demon that Xaphan had supposedly killed to claim his title as a Demon Lord, the same demon that had been contracted to the first vampire Leon had ever fought. They were more distinct than the last time he had seen them, but he wasn't in any state to guess the reason why.

Almost as quickly as they had appeared, the eyes vanished. Lewis' aura disappeared, and the demonfire that had been ravaging the southern pastures of the village winked out of existence, leaving a terrible scar upon the countryside. Nearly a full quarter of the village's grazing land was now gone, dozens of acres of grass burned away in mere minutes from a few blasts of demonfire.

But Leon didn't see this. As soon as Amon's eyes vanished, Leon's own eyes closed and he slipped into unconsciousness, his annihilated arm still raised upward. His bones had fused together and most of his skin and muscle tissue was little more than sludge that was spilling out through the gaps in his armor.

Chapter 305: A Glimpse of Power

Fire. That was all Leon could see. A great red-orange blaze consuming everything within its path.

But Leon couldn't see what it was consuming. The fire itself was all he could focus on.

As time passed, the flames that surrounded him grew darker. For a moment, the few strands of logic that Leon could muster sent the name 'demonfire' ringing through his head, but it soon disappeared as the flames continued to darken. This wasn't demonfire.

Soon enough, the flames were black as night. They shrouded everything around Leon in darkness, blocking out all other light. And yet, Leon could still perceive the pitch-black flames. Each lick of fire seemed to have a hazy white border around it, though when Leon tried to concentrate on it, this 'light' would vanish.

For how long Leon was like this, he had no idea. He couldn't see or move his body, and his mind was too foggy to count time.

After a minute—or a year, for all Leon knew—something in the flames changed. He saw a red-orange glow, but it wasn't the light emitted by fire. He had no idea what it was, but it filled him with a deep sense of dread. The light grew in intensity, and the black fire around Leon grew with it.

There was something around that light or something behind it, Leon couldn't tell. He could perceive no details, and even if he were clear-minded, he wouldn't have been able to even hazard a guess as to what he was seeing. All he knew was that whatever was behind or around that light was enormous.

Leon was transfixed by the light. He stared into it, unable to turn away, and the light seemed to flicker just a bit. Despite the ominous surroundings, Leon felt no fear, like there was some primal instinct within him telling him that neither the light nor the flames could harm him. In fact, he felt like if he could only reach out and touch the light, he could make it his, that he could claim it in its entirety.

But when he tried to lift his arms to seize this light, he felt nothing. For the first time, Leon had a moment of sudden clarity and looked downward to see what was wrong, to see why he couldn't feel let alone lift his arms. But when he cast his eyes down, he saw nothing but more black fire; his body wasn't there. It then occurred to him that he couldn't even see his own nose or eyebrows, it was like he was nothing more than a pair of eyes floating in a void.

Leon glanced up in panic, the reality of his situation piercing through his clouded mind. But then, the light pulsed, Leon felt a sharp pain in his apparently nonexistent head, and then everything went dark.

—

"...an you hear me, boy?"

Leon felt like his head was about to explode. He could barely remember what just happened, mostly just a blur of black fire and red-orange light.

"You don't seem dead, that's a good sign, I think..."

He could feel his face pressed up against cold stone. It felt familiar, it soothed his aching head, but he still had no idea where he was.

“Are you *really* not awake yet? You’ve been lying there for *hours*! How long does it take humans to come to their senses?!”

The buzzing in his ears slowly began to die down, and Leon thought for a moment that he heard someone talking. Their voice was familiar, a deep, gravelly tone that sounded almost like the crackling of flames. Or maybe he just heard crackling flames, Leon honestly couldn’t tell.

He wanted to open his eyes and look, but it just felt so good to lay where he was, his headache killing any motivation he tried to muster to fully wake up.

“Is *this* all you’re capable of, human? Have I partnered myself to a powerless child who slips into oblivion after every damn close encounter? This is the second time it’s happened, after all!”

‘Xaphan,’ Leon thought. It was strange hearing the demon with his ears rather than echoing through his head, but it was easy enough to recognize the tones of his partner’s voice.

Summoning a titanic amount of energy and willpower, Leon managed to crack open one of his eyes. His vision was blurry, but he could make out that he was lying down on polished stone tiles in a checkerboard pattern of white marble and some other kind of shiny red stone. Just beyond the edges of the tiles was what looked like green grass, but everything beyond that faded away into gray.

Or rather, as Leon’s vision began to clear up and he started fully waking up, he realized that there simply wasn’t anything beyond the grass, the ground just stopped and dropped off into a great gray void full of nothing but bright mist. This mist seemed to emit a soft white light that gave a feeling of being outside around noon on a cloudy day.

Leon recognized these surroundings. He hadn’t truly seen them in person since the day he awakened his Inherited Bloodline. There had been a brief few seconds after driving away Bran’s darkness magic where Leon had seen his soul realm, but that had been so quick that Leon barely even had time to look at Xaphan, let alone examine the island he now found himself upon.

“Oh? Are those the movements of a boy who’s regained consciousness?” came Xaphan’s voice that Leon had been hearing—whether he realized it or not—for a while.

Turning his head in its direction, Leon saw the huge blaze of bright orange flame that surrounded Xaphan, and within he could see the barest hint of a shadow, the only suggestion of the demon’s true body that was visible. In the head of the shadow were a pair of bright yellow eyes, like hot coals in the center of a raging bonfire.

Leon groaned as he struggled to move. He wasn’t quite ready to speak yet, but he could move his limbs, though his arms and legs were stiff and didn’t readily respond to his will. Still, after a few minutes of pained fighting with his own body, Leon managed to flop onto his back and rise into a sitting position. Not too far behind him was the white marble platform in the center of his soul realm, upon which sat his humble throne of black granite.

The last time he had been within his soul realm for any meaningful length of time, he had left it by sitting upon his throne. It made some degree of sense to him, then, that he remained upon that throne while he was conscious in the physical realm, and from his position at the bottom of the six-step-high

platform, Leon guessed that something must have knocked him off of it and he'd rolled down the stairs and onto the tiled floor.

Leon made to pull himself closer to the platform so that he could lean against it and not have to hold himself upright, but as he began to move, he realized that his legs weren't responding quite as he wanted them to. When he glanced down, he froze in panic as he realized that everything below his right knee and almost the entirety of his left leg was missing.

Instantly, Xaphan sarcastically chided Leon by saying, "Oh, don't look so surprised, boy. You knew your magic body wasn't completed!"

With the demon's admonishment plus a few seconds to collect his thoughts, Leon got a grip on himself. He wasn't in his soul realm as the complete pseudo-magic body that the Thunderbird had created for him, as he had been every time he had come to his soul realm previously. Instead, he was present in his own magic body that he had yet to finish. It was now more apparent than ever how much work remained, as he was able to see how much of his legs remained.

After taking a few breaths to calm himself, Leon asked, "What happened?"

"You used my power to fatally wound that vampire is what happened," Xaphan said with a hint of pride in his voice, but whether that was pride in Leon or pride in his own power, Leon couldn't say. But he definitely figured that it was the latter. "Also, your arm didn't explode, so I guess you're more durable than I gave you credit for. Well done."

"Not sure if I should take that as sarcastic or not..." Leon muttered.

"Take it however you like," Xaphan responded with an indifferent tone.

"By the way, demon, did you happen to see what happened to the vampire?" Leon asked as he settled into a more comfortable sitting position on the steps to his throne, which wasn't easy given he was missing about one and a half legs.

"I did," the demon replied.

"So, this is the second time a vampire serving Amon has turned up," Leon said.

"It was," Xaphan confirmed.

"What are the chances?" Leon inquired.

"Slim to none," Xaphan said. "Few demons, even Lords and Princes, have multiple followers in a single plane. There are so many planes out there, and so many *people* on each, that the chances are almost nonexistent for a demon of that rank to have multiple followers in any one plane... I *suppose* it isn't impossible, but given who it is we're dealing with, I would hazard a guess and say that Amon somehow found out where I was summoned to, and made a concerted effort to infiltrate and watch for my return."

Leon nodded in agreement. "It's a story that doesn't sound too unfamiliar. I guess that means we're in the same boat in more ways than one."

"Hmph. We each have powerful enemies, but at least we know who wants *me* dead, which is more than we can say for you."

"I would disagree," Leon said. "If you're right and Amon has been making vampires on this plane, then it would stand to reason that the two we've found so far aren't the only ones. I mean, Lewis was powerful, but that other one wasn't, which means that Amon isn't being too discerning in who he grants power to. Personally, I'm going to be keeping an eye out for any more vampires from now on. Especially given how much trouble they've been giving me of late."

"Not an *unwise* decision," Xaphan conceded.

"I've already got so many enemies to watch out for, that adding vampires to the list isn't too much skin off my back," Leon said.

"That attitude is hardly filling me with confidence," the demon retorted. Leon hadn't exactly been advertising who he was to all passersby, but his actions hadn't been too subtle, either. "Prepare yourself as best you can, after this failure, Amon may take a more *active* role in hunting me down. So far, he's been quite passive, we've yet to see him truly go on the offensive."

"I hear you," Leon replied. His face then twisted in thought as something occurred to him. "Hey, demon... why is it that Amon can grant power to those vampires, and they aren't completely obliterated by it? I mean, I can barely handle your power, and you're only three tiers above me. I can't even guess how much stronger Amon is compared to those vampires..."

"That has to do with our contract," Xaphan said. "I promised you my power without qualification. I am physically unable to hold any of my power back from you, so long as the terms of our contract are being fulfilled. I grant you power in exchange for safe harbor. So long as that harbor remains safe, then you will have all of my power. That is simply how it is. Those vampires specifically make pacts for a portion of Amon's power, which is generally a necessary clause in all contracts signed by demons with their inferior humans."

"... Did you forget to add that clause in our contract?" Leon asked with a tone of both irritation and mockery.

"... No!" Xaphan unconvincingly retorted.

Leon almost pressed further to bask in the knowledge that Xaphan had made a mistake, but since it negatively impacted him, he decided to refrain, much to the demon's surprise and quiet appreciation.

"Anyway, how long was I out for?" Leon asked.

"About two days," Xaphan answered.

"*Two days?*"

"Maybe a little more."

"Why was I out for that long?"

Xaphan paused for a moment, before slowly saying, "The last time you accessed your soul realm was when you were attacked by a shadow demon's magic power. It wound its way through your body and assaulted your soul realm, which jostled your magic body. This rendered you unconscious."

"How does that work?" Leon asked.

"Your physical body and your magic body are connected, or at least, that's the way it works for demons. To my limited understanding of humanity, magic bodies were once mistaken for souls, which makes a degree of sense given their abilities and their importance. While your magic body is upon your throne, then you will be conscious. If, however, it is thrown off by, say, a powerful magic attack, then you will fall unconscious."

"Was it Lewis who knocked me out, then?"

"Uhh, no," Xaphan admitted. "That... that was me. You couldn't handle my power, and it wound up throwing you off your throne. Were you a sixth-tier mage with a completed magic body and absolute control over it, it wouldn't have been a problem, but since your magic body *isn't* complete, you were knocked out. You couldn't wake until you recovered, and even then, your physical body is still unconscious."

Leon sighed in mild irritation. This wouldn't have been a problem if Xaphan had just remembered the clause that would allow him to limit his power, but Leon also couldn't give him too much grief, since he could understand that Xaphan wasn't in the best frame of mind after almost eighty thousand years in confinement. Besides, Leon was alive, and he had been the one to invoke Xaphan's power. This was simply the consequence of using eighth-tier power that was far beyond his control.

"Any way we can get that clause into our contract?" Leon asked, not putting too much hope in the possibility.

"... A contract of magic isn't the same as ink and paper," Xaphan hesitantly explained. "What's done is done. There is nothing more we can add unless we bring our contract to an end. If that were to happen, I would be forced from your soul realm and my power would be laid bare for all the Bull Kingdom to see. I wouldn't recommend that, given how the Kingdom reacts to demons under normal circumstances..."

Leon couldn't argue with that logic, but he was still disappointed.

"On the bright side of all this, the fact that you were able to wake up at all means you're close to ascension, not that you need that as a sign, given how close to completion your magic body is," Xaphan said with a didactic tone, as if he were a superior lecturing a junior. Any trace of embarrassment at the reveal of his oversight was gone, forcibly suppressed by Xaphan's ego.

"Mm," Leon mumbled. "Is the Thunderbird around?"

"Haven't seen that guy in months," Xaphan replied.

Leon nodded, then turned back to look at his throne. "I should wake up properly, then. The last thing I remember was passing out after the fight, I want to know what happened after."

"I understand, I'll return to healing, then," Xaphan whispered as he nodded in agreement. For a moment, Leon thought his tone sounded a bit sad, but he dismissed it as a figment of his imagination and started crawling up the steps.

It took more time than Leon cared to admit, but he eventually managed to wrangle himself onto the throne. He quickly got himself as situated as he could, then leaned back and closed his eyes.

Instantly, he felt some kind of shift, as if he were suddenly sent flying through the sky at a mind-bending speed, but the sensation was gone as quickly as it had arrived, and Leon could feel sheets pressed against his body.

He opened his eyes, revealing a room shrouded in darkness, lit only by a crack in the curtains by the one window in the room. Moonlight poured in through that crack, but even this small amount of light was more than enough for Leon to survey his surroundings.

He guessed he was in some kind of hospital, but his bed was too large and comfortable for a Legion-run facility, the walls were covered in murals, and the floor was richly carpeted. However, when Leon started trying to push himself up into a sitting position, he felt something strange, something important enough to distract him from examining the room: he couldn't feel his left arm.

After shifting the bed sheets and glancing down at himself, Leon was horrified to discover that his left arm was gone, amputated at the shoulder.

Chapter 306: Less an Arm

From the shoulder down, Leon's left arm was gone.

For a moment, Leon wasn't quite sure what he was seeing. There were so many healing spells and painkilling spells attached to his torso that he wasn't quite able to process what was before his eyes. However, as he gradually shook the fog out of his head from his two-day coma, the horror of his situation began to sink in.

Leon sat up, his sudden spike of adrenaline banishing his fatigue for the time being, and he began to tear at the loose robes he was dressed in, searching in vain for his missing arm. It wasn't until he had ripped open his clothes and saw the thick bandage wrapped around his entire torso and concentrated around what had once been his left shoulder and saw the true extent of the healing spells that blanketed his chest that he truly accepted that his arm was gone.

Acting purely on instinct, Leon tried to get out of bed, but his legs were weak and couldn't hold his weight. Consequently, as he swung them out of the bedsheets and tried to stand, all he wound up doing was loudly falling to the ground. As he did so, his flailing right arm swept over the end table and knocked a magic lamp to the ground, causing it to loudly shatter on the tiled floor.

Barely seconds had passed, not even long enough for Leon to struggle back to his feet, when the door burst open and three healers poured in, followed by Elise and Anzu.

"Leon!" Elise shouted in relief at seeing her lover finally awake.

"Sir Leon! You're awake!" cried the oldest of the healers. He and the other two tried to rush to Leon's side in the relatively spacious room, but Anzu practically knocked them all over as he rushed over to his

human's side. Anzu was practically wild with glee, bouncing all over chirping and waving his wings in joy at seeing Leon finally awake, but he was getting in the way of the healers, so Leon wrapped his one arm around Anzu's neck to get him to stop.

"What... happened?" he croaked in a hoarse voice.

"You-" Elise began as she rushed to Leon's side, but she was immediately cut off by the lead healer.

"Why don't we get Sir Leon back into bed before we start getting into these things with him?"

"Right..." Elise replied, though she hardly looked happy about it.

The three healers proceeded to help Leon back into bed, which was high enough for Anzu to rest his head on the mattress right next to Leon's hand while standing up.

"Where am I?" Leon asked once he was situated back in bed and had some time to compose himself. The fact that he needed help at all was an extreme embarrassment, especially in front of Elise, but complaining would get him nowhere fast, so he held his tongue on that front.

"You're back in my estate," Elise quickly informed him. "You spent a day in a Legion hospital, and once you were stable, I asked Prince Trajan to have you moved here, where some Heaven's Eye healers could see to you. Obviously, he agreed."

"I see..." Leon said as he absentmindedly stroked Anzu's feathered head. Elise was sitting in a chair that she pulled up right to the bed on his other side, and if his arm weren't gone, she'd have been holding his hand.

"Sir Leon, your injuries were found to be quite extensive once you were taken to the Legion hospital," the lead healer explained. He wasn't too interested in the hows and whys of Leon's presence in the estate, so he wanted to get his part done with so he and his two subordinate healers could leave Leon and Elise in peace.

"How bad?" Leon asked.

"The worst was your left arm," the leader healer said. "All soft tissue had melted away, leaving nothing but charred bones. The extent of the damage was beyond anyone's capacity to heal, save for maybe an exceptionally skilled healer from Heaven's Eye's central headquarters or the Sacred Golden Empire."

"Prince Trajan said that a healer from the Sacred Golden Empire is here in the capital, but apparently he refused to tend to you," Elise bitterly said with an expression on her face that said if she ever got her hands on that healer, she'd tear him to pieces.

"In fact, your arm was so badly damaged that it was deemed too difficult to heal by normal means. As a result, the arm was amputated, and we began to make preparations to regenerate it. Now, I don't want to lie to you, such a thing is an extremely complicated and time-consuming thing, you should probably count on it taking months, perhaps even a few years before your arm has been completely regenerated and strengthened to the point of being ready for battle," the healer continued.

Leon nodded, accepting the reality as calmly as he was able. This was going to take some getting used to, but he-

"There are better ways, *faster* ways," Elise said, interrupting Leon's thoughts.

"My Lady, perhaps it's best that we get his current situation explained first before we get around to how to help him recover?" one of the subordinate healers said. She was a rather round woman of about average height, long brown hair, and a perpetual matronly smile on her face.

Despite this slight admonishment, Elise simply smiled back at the healer and said, "Right!"

Leon didn't know it, but this woman was not only one of Emilie's personal healers, but she was also Elise's nanny growing up, and Elise considered her as close as anyone could be outside of her family. Now that Elise was grown up, this woman had been spending her time expanding her knowledge of the healing arts, which was why she hadn't been around to meet Leon before now.

Introductions would have to wait, though, as the lead healer, not wanting to waste too much time, continued.

"Your arm was not the extent of the damage. You had multiple fractured ribs, and you suffered extreme damage to your internal organs from demonfire. Just about everything within your chest was badly burned. Those injuries, unlike your arm, *can* be healed using normal means, though it will take a couple more days of rest before you'll be back to one hundred percent in that respect."

Here, the healer paused and waited to see if Leon had any questions.

"And my arm?" Leon asked. The healer had said 'normal means', and Elise had mentioned something about being able to speed up his recovery. If there was any kind of chance for him to recover his arm in anything resembling a timely manner, he was going to take it. Everything that he wanted to do would be made so much more difficult if he lacked such an important appendage, especially now that he felt mere weeks away from the sixth-tier.

"That... It might be best to get used to it right now, there's no guarantee that we can help you to regenerate your arm as quickly as you may be thinking," the lead healer softly warned. "Regeneration takes a long time and it would require a lot of healing potions, plus a substantial amount of time in physical therapy. If we were to be optimistic, then we'd be looking at a six month recovery time. It will probably be closer to a year or two, though."

"It doesn't necessarily need to take that long," Elise said with a glare and an insistent tone. "I have a Meligaent's Obsession! That herb can help regenerate lost body parts!"

"As I've told you several times now, My Lady, your herb isn't mature, there's no way we can know if it would work or not!" the lead healer shot back. It was clear to Leon from this short exchange alone that they had been arguing about this for a while. "If the herb hasn't grown enough, then the best we could hope for is nerve damage that would leave his regenerated arm paralyzed! At worst, Sir Ursus could wind up completely paralyzed, or even dead!"

"It's mature enough!" Elise retorted. "It will work! We just have to try! Besides, if there any complications, I have faith enough in your skills that they won't become serious problems."

The lead healer sighed. After a long moment of silence, he said to Leon, "To use an immature Meligaent's Obsession is indescribably risky. I urge you not to take this option."

"What other choice is there?" Leon calmly asked as he looked down at where his shoulder and arm used to be. He was keeping a lid on it, but inside he was freaking out. He'd never once considered the possibility of losing a limb, and the only thing keeping him from losing his mind was the prospect of regenerating his lost arm.

"If you were able to reach the eighth-tier, then it might be possible to regenerate the arm on your own," the lead healer said, though from his expression it was clear that he didn't think Leon had great chances, despite the fact that he was already a fifth-tier mage and not yet twenty years old.

"I appreciate your concern, but I can't wait that long," Leon replied. He then turned to Elise and said, "I would be willing to take the risk."

Elise smiled at him, knowing that that's what he would say, while the lead healer sighed and said, "I understand your decision, Sir Leon. I will do my best to mitigate the risks."

With that, the three healers left the room, leaving Elise, Leon, and Anzu alone.

A short silence followed, with Leon gently rubbing the left side of his body in an attempt to get used to his current situation. He closed his eyes and his breathing started picking up as the panic really started to set in with the healers gone. Making matters worse was the knowledge that this horrendous injury was self-inflicted. Leon had been the one to invoke Xaphan's power, and though it was to keep himself from being killed by Lewis, Leon still couldn't help but wish he hadn't done it and tried to find some other way.

Noticing Leon's distress, Elise got out of her chair and climbed into bed next to him. She didn't say a word, she just snuggled up next to Leon to make sure that he knew that she was there for him. Anzu, picking up on Leon's current state just as well as Elise was, nuzzled his head against Leon's hand in an attempt to calm his human down.

It took a while for Leon to regain his composure. He managed to keep his eyes dry, but his panic and fear of the future had been readily apparent, regardless.

"Thank you," Leon whispered to Elise once his shaking finally stopped.

"No need to thank me, my love," Elise responded with a glowing smile. "Besides, you've gotten me out of work for a few days, at least, that's always a positive thing..."

After chuckling at her joke, Leon took a deep breath to steady himself. "I know how much care and effort you put into that herb, how expensive it was, I can't... I *don't* like that I fucked up so badly that I now have need of it."

Leon might have continued on in this vein for a while, but Elise silenced him with a finger on his lips.

"I'm happy that it's being used well. That it can be used to heal you is worth every silver coin I paid for it and it makes every ounce of effort I exerted in growing it well-spent. I can't think of a better use for something I have grown than healing someone I love."

"Thank you," Leon repeated. "I don't know how I can ever repay this..."

"You say that like this is meant to be a transaction," Elise said with a smile that was half-wary and half-amusement. "You don't owe me anything for this. I just want you to focus on recovering, got it?"

Leon could only nod and say, “I love you,” as he pressed his forehead into hers.

He meant those words, but there was a part of him that hated this helplessness. Logically, he knew that it was all right to rely on Elise like this, but there was also a part of him that knew he lacked the resources to reciprocate if their circumstances were reversed. He could give Elise all that he had to give, and it still wouldn’t equal what she had done and what she was doing for him. She’d even given up having a harem for him.

Leon couldn’t help but feel increasingly insecure about their relationship, about this disparity in what each had done for the other. To an extent, his general willingness to go along with whatever Elise wanted to do, whether that was in bed or otherwise, was due to this insecurity, to this sense that he couldn’t bring the same material things to the table that she could.

He knew that this was an irrational feeling, that the simple fact that Elise wasn’t hesitating to give him things like her rare and expensive Meligaent’s Obsession indicated that he was worth more to her than these things were, but he couldn’t help feeling this way.

This was also something that he felt like he’d have to talk with Elise about. Eventually. For now, he would follow her instruction and get some rest.

Chapter 307: Trajan’s Visit

For two days, Leon stayed in bed resting and recovering. There was little else to do except train, so that’s how he spent his time. His brief foray into his soul realm brought on by his extreme injury spurred him onward even when he grew tired and bored from the long hours of staying in bed.

Plus, focusing on finishing his magic body kept his mind occupied and off the fact that he was missing his arm, keeping all the anxiety and terror that came with losing a limb at bay. For all intents and purposes, it was working, though it helped that Leon only had to wait a little while longer before he got his chance to regain his arm.

During this time, a Heaven’s Eye beastmaster was called in to take care of Anzu in Leon’s absence, though Elise helped in this area where she could. As a result, Leon noticed that Anzu was becoming far more comfortable around Elise than he was when they first met. In fact, in just the week or so since he’d come back to the capital, Anzu was already on much better terms with Elise than he had been with Alix—he barely tolerated it when Alix wanted to shower him with attention, but he was at least now indifferent to Elise.

This, of course, frustrated Alix to no end when she visited the morning after Leon awoke. She spent some time with Leon and hung out a bit with Elise, but then had to leave to attend to some business with Minerva.

Alix wasn’t the only visitor who came to check up on Leon, though, Prince Trajan also stopped by.

“Leon!” he shouted when he walked into Leon’s recovery room.

“Your Highness!” Leon responded as he sat up in his bed and stopped focusing on his training.

“Please, relax,” Trajan said when he saw Leon struggling a bit to push himself up without his left arm. The Prince took a seat by the bed and said, “All things considered, you’re looking well.”

Trajan wasn't lying, for how injured Leon was when he was brought back to the capital, he looked almost completely healed, left arm notwithstanding.

"I've been well taken care of," Leon said.

After a brief moment of silence, Trajan sighed and said, "I'm sorry I sent you out there. I never thought it would be such a dangerous mission, I just wanted you out of the city for a while."

"No apologies needed, Trajan," Leon replied. "As you said, you couldn't have known."

Trajan nodded, then said, "Well, at the very least, I'll be able to stop lying to Lapis that you're all right. That giant approached me a once and asked after your status. I don't know how it became suspicious, but I had to get quite insistent that you were fine so that it wouldn't leave the Royal Palace and rampage around the capital."

Leon smiled. "Lapis is a good guy," he softly said. "I think that I might just bring him along the next time I do something violent. He's always trying to get me to do so, anyway."

"That might not be the best idea at the current moment..." Trajan hesitantly said. "It would be best not to let on that you're anything but an unusually young knight."

"Why?"

"Justin Isynos is in the capital."

"He's here?!?" Leon asked in surprise.

"He arrived a couple days before I sent you out. In fact, his presence here is the *reason* why I sent you away. I didn't want you and him in the same place, just in case."

Leon nodded in agreement, though his heart was racing with the news. The man who he suspected of playing a major part in the fall of his family was no longer in Calabria but was now in the capital.

"What is he doing here so soon?" Leon asked as he forced himself to calm down. He knew about August's offer to the man, but he, like Trajan, wasn't expecting Justin to arrive in the capital for at least a month.

"I'm not sure, we haven't spoken much. As he's one of August's stewards, he's mostly interacting with my nephew and pushing papers. His role doesn't intersect with mine. But that isn't to say I don't have my eye on him, I've arranged to have him under constant surveillance."

Trajan pulled out about a dozen papers or so and handed them to Leon.

"This is everything he's been doing since he arrived in the capital. Given how soon he arrived, I wasn't able to prepare my people fast enough. As a result, I've had to rely on the Royal Spymaster for most of this."

"Can he be trusted?" Leon asked.

"I think so," Trajan said, and Leon accepted the Prince's word.

Leon quickly flipped through the pages that Trajan handed to him. Inside were detailed records of where Justin went during these past few days, who he spoke to, and for how long. Justin had purchased a small villa on the edge of the noble district, a place that would fit his position, but there was also a note about how expensive his yacht and the horses he brought with him were, indicating some possible hidden wealth.

Additionally, the last three pages were information on Justin's background, from his time spent as a noble in a city called Isynia far to the south. In fact, his country of origin, the Most Serene Republic of Siracusa, was completely unknown to Leon.

"Where is this 'Most Serene Republic'?" Leon asked.

"I think it's on the far side of the continent, in the south-eastern corner of Aeterna," Trajan said.

"It's *far* outside the Bull Kingdom's sphere of influence, so we don't generally get too much information on it."

"That's a mighty far way to have come," Leon observed.

"Indeed, far enough that it would be impossible in every practical sense to verify his identity," Trajan said.

Leon frowned, then looked over the papers again. There was a great deal of mundane information, such as the personal details of most of his servants, his daily schedule, and what he was buying to furnish his new villa—in other words, there was essentially nothing of consequence, especially not the one thing he was looking for, the one piece of information that he considered the most important given his belief that he and Justin Isynos were enemies.

"I would've thought his magical tier would be here, but it isn't," Leon said as his frown grew deeper.

"I have no idea how strong he is, but he's definitely stronger than me. He hides it well, but I'd say that he's at least equal to the strongest of the Paladins," Trajan said in a grave tone. He ran his hands through his graying hair with a complicated expression. "What's more, he has three subordinates that seem to be seventh-tier as well, though again, it's almost impossible to tell for sure without getting a Paladin to check them out, and the Paladins are far too busy for such a trivial job."

Leon put the papers down and looked at the Prince, a look of determination and muted anger in his golden eyes, and asked, "So, what's our next move?"

"Our'?" Trajan asked with a cocked eyebrow. "My next move is to continue looking into what I can, maybe even try and get some spies into the Isynos household. *Your* next move is to heal and wait for your lady to regrow your arm!"

"That won't take long..." Leon impulsively stated, but once he realized how much he was tempting fate, he quickly added, "... Or at least, I don't think it will... I should be fine in a few days..."

"We can cross that bridge when we come to it," Trajan said, but that answer didn't satisfy Leon.

"This guy may have had my family destroyed. He's certainly connected to at least one person who had a hand in murdering my father. I'm not leaving the capital again, not with him here as well."

"That's bold of you, to so blatantly argue against a Prince's orders," Trajan said, but the smile on his face betrayed his own amusement and ensured that Leon didn't feel a single ounce of fear.

Leon met Trajan's gaze and showed nothing but determination. Trajan figured that if ordered to, Leon would eventually leave, but the Prince was also concerned about Leon's reckless streak. If he didn't at least involve the younger man in his surveillance of Justin Isynos, then Leon might do something stupid. Again.

"I won't insist that you leave the city again," Trajan said. "I will also trust that you have the self-control not to do something as asinine as attacking the Talfar camp was. You will make no moves against Isynos without my express permission. Understand?"

"Yes, Your Highness," Leon said with as much dignity and formality as he could muster from his bed.

"Good." Trajan stood up and walked to the door. He opened it and waved, calling in someone who was waiting outside. "I've been given the report of what happened, but I'd like to hear about this vampire from you."

After several seconds, the elderly Legate Caelestius and several of his adjutants walked in. "Sir Ursus, it's... *good* to see you awake."

Leon nodded in acknowledgment, but he thought he detected some slight disdain in the old knight's tone when he said Leon's name, which instantly lost him any goodwill Leon may have had for him. Leon wasn't surprised given his experiences so far in the Bull Kingdom, but after being at the much more tolerant Bull's Horns for a year and a half, he needed to readjust to this attitude.

"I asked Sir Caelestius to accompany me here to hear your report," Trajan explained. If he picked up on the old knight's derision toward Leon, he didn't show it. "This way, you won't need to submit your report later."

"Thank you, Your Highness," Leon said gratefully, but before he launched into his own explanation, he asked, "How are Sir Adalgrim and the others?"

"Three of the knights were killed, Sirs Lothar, Cyricus, and Clovis—not the Consul, obviously. Dames Fara and Olympia, and Sirs Adalgrim and Karloman all survived, though all four are currently resting in a Legion hospital. Karloman is still unconscious, but he'll make a full recovery eventually, while the other three are largely healed but are being held until tomorrow when the healers can verify that their injuries are gone."

"And the vampire was killed?" Leon inquired.

"There was very little left of that one," Trajan said with a look of muted anger. "I was hoping you could tell me more of what happened, everything that happened after the other knights were incapacitated."

Leon nodded, then launched into his explanation. He left out his use of demonic power for obvious reasons, saying that he'd instead managed to score a lucky shot by raising his sword just in time for a charging Lewis to impale himself upon it, after which his demonic Lord incinerated him. He did, however, make sure to tell Trajan and Caelestius it had been a demon he'd encountered before in his prior mission to kill a vampire, though framed as only his suspicion based on what he could sense.

"I see..." Caelestius said once Leon was finished. After he glanced back at his adjutants to make sure everything was written down, he said, "I highly doubt it was the same demon. From what I know, and I know a great deal as a former specialist on demonology, the possibility that this vampire's contracted demon was the same as that of a vampire you encountered previously is ludicrous."

"I have told you what I know, Sir, what you make of it is not for me to decide," Leon stated slightly dismissively, not taking well to Caelestius' dismissive tone.

"Ursus..." Trajan said in warning. For all Leon's recklessness, the Prince had never seen Leon be insubordinate to a higher-ranked knight in person before. Usually, Leon simply kept his concerns to himself.

Leon looked suitably chastised, and Caelestius didn't say another word. The older knight glared at Leon out of the corner of his eye as he turned to Trajan and bowed. "I have what I came for, Your Highness, so if there's nothing else, I would like to take my leave."

"You're dismissed," Trajan said, and Caelestius departed.

Trajan and Leon sat in silence for several seconds as they waited for Caelestius to leave earshot before they spoke again.

"Your Highness, it was the same demon, I *know* it," Leon quietly insisted.

"I... Caelestius seems to have a bit of an attitude problem, but I'm with him on this one, I can't imagine that it was the same demon," Trajan said with an almost apologetic look, an expression that he would show only to Leon and Minerva.

Leon nodded again, but it wasn't in agreement. He wasn't going to let this matter go, but he also wasn't going to make a big deal out of it since his only real concrete source of information to go on was another demon. That left only one option: to look into this matter himself so that he could bring solid evidence to the Prince of Amon's presence in the Kingdom—if there was even any to be found.

At the very least, he felt like he could leave the investigation in Justin Isynos to Trajan while he looked into these vampires. Given that he'd now had two encounters with Amon's vampires in less than three months, he felt like it was at least as imperative to get more information on them as it was to look into Justin's affairs.

"Listen, kid," Trajan said as he got to his feet, "the triumphal games are going to start in a few days. As a Prince, I must attend. Lady Elise has indicated to me that your arm should be healed by then, so I want you there as well. You don't have to be with me in the Royal Box, but as one of the knights who participated in the triumph, you're expected to attend."

Leon frowned. He hated the spotlight and he saw more benefit in staying out of it, he had no desire for fame. Still, gaining rank and power within the Bull Kingdom was part of his plans to find those who ordered his father's death, and there was likely to be more expected of him in line with these games.

"I understand," Leon said through clenched teeth.

"Thank you," Trajan said. "Hurry up and recover. If you're going to be involved with this thing with Justin Isynos, then you've got to be in peak condition. I'll send someone in a few days to check up on you, so I

want you to stay here in the meantime. The person I send will come with further instructions depending on what they find.”

With that, Trajan said his goodbyes and left. His duties left him with little time to spend with his injured knight, so as much as he might have wanted to stay with Leon a bit longer, it was time for him to go.

Meanwhile, the only things on Leon’s mind after the Prince’s departure were more training and a quick visit to the Royal Archives as soon as he could manage.

Chapter 308: Greater an Arm

Leon stared at the brown liquid in the vial and was unable to hide the profound disgust on his face.

“Don’t be such a baby!” Elise chided. “Drink it!”

This was the potion that would help Leon regrow his arm, so despite his face twisting into such an ugly grimace that it felt like it would never return to normal, Leon still tossed the vial back and swallowed its contents. He tried his best not to taste the thick sludge-like potion, but it was so foul that he failed in this endeavor, and almost choked as it made its way into his stomach. Fortunately, he was able to fight through it, and after a few seconds of discomfort as his stomach twisted itself into knots, things settled down and the taste faded away.

“It should start working any minute now...” Elise muttered as she stared at where Leon’s left shoulder used to be, where the bandages had just been removed before Leon downed the potion. It was an unnerving sight, that of a shirtless Leon missing an arm, but Elise was above such primal aversion and didn’t look away.

“What all was in that potion?” Leon asked as he desperately tried to take his mind off the procedure.

“The Meligaent’s Obsession, Asha tree sap, four additional common healing herbs, and a mashed up Catewallian Isidae—a beetle whose powdered shell has some startling healing properties.”

Leon fought the urge to throw up, which after a few seconds he realized wasn’t too difficult as his waist had gone numb. Regardless, he was quite happy that until now, he hadn’t had to rely on healing potions. Healing spells usually did the job for him, which was fortunate given how relatively cheap they were to produce, but healing spells couldn’t regenerate body parts and had only marginal effects on diseases, which is where healing potions found their niche.

The three healers that tended to Leon after he was transferred from the Legion hospital were also in the room, but they were silent as a graveyard. The lead healer, in particular, stared at Leon’s torso looking for any sign that the potion wasn’t working. He and Elise had spent the past two days making it, but the Meligaent’s Obsession was young, and he wasn’t confident that it would work well.

That being said, he hadn’t seen anything that concerned him. Yet.

“Sir Leon, I must remind you to tell me if you experience any pain or anything else at all that concerns you,” the lead healer stated as he took a few steps forward to the side of the bed to more closely monitor Leon’s condition.

“I will, should I feel anything like that,” Leon said.

Suddenly, his stomach tightened until it felt like a rock in his waist, and Leon almost bent over in pain. But before he could tell the lead healer, he felt it loosen and warmth spreading throughout his body.

“Be ready...” the lead healer said to the other two healers as Leon pushed himself back into a seated position. “We have to move fast if this potion’s regenerative powers need any direction.”

The other two healers nodded, but it seemed like that wouldn’t be necessary, as the wound on Leon’s shoulder instantly closed up. Immediately following this, his shoulder started to swell like a bubble.

Leon had to stifle a few moans of discomfort—any pain he felt had faded away, but he felt a phantom itch in his left forearm and a burning sensation in his left shoulder, neither of which were there anymore.

That changed as the swelling continued, the bubble of skin forming and shaping itself into a shoulder over the course of about thirty seconds. Cracking echoed through the room as new bones grew within the shoulder to support it, and the bubble extended downward.

“Do you feel any pain, Sir Leon?” the lead healer asked as he avidly watched the regeneration. For all his warnings about the possible dangers, he was still fascinated at such a quick regeneration, as normally the regrowth of an arm would take weeks at best and as much as half a year under normal circumstances. With the progress so far, he relaxed a bit, but he still kept his duties in mind.

“Nothing to write home about,” Leon murmured as the bubble of skin continued to inch downward, soon forming his upper arm.

Again, cracking sounds were heard as bones grew, and a sickening, almost wet sound joined this cracking as muscles formed over the bones.

Leon could feel magic flowing into his rapidly-forming left arm from his stomach. It concentrated in the bubble of skin at the end and wove itself into organic tissue, and the more his arm regenerated, the more weight Leon could feel lift itself off his shoulders. The shadows of fear and depression in his mind that he kept suppressed were brightening as his arm returned to him.

With a snap, Leon’s entire upper arm was back, with muscles to match his right arm. Leon was a bit surprised, as he thought that the arm might regenerate with only the barest hint of muscle, but instead, his arm regenerated so well that now it looked like it had been amputated at the elbow rather than the shoulder.

Overall, the sensation of his arm regrowing was one that Leon would describe as pleasant, though there was some stinging pain every now and then as his nerves reformed.

The bubble continued down his forearm over the next few seconds, only to slow down immensely as it reached the complex skeletal structure of his wrist. However, even though it went slower than the rest of his arm, his wrist and hand soon took shape out of the bubble of flesh.

It was over. Leon’s arm was back, and with nary a hint of lost strength—or at least, none that he could tell. As with most things, it would be training and combat that would be the true test.

“Sir Leon, could you please raise your arm a bit?” the lead healer asked as he approached the bed. Leon complied, and the healer started poking and squeezing Leon’s arm, making sure that everything was working as it should and that there were no missing bits.

“Incredible...” one of the other healers muttered.

“Indeed, I had no idea that it would work so quickly,” Elise admitted. She then looked at Leon, her brow turned upward in concern, and asked, “Do you feel anything wrong? Any pain or weakness?”

“None,” Leon said as he flexed his arm and channeled some magic into it. His shoulder was a bit stiff, almost concerningly so, but apart from that, it was as if he had never lost the arm. The stiffness didn’t seem to be a problem, though, so he didn’t mention it.

An invisible weight seemed to lift itself off his shoulders as he leaned back in his bed, his arm newly regrown. The loss of a limb is rarely taken well by anyone, and Leon managed to keep himself calm and sane only because of the promise of Elise’s Meligaent’s Obsession.

[Hmph, you’re quite the lucky human,] came Xaphan’s voice from Leon’s soul realm. [I’d have never thought that such a weak human could’ve recovered from an amputation so quickly. You’d better do right by that girl, else I’ll do the universe a favor and incinerate you from the inside.]

[Noted,] Leon replied with an almost sarcastic smile. He loved Elise and he had no intention of ever doing anything to bring her to tears; he didn’t need his demonic partner to threaten him with death for that intent and his feelings of love to grow stronger after this experience.

Elise, seeing Leon flex and stretch his arm, gave him a radiant smile, which he happily returned. She leaned forward and wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him, and Leon held her close.

“I... think we’re in the way here,” the lady healer said, and she almost pulled the other two healers out of the room. It was clear enough that the regeneration had been a success, and that they were no longer needed—if there had been any problems, the lead healer was skilled enough that he would’ve found them by now.

Once the two separated, Leon smiled awkwardly at his lady and said with a downturned gaze, “I’m sorry you had to use such a valuable herb on my worthless ass.”

“And who said you’re worthless?” Elise asked with a wry smile. “Whoever they are have clearly suffered some extreme brain damage!”

Leon chuckled, but then he turned serious again and replied, “If I weren’t in that situation, if I were strong enough to avoid being injured like that...”

He would’ve continued on like that for a while longer, but Elise silenced him with a finger on his lips.

“Not another word, love,” she whispered. “It doesn’t matter that you were injured. You came back, and that’s what counts. That’s all that counts. I’d obviously prefer if you weren’t in such danger, but you survived.”

[She’s speaking sense, boy,] Xaphan chimed in, somewhat ruining the atmosphere that Leon and Elise were cultivating. [If your life is at risk, you should never hesitate to do what you need to do to survive. And hopefully kill your enemy, but survival is paramount.]

[Mmhmm,] Leon responded to the demon, then turned his attention back to his lover.

"It doesn't matter how hurt you are, I'll always be here," Elise said with a glowing smile on her beautiful face. "If you need it, I'll give you whatever you need to heal."

Leon smiled bitterly, it being made clear once again that he couldn't offer the same things. He'd give Elise all he could if the need ever arose, of course, but it was a mere drop in the bucket compared to the resources she could bring to bear as a high-ranking member of Heaven's Eye.

"Can... I'd..." Leon sputtered, not quite knowing how to approach the issue. He knew it was irrational and stemmed mostly from insecurity, but he also didn't know what there was to be done about it other than working on it on his own.

But Elise stared at him with her big brilliant green eyes and waited patiently for him to ask whatever was on his mind. Despite his public stoicism, he didn't hide much from her in private, and she could tell that there was something important that he was trying to work through.

"Is it necessary to live here?" he finally asked, and Elise almost had to take a moment to recover from how unexpected the question was.

"Are you... thinking of staying somewhere else?" Elise asked with a worried tone.

"I was," Leon confirmed, but as Elise's expression turned to one of pain and dejection, he continued. "I love you, and I want to live with you, but there are so many things you've done for me... I don't know, I know that I shouldn't feel this way, but I can't help it. I suppose I would just feel a bit better if, at the very least, we didn't have to live with your mother, even if we're on the opposite side of the estate from her."

"So... you're asking if we..." Elise hesitantly began, not quite sure what Leon was getting at.

"I was hoping we could get a place for ourselves," Leon said, finally straightening out his tongue a little.

"I don't want a place that's just yours, and I *definitely* don't want a place that's your mother's..."

Leon didn't honestly dislike Emilie, despite her revealing his identity to Alix and her threats to him after Elise decided to not have a harem for herself, but he also greatly valued his own privacy, and there was always a shadow in the back of his mind that Emilie's estate wasn't that private.

Leon continued, "But I also don't want a place that's just mine, a place where you're allowed to stay. What I want is someplace that can be *ours*, and ours alone. Someplace that we both pick out, a home for ourselves, a place where we're not beholden, officially or otherwise, to anyone else, such as your mother. Does any of this make sense?"

"Yes, it does," Elise said with a giggle. She climbed into bed next to Leon and snuggled up against him.

"Have anywhere in mind?"

"Hadn't gotten around to planning that far ahead, yet," Leon admitted. "Should I assume, then, that you're on board with this?"

"Of course I am!" Elise animatedly replied. "I've been thinking about moving out for a while, now, since before I returned from Teira, in fact. This was mostly because Mother kept bothering me to find a boy,

but since you and I got together, she's really backed off, so I haven't felt particularly rushed. Besides, it's always hard to move out of your childhood home."

Leon nodded, knowing exactly what she meant. He hadn't much of a choice when it came to leaving his home behind, as it had been quite thoroughly trashed by the team of assassins that killed his father. Still, it wasn't an easy thing to do, despite his relative lack of hesitation.

"How about I put out some feelers and we can decide after they get back to us?" Elise suggested.

"We should probably get on the same page as to what we want, first," Leon said as he pulled her closer with his newly-grown left arm, quietly relishing in the fact that it was back. "Regardless, though, I think we need to split the costs right down the middle."

"You know that that hardly matters to me?" Elise said.

"All right, no need to brag about your wealth!" Leon said as he playfully flicked her on the forehead. "It doesn't matter that you're so rich it hardly matters to you if you pay for the whole thing, the point is to get to something that belongs to the both of us."

"Mmmmm," Elise hummed, her face scrunching up in mock irritation after his finger flick. "I suppose..." she whispered, and the two began to debate exactly what they might want when it came to a house of their own.

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This was the original Ch. 308, but after giving it a re-read, but I didn't think it fit, I couldn't find a place to make it fit, and I felt it was a bit short and insubstantial. Still, I couldn't bring myself to just delete it, so here it is instead, as some bonus content.

—

Gaius stifled a groan as he left Octavius' wing of the Royal Palace. He had just arrived in the capital several hours before as an escort for the Prince's household belongings and had to stay and 'supervise' the steward and servants as they moved everything into Octavius' apartments. In other words, he had to stand and watch and try not to look too bored while everyone else did all the work.

It wasn't a particularly grubby job, but he most certainly didn't appreciate it. He was supposed to be Octavius' squire, and being tasked with this menial of a job was a new low in Gaius' opinion. Being ignored by everyone was one thing, being a comfortable hostage was another, but being treated like a glorified servant was worse than both.

Still, if it got Gaius away from both Octavius and the Earthshaker Paladin, he wasn't going to complain, no matter how a task like this tried his patience. Ever since the events around the Prince's gathering in Valentia, Gaius had been shunned even more than he was by the Prince's faction, namely Octavius himself and both Paladins in his corner. He guessed they might have suspected him for knocking out the Earthshaker Paladin and freeing the girls he had imprisoned and abused, but they obviously had little proof of it otherwise he might've been treated far worse.

Regardless, Gaius had long since accepted his circumstances and that he'd never learn a thing under Octavius about being a knight, though that isn't to say he enjoyed his work. At the very least, though, he was assured that his life and safety weren't in any danger, otherwise Octavius could lose the support of his family. To harm him would defeat the purpose of having him as a hostage, after all.

Gaius walked away from Octavius' apartments, his work for the day complete—Octavius had given him strict instructions not to bother him until the next day, which Gaius was perfectly fine with. He was looking forward to relaxing in the capital, perhaps even spending some time with his older brother, Nicomedes. However, just as Gaius was about to reach the bridge back to the city proper, he heard someone call out from behind him.

"Gaius!"

Gaius turned around to see who it was and saw none other than Tiberias Decimius, one of his fellow third-tier nobles who attended the Knight Academy alongside him.

"Ah, Tiberias!" Gaius exclaimed as he summoned up some measure of enthusiasm after his long and surprisingly exhausting journey from Valentia hundreds of miles to the southwest.

"I *thought* that was you!" Tiberias said as he quickly jogged forward and caught up to Gaius.

"What're you doing here? I wasn't expecting to see you until the knighting ceremony in a few months!" Gaius asked in confusion. He and Tiberias were friendly enough after having known each other for years, but Gaius wasn't too fond of the other man overall. Tiberias almost always acted with all the politeness and dignity that a son of a Duke ought to, but it would occasionally slip for a second or two and Gaius would get a glimpse at something dark within Tiberias. Even before Gaius had started to make a concerted effort to be better, to be less arrogant, he hadn't felt completely comfortable around Tiberias.

"I came here in anticipation of our knighting!" Tiberias said as he fell in beside Gaius and the two began to leisurely walk across the bridge.

"You're a few months early, in that case," Gaius replied.

"You're not wrong, but there was little for me to actually do with the Legate I was assigned," Tiberias said.

"What do you mean? Even if there wasn't much work you had to do, just getting some experience dealing with the paperwork of a Legion should've been enough," Gaius said, though once he was finished, he thought about his own situation.

'Maybe Tiberias has found himself in a similar situation to me, where his assigned knight wasn't treating him with the expected courtesy?' he wondered.

Before Tiberias could explain his reasoning, Gaius changed his question. "Which Legion were you sent, again?"

"Ah, the 12th," Tiberias answered.

"The 12th..." Gaius muttered as he thought back to his childhood geography lessons—the assigned locations were taught in the Knight Academy as well, but Gaius hadn't felt the need to attend those

lessons. Besides, the locations weren't always accurate, since Prince Trajan liked to move his Legions around, as did other Consuls on occasion. "That's the one closest to your family's lands, isn't it?"

"It is," Tiberias said with a smile. "It was a pretty easy job to do, especially since I'm on good terms with most of the nobles around the Aurelianorum. For the most part, all I was able to do was network and get to know some of the knights within the 12th; unfortunately, Legate Aurius somehow managed to fail upward, as he was far too imbecilic to teach me anything of worth, except perhaps how to hide one's own incompetence."

Gaius lightly frowned at Tiberias' harsh words toward his immediate superior. "Harsh words. I take it you won't be joining the 12th Legion after becoming a knight?"

Traditionally, squires joined the units they were in for their squireship, but this wasn't always the case. Some squires, especially those from powerful families, were given the option to choose where they wanted to serve. Gaius fully intended to try and take this route, if he were able, and from the way Tiberias was talking about the Legate he was assigned to, Gaius fully expected him to do the same.

"Hmm, I'm not sure," Tiberias said with a thoughtful expression on his chiseled features. "I haven't given it much serious thought. I'd need to think about where I would want to go instead, though off the top of my head I'd say any of the first five Legions would probably be my choice. How about you? You were serving a Prince, were you not? How did that go for you?"

Tiberias gave Gaius a pleasant but knowing

Chapter 309: Antonius' Report I

About an hour or so after Leon's arm was regrown, Leon and Elise parted ways to see to their own respective business. Despite their agreement to find a house separate from Emilie's estate, they still had other, more immediate things to attend to.

For his part, Leon's first concern was to find Anzu. After the fight with Lewis, the griffin had accompanied the unconscious Leon back to the capital, but he had largely been left alone after Leon had woken up. The Heaven's Eye beastmaster assigned to him gave him a clean bill of health, so other than the servants that brought him food, no one bothered much with him. As a result, he was left in the stables and gardens to do his own thing while Leon was still in bed, which usually meant anxiously pacing back and forth waiting for his human to recover.

When Leon finally did arrive out in the gardens where Anzu was waiting, the griffin was ecstatic, running straight at Leon and almost tackling him to the ground. In fact, if Leon were mortal, he probably would've been badly injured from Anzu's enthusiastic charge; Anzu's head now reached Leon's shoulder and he weighed more than double the average man.

"Hey, there, little buddy!" Leon said as he patted Anzu's head. The griffin's paws were up on Leon's shoulders, his wings were spread and curled around the two of them, and he kept rubbing the top of his beak on Leon's face in an obvious show of joy and affection.

Once he managed to get Anzu off of him, Leon quietly observed the young griffin. He was continuing to grow incredibly fast and was now larger than a small pony. If he wanted to, Leon figured he could probably start to ride Anzu, but the griffin still wasn't large or powerful enough to be used as a warhorse

quite yet—Leon had learned from the Heaven’s Eye beastmaster that took care of Anzu that the griffin needed to be at least fifth-tier equivalent before he could learn to fly, as the use of wind magic was required to get off the ground. Leon couldn’t help but feel some disappointment when he learned this, but at the rate Anzu was growing, he estimated that he and his griffin would be invading the firmament in less than a year’s time, an estimation that the beastmaster agreed with.

Shelving that for the time being, as he had other things to do, Leon moved on. He and Anzu went back inside to tend to his next biggest priority: his armor. The armor had been taken to Elise’s wing after it had been removed, so that’s where Leon went.

The armor was in terrible condition, and the more Leon surveyed it, the more his face fell. The few Magmic Steel plates he had left that covered his left arm, already so resistant to fire and which he had enchanted to even better resist fire magic, had all melted to the point of being largely unusable. Most of the rest of his plates were in more usable condition, but almost half of his Skyflax padding had been incinerated and the silver griffin insignia on his cuirass had melted into an indistinct blob.

All in all, his armor had been utterly ravaged by both Lewis and by Leon’s own use of Xaphan’s power. Fortunately, those damaged parts were at least still salvageable, and since he was staying in the Tower Lord’s own palace, it was easy enough for him to arrange for repairs to start, which he was told would only take about a week.

He’d still need a couple of days after the armor was repaired to remake his enchantments, though he was actually looking forward to that part. It would not only give him more practice with his enchanting skills, it also gave him the opportunity to do them better than he had done more than a year ago. Plus, he could also start working on some of the other enchantments he’d been thinking about since the last time he had done work on his armor.

The more he thought about it, the more Leon’s excitement grew and the more his dejection at the state of his armor lessened.

With that taken care of, Leon decided that his next bit of business would be with the Royal Archives. The Royal Archives was the central repository of knowledge within the Kingdom, and it wasn’t just filled with academic texts and other objects of scholarly interest, it was also where the Kingdom stored all of its records. Leon needed information, and the Royal Archives was the place he knew he’d find what he was looking for.

And he just so happened to be acquainted with someone who worked there.

Less than an hour later, he found himself standing outside the cylindrical building that housed the Royal Archives. He notably hadn’t seen Lapis in its usual place outside the palace, but he wanted to take care of his business before he went looking into that, and so he walked inside with Anzu at his side.

As soon as he entered, one of the receptionists instantly stood up and said, “Please, Sir, no pets or war beasts within the Archives!”

Leon frowned, but he glanced down at Anzu—quietly marveling at how little he had to look down to make eye contact with the griffin as he did so—and said, “Anzu, wait here.”

Anzu gave him a strange look, but he sat down right next to the door, though he stared at Leon's back as the knight walked further into the building.

"I apologize, Sir, but those are the rules," the receptionist said as he gave Leon an apologetic look.

"It's fine," Leon responded. "I'd like to meet with Prince Antonius, if that's possible."

"His Highness...?" the receptionist hesitantly asked as he glanced at his superior.

"We'll have to check with His Highness, first," she said as she stood up and took over the conversation.

"May we have your name and your reason for coming here, Sir?"

"Leon Ursus, I need to check in on something His Highness was looking into for me," Leon answered.

"Very well, Sir, please feel free to have a seat while you wait..." the receptionist said as her colleague took off down the halls toward Antonius' office.

Leon availed himself of their hospitality and sat down in one of the few couches that were in the entrance hall for just these occasions and waited. He wasn't waiting long, as less than ten minutes later, the receptionist returned and informed Leon, "His Highness is willing to see you right now, Sir!"

"Thank you," Leon said as he stood up and began walking toward Antonius' office. As he started to leave the receptionist's line of sight due to the curve of the hallway as it traveled around the building's perimeter, he glanced back at Anzu, smiled, and nodded. Anzu immediately took off sprinting to catch up, and Leon heard both receptionists gasp in shock.

"Sir!" the male receptionist called out as he started to run to catch up with Leon, but he was instantly stopped by his female colleague.

"Don't bother," she said as she sighed and sat back down behind the desk. "That guy's a fifth-tier mage, at least, and if he has business with His Highness then he's far above our pay grade. Best to just leave him be. Besides, it didn't look like his griffin was so ill-trained that he would trash the place."

The male receptionist looked a bit conflicted, but in the end, he submitted to his co-worker's wisdom and let Leon go.

Leon quickly made his way to the Prince's office. When he pushed open the door, he found the place in about the same state as when he was there last, with the walls lined with full bookshelves and the dozen tables covered in books, scrolls, and ancient artifacts.

Antonius was hunched over one of these tables that contained various shards of green metal and three clay tablets. Hearing the door open, Antonius looked up from his work, and after a barely noticeable moment of hesitation, he smiled and said, "Sir Leon! Wonderful to see you!"

"And you, Your Highness," Leon responded as he entered the room and gave the Prince a short bow.

"Please, no need to hold to such formality when it's just the two of us!" Antonius said with an exasperated tone. He had made his distaste for formalities clear when he had met Leon, but Leon wasn't going to let his formal greetings go until he knew the Prince better.

As Leon walked further into the room, Anzu followed close behind, but with a few words, Leon had him wait by the door.

"That's a beautiful griffin you have there," Antonius said once Leon had finally come over to his table.

"Thanks," Leon said with a smile of pride.

"Was he wild?" Antonius asked.

"He was," Leon confirmed. "His mother abandoned him, and I happened across him not long after. He imprinted on me, and we've been almost inseparable since."

"I must admit some jealousy, albino war beasts are hard to find unless they're bred."

"I'm very lucky to have Anzu," Leon said.

"Anyway, what brings you out here?" Antonius asked, his brown eyes gleaming with curiosity. He was fairly anxious around Leon, but his thirst for knowledge far outweighed that anxiety.

"Made any progress on my map?" Leon asked.

"I did," Antonius answered as he led Leon over to another table covered in arcane scrolls and detailed maps of the plane. With a quick scan of the largest map, Leon was unable to locate the Most Serene Republic of Siracusa, the nation that Justin Isynos claimed to hail from, but most of the Bull Kingdom's maps of Aeterna south of the Four Empires were hopelessly out of date, so such results didn't strike him as unexpected.

"Most of the locations that were marked on your map are the locations of cities within the borders of the Four Empires," Antonius explained. "I couldn't point to any common element that links them together, though, as there are still three locations that I couldn't identify."

As Antonius explained these things, Leon scanned the map of Aeterna that he was using, his eyes drawn to every marked location. The map that he had found in the Cradle had three dozen lights strewn all over the plane, and with Xaphan's prison and in the Forest of Black and White that he left out, that left thirty-four marked locations, with more than half of those within territory owned by the Four Empires. Less again the three that didn't seem to correspond to anything, and that left thirty-one cities, including Teira.

"I'm quite curious as to what these points refer to," Antonius said. "I'll keep looking into it, especially since Teira is marked on here, but I haven't a single solid clue as to what they could mean, the map is just too zoomed out to know for certain. Maybe ruins similar to what you found in the Border Mountains, but I'm afraid we don't have detailed enough information of these locations to know about any old ruins around them."

"Thanks for looking into this for me," Leon said. He could make an educated guess that the lights were pointing to major Thunderbird Clan facilities established when the Storm King conquered the plane eighty thousand years ago, but he didn't know if these places had been found and looted yet. If these locations were cities, then the possibility was strong that the facilities at these locations had been found and plundered, but the chances were better that the three that weren't around cities were relatively intact, and to say that piqued his interest would be to make a gross understatement.

“Looking to head to Teira anytime soon?” Antonius asked.

“Wasn’t planning on it,” Leon replied, “though I’d love to make the trip. I didn’t get nearly enough time to sightsee when I was coming south.”

“If you ever go, be sure to let me know, I’d love to have an excuse to poke around and look for anything of note that may be related to these points,” Antonius said with a look of anticipation. “As far as I know, and I’ve made plenty of inquiries and done quite a bit of research, there aren’t any ruins similar to what you described in that ‘cradle’ place in Teira, but I’d still like to look around in the older districts just to be sure.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Leon said. He figured that his family’s archives were what the mark was pointing to, but he wasn’t about to reveal that knowledge to Antonius. Given the way Argent Palace was guarded, he also wasn’t too worried about the Prince finding out about the archives below Argent Palace. No one was allowed access to the site, which kept the place as safe as could be, not to mention the other safety features that Leon had to pass to access the site himself.

“Anyway,” Antonius continued, hoping that he could get his business with Leon concluded as soon as possible, “is that the only reason why you’ve come to visit me today? I was preparing a report to send your way to save you the trouble of coming all this way...”

“No, there is something else...” Leon said. “I’d like to look into the history of vampire attacks within this Kingdom.”

Chapter 310: Antonius’ Report II

“What are you hoping to find within the records of vampire attacks?” Antonius asked Leon, his brown eyes slightly narrowing in muted frustration. Being around Leon made him more than a little nervous, like being around someone with a sword hanging over their head; he didn’t want to be in the splash zone if Leon’s identity was made public and the sword over him finally fell.

“I went on a hunt a few days ago to deal with a werewolf...” Leon began, quickly giving a condensed version of the events of that mission.

“That... is quite the story...” Antonius muttered, his anxiety about Leon’s presence swiftly fading from his mind with all this new information. “A werewolf with a demonic core within its body, a powerful vampire that claimed to own that core, and anecdotal evidence of said vampire serving the same demon as another vampire you encountered months ago...”

Leon nodded along, confirming that Antonius had gotten the details correct.

“So, then, you’re looking for more information on recent vampire attacks in connection with your suspicion that this demon has been attempting to infiltrate this plane?” Antonius asked.

“Something like that,” Leon replied. There was the possibility that his own connection with Xaphan could be exposed with him looking into these matters, but he also couldn’t allow such a powerful enemy to continue on in the shadows, just as he couldn’t allow those that had killed his family to keep doing what they were doing. However, unlike the latter case where he had Trajan doing a lot of the legwork, he had no one to assist him with this vampire situation.

“Have you taken this matter to the Legions?” Antonius inquired, not truly believing that Leon had hidden it, but having to ask anyway.

“I have, and they were brushed off by Sir Caelestius,” Leon answered.

Antonius frowned. “I’m not familiar with the man,” the Prince admitted, “but I don’t think you’re lying, and if there is indeed a demon making moves within our Kingdom, then we have to do something about it. Wait here, I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Leon said, causing Antonius’ frown to momentarily deepen in displeasure. However, the Prince didn’t say a word about it, instead hurriedly making his way to the door. He slowed down a bit as he approached Anzu, but when the griffin didn’t make a move to stop the Prince’s approach, Antonius sped back up and walked out the door.

Leon spent the next twenty or so minutes crouched down beside Anzu by the door, absent-mindedly running his fingers through the albino griffin’s pure white fur and feathers until Antonius returned.

The Prince walked in through the door pulling a cart filled with huge stacks of papers and thick leather-bound tomes. Leon instantly stood up to assist the Prince, even though as a fifth-tier mage, Antonius didn’t really need the help. Leon started unloading the cart onto some free space on one of the nearby tables while Antonius set about clearing it of the stacks of scrolls that covered it.

“All of this,” Antonius said once the contents of the cart had been spread out across the newly-cleared table, “are the records for the past century regarding vampire attacks within the Kingdom. They’re not necessarily the most complete, I grabbed only what I could find on such short notice, but this is a good place to start.”

“What sort of information was recorded?” Leon asked as he grabbed the nearest book and started flipping through the pages.

“Everything,” Antonius replied. “From the first reports of suspected vampire activity all the way to the reports of the knights that were dispatched to deal with them. All the details of these missions were recorded and filed with the Royal Archives, though as I said, there are probably a substantial amount of records that I wasn’t able to find in my cursory search.”

“You still seemed to find quite a few,” Leon observed. The book he had grabbed had hundreds of vampiric incidents recorded, and there were fifteen more books of similar size on the table. There were also the stacks of papers that Antonius had brought back, which seemed to be additional reports that hadn’t been indexed from what Leon could tell by quickly skimming over what he could see.

“So, then, we’re looking for vampires associated with a fire demon,” Antonius stated. “Unfortunately, most of the vampires encountered within the Kingdom are quite weak, so it’s not always possible to know what kind of demon they are associated with. That being said, I’d be willing to bet that most of these reports have the demon’s element reported.”

“Good,” Leon said as he began to start looking at the reports in his hand in earnest.

The two stayed there, silently flipping through hundreds of reports, taking notes, and occasionally confirming something with the other. It wasn’t until three hours had passed and most of the reports had been scrutinized that they finally called a break to go over what they had learned with the other.

For his part, Antonius' face was ashen, and his legs shook as he stared at his notes. Leon, on the other hand, having largely expected his results, wasn't nearly so distressed. The extent to which Amon had infiltrated the Kingdom was astounding—or at least, the sheer number of vampires that had made pacts with fire demons was staggering.

"More than half of mine were fire vampires," Antonius said as he collapsed into a nearby chair. The implications of an immensely powerful fire demon so deeply entrenched within the Kingdom were beyond terrifying.

"I'd say almost three-quarters of the reports I read through had fire vampires associated with them," Leon stated as he faced the Prince and leaned back against the table.

"How... how hasn't this been seen, yet?" Antonius wondered aloud. "If there are so *many* fire vampires running around, how hasn't this been addressed yet?!"

"How often is it that people come and go through the records of previous vampire attacks?" Leon asked.

"No clue," Antonius replied. "I don't really associate with the scholars of the Royal Archives much, I prefer to be left alone to my own research..."

"Well, given how quickly Sir Caelestius brushed off my concerns, I'd say that there aren't many people who come and closely scrutinize these records after the reports have been made," Leon said as he rested his chin in his left hand, propping the arm up with his right. "I can't imagine anyone who looks at those records as a whole could miss that at least two-thirds of the total vampires that have surfaced in this Kingdom had contracts with fire demons, so that must mean that after the reports have been filed, they get stuck here and forgotten. Or at least, I *hope* that's what's happening..."

"What do you mean?" Antonius asked. "Are you suggesting that there's someone covering this up?"

"I'm not suggesting anything," Leon replied. "All I'm saying is that it's a possibility, and that I hope it isn't reality."

Antonius clenched his teeth and said, "I have to tell Uncle Trajan about this. This sort of thing can't be ignored!"

"That would be most helpful," Leon responded. "I have already told His Highness about my concerns, but in the absence of conclusive evidence, he couldn't bring himself to believe me."

"I... I *suppose* I can understand," Antonius conceded. He didn't believe Leon either until he actually took the time to look at the records. The Prince then grabbed a few pieces of paper and a pen, then began to hurriedly scrawl a preliminary report as quickly as he could and not have it be illegible. He was finished in minutes, and he handed the report to Leon. "Find my uncle, give him this."

Leon nodded, then took off for the main palace complex with Anzu at his side. The receptionists gave him a strange look as he passed, but neither said a word to him; even if they had the inclination to try and reprimand him for bringing Anzu into the Royal Archives, the serious look on Leon's face prevented any attempt to stop him.

As soon as he was outside, Leon started running. There was enough evidence to suggest a possible vampire conspiracy within the Kingdom, and since it was starting to directly threaten him instead of the Kingdom itself, Leon didn't care about maintaining a dignified image.

When he returned to the main courtyard, he again noticed Lapis' absence, but he couldn't stop and look for the giant. Instead, he continued straight for the Royal Palace's front doors, to the slight concern of the four guards standing outside of them. There were other guards around the courtyard as well, though none of them were in Leon's way.

"Slow down!" the strongest guard shouted. Since he was a fifth-tier mage as well, Leon complied, though he couldn't help but scowl. As Leon closed the distance between them at a more reasonable pace, the guard ordered, "Identify yourself!"

"Leon Ursus, a knight in Prince Trajan's retinue!" Leon growled back.

The guard was about to ask for proof of I.D, being more than a little put off by Leon's running toward the Royal Palace, but as he opened his mouth, one of his subordinates, a fourth-tier mage, said, "I remember him, Sir Ursus went before the Royal Court a few days ago, Prince Trajan did affirm his status."

With an endorsement from a Royal Guard, there was little to stop Leon from entering the palace, and he did so with a brief glare at the guard who had cost him a few precious seconds, and the guard responded in kind. Once inside the atrium, though, Leon had no idea of where to go to find Trajan.

"Can I help you, Good Sir?" asked one of a number of nearby receptionists. There were thousands of people who worked in the Royal Palace and thousands more who had business with people within. As a result, she was used to seeing people walking in with little idea of where to go.

Leon approached the desk she was behind—one of two on either side of the doors—and said, "I'm looking for Prince Trajan's office."

"I see... and your name?"

Leon identified himself, but he had to use his I.D card for verification. As soon as he showed the receptionist his Heaven's Eye I.D card, there was no more waiting around, the receptionist instantly told Leon where to go. It didn't matter that she didn't ask him what his social status was—she was only a second-tier mage, so she couldn't see through Leon's power, and since she didn't know he was a fifth-tier mage, she couldn't then assume that he was a knight—and it also didn't matter that she didn't ask Leon about his relation to Prince Trajan. All that she needed to see was the Heaven's Eye I.D and the impossible to fake magical markings upon to give Leon the information he requested.

At the least, she knew that Leon was affiliated with Heaven's Eye, as no one else would have their I.D issued by them, and any representative of Heaven's Eye would, of course, be qualified to speak with the Prince.

Not to mention, if there were any shenanigans going on with Leon, then she was sure that the palace being full of the best warriors and most powerful mages in the Kingdom would stop him.

Not even five minutes after walking into the Royal Palace, Leon arrived at Trajan's office. The Prince's secretaries recognized him and immediately informed Trajan of his arrival and the Prince had him shown in.

"Leon!" Trajan said with a wide smile on his chiseled face. He looked as tired as Leon had ever seen him, his skin had lost all the color that the ride from the Bull's Horns had put into it, and he didn't seem to move with the energy that Leon was used to. And it had only been a little over a week since they had arrived in the capital.

Leon walked further into the office as Trajan rose to greet his young knight.

"It's good to see you up and about, boy!" Trajan exclaimed. He waited a few moments for the door to close before he pulled Leon into a brief hug and then directed the younger man into a nearby chair.

"How are you doing?"

"I'm doing much better than I was a few days ago," Leon said with a smile. "I've come with some troubling news..."

"What do you mean?" Trajan inquired, his face turning serious.

Leon answered by handing over the note that Antonius had given him, and Trajan accepted it with a look of apprehension.

Trajan quickly scanned the document, but he was so taken aback by what he found within that he had to read it again just to process the information.

"This..." the Prince quietly muttered, at a bit of a loss as to how to take this information. However, that indecision lasted all of about two seconds; Trajan sprang to his feet and said to Leon, "You and Antonius are going to tell me everything you know about this situation. Right now."