

Storm King 351

Chapter 351: Elise's Frustration

The man hidden in shadow was gone, his pillar of ice shattered. Naiad's water dragon lowered her to the ground and she took off back toward the ambush point. It was lucky that the owners of the villa that she and the darkness mage had been standing atop of didn't seem to be home, but there was little sense in sticking around.

From their brief clash alone, Naiad could tell that he was extremely powerful, easily able to stand against her if they truly fought. In the back of her mind, she was a bit grateful that the man had run away, as she never would've done so and she could easily see herself losing that fight. She could also see herself winning, but she guessed that their fight would be closer than she would've ever liked.

No, it was better that the man ran, and Naiad didn't pursue. She knew that it was safer and smarter to link back up with Leon and tell him about what just happened.

Leon didn't mince words when Naiad reappeared through the trees and approached him looking like she wanted to talk.

"Not here, we have to leave," Leon curtly stated, the wrecked carriage behind him surrounded by bodies. He hadn't sensed any magic senses washing over them, but there was always the possibility that he and Naiad had been seen, and his armor at least was quite distinctive.

[You're just going to leave all of that behind?] Naiad asked, nodding in the direction of the bodies. Some of them had caught fire from both Leon and the fifth-tier guard's use of fire magic, but it wasn't enough to destroy much of the evidence of what had just happened.

"Not a lot of point, I didn't leave anything incriminating, and all of this has likely been seen." Leon was confident, but he was still in a bit of a hurry. He hadn't expected a battle to break out between Naiad and some random powerful mage, and he wanted to beat feet. The only consolation he had was that Naiad was a relative unknown in the city, and that it was extremely unlikely that anyone who might've seen them would recognize her.

[Back home, then?] Naiad asked, effortlessly referring to Leon's villa as 'home', which Leon was in far too much of a hurry to notice. In fact, Naiad herself didn't even notice her ease with the term.

Leon nodded and began to disappear, his ring flashing a brilliant green as his magic power flowed into it.

Naiad didn't stick around, either. Her body collapsed into water, sank into the ground, and found its way to the Naga River first through groundwater, then through the small rivers and canals that had been built throughout the noble district.

For his part, Leon's route was largely on the road, but as he made his way back home, he happened to notice a large contingent of Legion soldiers rushing toward the ambush point. It had been less than ten minutes since he had launched his ambush and based on how long it took the Legion to arrive at his house following the vampiric assault upon it, he considered this almost insultingly good timing.

'I guess the Legion may have stepped up their response time, after all,' Leon thought, a frown forming on his face. He was a bit torn between being grateful their response time was so bad, since it gave him the

opening he needed to kill Tiberias, but on the other hand, he would've greatly preferred it if they had reached his home sooner so that he wouldn't have had to rely upon Naiad for his survival and the survival of his friends and family. Or maybe it was just because it was Tiberias who had been attacked this time and not him that accounted for the increase in response time.

Invisible, it was easy to return home unseen and unobstructed. Leon had to dodge a few noble carriages and caravan-like trains of followers, but as was the norm for the noble district, the roads winding through the short hills were largely deserted. But Leon didn't take that as license to slack off, and he maintained his invisibility until he opened the gate in the wall that now surrounded his villa. Of course, his return to the world of the visible wasn't entirely by choice, as his home was, at this point, so warded that he literally had no way in without disrupting his invisibility.

Leon scurried inside, swiftly shutting the gate behind him. After the knighting ceremony at the Knight Academy parade grounds, the party at Marcus' estate, and his murder of Tiberias, Leon was mentally exhausted. It wasn't time to rest, though, as there were a few more matters he had to attend to while he bunkered down at home for the inevitable fallout from what he had just done to both arrive and clear, first and foremost being the Heaven's Eye beastmaster who was training Anzu in the front yard of his estate.

Elise hadn't started on expanding her herb garden yet, so there was plenty of room for the beastmaster to get Anzu used to running around with weight on his back. It wasn't much longer before Leon would have to participate in the young griffin's training once more, as Anzu was steadily approaching the fifth-tier. At the fifth-tier, Anzu was all-but guaranteed to gain access to powerful wind magic which would allow him to fly, and would then be strong enough for Leon to start using the griffin as a war mount. He might have to hold off on wearing armor for a while, but the beastmaster estimated that in six months, Leon would have his own flying mount.

Leon couldn't wait, both for the training, and for its result. Anzu had long since grown large enough that he had to stay home and not follow Leon around everywhere, which the young griffin hadn't taken well, at first. Fortunately, he was now relatively used to not being around Leon anymore, though he still went absolutely insane with joy whenever Leon returned home.

Case in point, as soon as the griffin saw his human walk in through the gate, he completely abandoned training with the beastmaster in favor of charging at Leon, waving his wings and chirping with happiness. Leon was almost knocked right over; Anzu was quite large now, probably weighing three or four times as much as a full grown man, if not more.

Leon spent a few minutes with his griffin before letting the beastmaster—who was mercifully unperturbed at the sight of Leon in strangely nondescript armor with a few splatterings of blood scattered over him—have him back to continue the training, and when he walked inside the villa, he found that Naiad was already there waiting for him.

"Have any trouble getting back?" Leon asked as he pulled his armor back into his soul realm, only now realizing how strange he must've looked to the beastmaster. He didn't think the beastmaster would do anything about how suspicious he looked, though, given that he worked for Heaven's Eye, which, as a neutral and international party, wasn't subject to the same laws and restrictions as most citizens. To expect a member of Heaven's Eye to report on someone like Leon, who was extremely well connected

with the organization's leadership in the Kingdom, was to expect that member to act like a fool. No private citizen would willingly make an enemy of Heaven's Eye if they could avoid it, no matter how suspicious their actions—or so Leon now had to count on, as he wasn't about to go out and threaten the beastmaster or explain himself in any way.

[None,] Naiad whispered into his mind. She stood by the back door and watched Leon walk over to a couch and collapse into it. She then moved over and took a seat right next to Leon, practically right up on him.

Leon was far too tired to care, though, and he simply muttered, "Good..."

[About that darkness mage, though...] Naiad said, and she recounted for Leon her brief exchange and fight with the mage hidden in shadow. She made sure to emphasize his power and how much trouble she thought she'd have with him if they got into a proper battle.

"Did you get a good look at him?" Leon asked, his face changing from one of shock into muted anger as her story continued.

[I did not, he remained in his shadow the entire time,] Naiad said.

"But I thought you said you could see him?" Leon asked.

[I was using my magic senses,] Naiad explained. [I could see his shadow and his form within, I couldn't get enough detail to pick him out of a crowd, though.]

Leon clicked his tongue in annoyance at the whole situation, simply saying, "A shame..."

A man who possessed enough power to survive an encounter with Naiad wasn't someone Leon could afford to ignore, and he was fairly certain he already knew who that man was, or at least, who he was probably connected to: Justin Isynos. It was possible that he had yet another powerful enemy out there who possessed darkness magic, but the line about him being a concerned father looking out for his daughter stood out to Leon. He didn't know too many people that well, and Justin Isynos was the only one who seemed to have enough power and the connection to someone Leon knew to fit the person who Naiad described.

Leon briefly contemplated telling Naiad about Justin, but after a couple seconds of thought, he decided against it. He still didn't fully trust Naiad with that kind of information, even though he could trust her motives were straightforward. She wanted his child, and after that, he figured she'd leave. He didn't want her running around with sensitive information, at least until he got to know her better. Besides, if what she said was true, then she wasn't strong enough to kill Justin on her own—at least, not without exposing both of them to immense risk of death.

And speaking of child-making, Naiad had been subtly inching closer to him on the couch during their entire exchange, and Leon was so lost in thought that he didn't notice until he turned back to look at her and found her face mere inches away from his. He jerked back in surprise, but he was already at the edge of the couch, so he couldn't get much distance from her without getting up.

[What's wrong?] Naiad asked in concern, her deep blue eyes capturing Leon's and not letting him look away.

"I... uh... nothing..." Leon sputtered in an attempt to not anger Naiad. For all that he didn't appreciate how she had inserted herself into his life, he couldn't deny that she was a powerful ally worth keeping around as long as he could.

His embarrassment over the situation only grew when he felt awareness coming from his soul realm. He didn't know if it was Xaphan or the Thunderbird checking in on him, but either way, he didn't much enjoy the audience.

[Can I-] Naiad began, but she was interrupted when the back door was flung open from the outside, revealing a less than happy Elise and the merciful absence of his friends. However, Leon's red-headed lover looked positively pissed, obliterating any relief he felt at not having to explain anything to Charles, Henry, or Alain.

Leon immediately rose to greet her, but she barely looked at him as she pulled off her shoes and made for an armchair. Once seated, she momentarily glared at both Naiad and Leon before asking, "Is it done?"

"It is," Leon confirmed.

[... With a few complications...] Naiad added, and she quickly repeated to Elise what she had told Leon about the mage she'd fought.

Before Naiad could begin, though, Leon contemplated stopping her. With Elise's friendship with Valeria to consider, Leon hadn't yet told her about Justin Isynos' connection to his family's downfall, and he didn't want her to poke too much into that. Ideally, he'd find some way to deal with the situation before things got too hairy, but as more time went on, he more and more came to realize that that wasn't going to be a good option for him. He needed to be open and upfront with Elise. He knew that, but he also didn't know how and when to broach the topic. So, in the end, he let Naiad speak unimpeded.

Elise was, of course, disturbed at the thought of someone of comparable power observing Leon, especially since it seemed they were connected to one of her friends—Leon wasn't friends with any ladies other than her and her circle of friends, apart from Alix, at least to her knowledge.

"I'll look into that later," Elise said with a scowl. "In the meantime, Naiad, could you please give me and Leon some privacy? I appreciate everything you've done for us in this regard, but we need to talk alone for a few minutes..."

Leon's heart sank. He'd heard it said that the guilty always know why they're in trouble, and in this case, he felt like the saying was accurate; he'd practically abandoned Elise at the party. They'd both known what he was going to do, but he knew that there had been an expectation that he would do so with more grace. Instead, he was rudely abrupt and thoroughly embarrassed Elise in front of everyone at the party.

He could understand why she wasn't happy with him right now.

[... I suppose...] Naiad replied. She felt like it was more important to discuss their opponents but seeing the look on Elise's face convinced Naiad not to push the issue. She slowly rose from her seat and, with one last slightly regretful look at Leon, returned to her guest rooms.

Leon remained quiet. He felt like it was best if he let Elise speak first, and if he were to hastily offer apologies before she began then it would only make things worse.

Elise, however, didn't say a word for what felt like an eternity. She stared at the wall after Naiad left, her face stony and impassive.

Finally, after long enough that Leon was about to break his silence, she said, "You left me..."

"I did..." Leon quietly replied, his voice dripping in shame.

"Normally," Elise continued, her voice quivering in anger, "it's polite not to leave so abruptly. The people we were with took notice, and if they're questioned then your name might come up in connection with Tiberias' since you left so soon after him!"

Leon nodded, not interrupting her despite her pausing for a moment. He was prepared to be questioned about Tiberias' death, but that they left a party at the same time was hardly damning evidence. Fortunately, their disputes weren't public knowledge, so Leon had no public motive to kill him.

"There are apologies to be had, people to explain yourself to..." Elise continued, moving on from that topic and seeming as confident as Leon was in dismissing any investigations given how little evidence there was that any of them were involved. "I understand why you did it, but the way you left the party left much to be desired..."

"I understand," Leon whispered.

"Do you really?!" Elise demanded, her voice rising for a second before she got herself back under control. "I... understand why you left. I know that Tiberias had to be taken care of, that you had to leave to do that. I understand that, I do. But..."

"But it still sucked," Leon finished for her, and she nodded in agreement. "I could've picked a better way to do that, perhaps telling Marcus that I couldn't stay for too long or coming up with a better explanation. Been more polite when I left so that I didn't seem to be abandoning the party..."

"Yes," Elise said. "I had to stick around and got questioned a lot about you after you were gone, mostly about what you were in such a hurry for and why you left like that. Fortunately, most people understood when I repeated that you had to be here for Anzu's war beast training, but I still had to deflect a lot of very insistent and probably judgmental people, and I hated every moment of it."

Leon could understand that perfectly well. He hated interacting with people in general, and that was something he had to do for himself. Having to explain and make excuses for someone else would be the worst.

"I don't want that to happen again," Elise said, her tone still angry and frustrated. "I get enough of that at work, I don't want that to slip into our time, as well."

"Then I'll never do it again," Leon said. "Shouldn't be too hard, so long as I never get invited to another party again..."

"There'll be invitations," Elise said with more than a little bit of depression leaking into her angry tone. "I've had to live with invitations as a fact of life since the day I was born. We're just going to have to be very selective with whose parties we attend."

“How about none?” Leon asked with a cheeky smile, and Elise couldn’t help but giggle despite her anger.

“I suppose that *would* work,” she said, smiling for the first time since coming home. “We’re going to piss off a lot of people that way...”

“That’s fine,” Leon said. “I don’t plan on staying in the Bull Kingdom forever anyway.”

Elise’s eyebrows shot up in curiosity and slight shock, quickly dulling her frustration and cooling her anger. For all that Leon had learned from the Thunderbird, he still hadn’t been entirely forthcoming with Elise about his future plans. The most she knew was that he wasn’t planning on staying in the Legions for too long, maybe a decade or two at the most.

“My goals are a little higher...” Leon said, smiling at his lady. “Have you ever heard of the Nexus?”

Chapter 352: Political Trap

The events surrounding the death of Tiberias took the entire city by surprise. For a noble to be so brazenly murdered in the streets was unheard of in the Bull Kingdom. It had happened before, but not in living memory; these days, most nobles kept their business out of the public eye. If assassins were to be involved, they wouldn’t strike out in the open.

Of course, Tiberias hadn’t been exactly killed in the open, he’d been killed on a deserted road in the noble district. Still, that hardly made much of a difference. At the end of the day, the son of a powerful Duke was still dead, killed in a place that should’ve been safe.

What was more, Tiberias’ death was immediately overshadowed by a duel between a pair of freakishly powerful mages in the city, and there were far more people talking about it than about the death of a nobleman too young to have earned much name recognition.

Duke Euphemius Decimius’ rage was immense, though. When he arrived at the ambush point and collected his son’s body, he was inconsolable and alternated between hysterical weeping over Tiberias’ body and spitting fiery wrath practically second-to-second. With Tiberias dead in his arms, Euphemius had completely abandoned his noble demeanor.

This wasn’t unexpected, of course. Euphemius had other children, but Tiberias was his oldest son and his heir. His wives, for the most part, raised his children, but Tiberias was the one he had spent the most amount of time personally raising.

In the weeks that followed, no one connected either Leon or Naiad to the ambush. No one even showed up at Leon’s villa asking for an interview, even though he and Tiberias had been at the same party less than an hour before Tiberias’ murder and had left at about the same time. Leon suspected that that was because he was a knight in the service of Prince Trajan, but as the man who killed Tiberias, he wasn’t about to complain.

There was most certainly an investigation, of course, but it didn’t seem to touch Leon, and he wasn’t going to rock the boat on that front. If the investigators didn’t suspect him, then asking questions about it would be the worst thing he could possibly do.

There were a few unintended consequences to Leon’s actions, though few of them actually impacted him in any meaningful way. However, they greatly impacted Trajan and the King’s advisory council.

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“I want whoever murdered my son found and executed!” Duke Euphemius raged, his normally handsome and chiseled features marred by three weeks of mourning and lack of care. In fact, this meeting was the first time since he’d gone to collect his son’s body from the ambush site that the Duke of Aurelianorum had been seen outside of his estate.

“I assure you, Your Grace, that we are doing everyth-“ the Consul of the Central Territories began, attempting to soothe the Duke’s wrath and bring some patience back to him. The Legions had little power to question the landed class, which made finding leads on Tiberias’ killer difficult since the young man was killed in the noble district after coming home from a party filled with nobility. Unfortunately, that meant that the investigators couldn’t even get a guest list for the party to speak with the commoners there, and all other leads into the matter had turned up empty.

However, after almost two years of economic setbacks from Heaven’s Eye and no answers to his multiple attempts to figure out why they had done something like that, along with the perceived insult of more resources going to finding out the identities of the two eighth-tier mages who got into a duel practically right next to the place where Tiberias had been killed, Euphemius’ patience wasn’t what it once was, as was plain to see for the members of the advisory council.

If the Central Consul were to try and explain why this was important to the investigation—the two eighth-tier mages fighting right next to where Tiberias had been killed were almost certainly related despite those few mages who witnessed the latter parts of the ambush through their magic senses not supporting that theory, and besides, it was effectively the only lead that they truly had right now—Euphemius would only grow angrier and perhaps even reach the point of violence if the Consul were to try and explain that to him.

The Duke was a smart and rational man, of course, he already knew everything that the Consul would try and explain. He didn’t need to be talked down to like an emotional child, he needed those base and foul assassins that murdered his son to be made a head shorter.

“You’re not doing enough!” Euphemius shouted. “I want heads on fucking spikes!”

His behavior, while incredibly rude and uncouth, was understandable, and few tried to calm him down. Of course, it was one thing for him to act like this in the advisory council, surrounded by peers and men and women of similar rank, it would be another thing if he were to behave like this in public. Still, while most people present were willing to forgive the grieving father a few harsh words, Trajan was not.

“Duke Decimius,” the immense Prince began, his deep resonant voice echoing throughout the chamber and carrying a hint of killing intent that sent a chill down Euphemius’ spine that quite effectively cooled his anger, “please remember that you are before Royalty.”

Trajan needed to say no more; Duke Euphemius glanced around at the other Lords and high officials in the room and, as if waking from a nightmare and realizing where he was, he quietly sat back down. He wasn’t sitting at the main table as he wasn’t officially a member of the council, though he was still of high enough rank to be permitted entry to the chamber, especially when the business they were discussing had to do with him and how the consequences of his son’s death would play out.

“Now, then,” Trajan said once Euphemius had quieted down, “let’s get to the *constructive* part of this meeting.”

“Yes,” August agreed, and Trajan seamlessly handed off the speaking role to his nephew, causing a few noble eyebrows to rise in mild offense, not the least of which being both Octavius and the Central Consul. “In the past couple of months, there have been two high-profile attacks on prominent residents of the noble district-”

August had undergone quite the transformation after the awakening of his blood, as was plain for everyone to see. His body was more thickly muscled, his skin looked healthier, and he radiated youthful energy. It was obvious what had happened, and it made more than a few nobles nervous, since awakening the blood of the Sacred Bull did a lot to legitimize a claimant in the eyes of the loyalist nobility. Chief among those who felt the pressure of August’s blood awakening was his rival and elder brother, Prince Octavius.

“Oh?” Octavius interrupted. “I have obviously heard about the murder of Lord Tiberias, but who was the second of these ‘prominent’ residents?”

“Sir Leon Ursus,” August responded. “His villa was violently attacked by a nest of vampires not too long ago! Surely you remember this?”

“A northern barbarian who happened to receive a knighthood is hardly a ‘prominent’ member of the nobility, no matter whose daughter he happens to be fucking,” the elderly Countess of Lindinis venomously stated, to the agreement of many in the chamber. Leon was a Legate and a knight in the service of Prince Trajan, but his name alone was enough for these men and women to dismiss him outright. It didn’t matter that he had a Prince and the local Tower Lord on his side, though that was usually enough for people to watch their tongues where he was concerned.

The Countess of Lindinis, on the other hand, had a quality unique to those who were old or incredibly entitled—in short, people who didn’t think they’d have to deal with consequences—and spared nothing for the young knight.

Trajan glared at her and said, “While your opinion is valuable, My Lady, it’s not always *appreciated*. Civility is a noble virtue, is it not?”

“Indeed it is,” the Countess agreed, though her tone was almost sharp enough to cut the council table in half, “but civility is wasted on the uncivilized.”

Before Trajan could respond, August cleared his throat and said, “Let’s not get off track arguing over semantics and who is or isn’t ‘prominent’. The fact of the matter remains that there was a large attack perpetrated by vampires on a member of my uncle’s retinue, and a violent and deadly assault upon the party of Tiberias Decimus. This meeting has been called, in part, to address these issues and ensure that this does not lead to a rise of lawlessness within the city. As it is, I wouldn’t be surprised if people were losing faith in this Kingdom’s ability to protect them!”

“What I want to know is why in the name of the Ancestors was a savage targeted by vampires?” the Central Consul asked, ignoring much of what August just stated. “What is he hiding that he warrants the level of violence they tried to enact upon him?”

"I agree that this 'Leon Ursus' warrants investigation," Octavius said. "Perhaps we might find something that you don't want to find, Brother?" When August gave Octavius a blank, questioning look, Octavius continued with the smile of a spider who had just caught a gnat in its web, "Our loyal members of the 1st Legion had even begun a preliminary investigation, but at the word of you and our dear uncle, that investigation was called off. What is it about Leon Ursus that you two don't want us to know?"

"Leon Ursus is not pertinent to this discussion," Trajan said. "The merits of launching an investigation into him is not for this council to discuss. What *is* our purview is how to deal with what very much seems like a rising tide of violence in the city."

"Yes," August said with some gratitude as he and Trajan quickly deflected away from the possibility of investigating Leon—both knew his name and saw little benefit in letting it leak, at least for the time being. "I propose that we increase Legion patrols in the noble district. Our response times in these incidents has been appalling, to say the least. It took at least fifteen minutes for our soldiers to arrive at the scene of Lord Tiberias' murder, and more than *half an hour* to reach Sir Leon's villa. Who's to say how long it might take them to arrive if any of *your* estates are attacked?"

No one said anything, but there were few smug faces around the table. The nobles quite enjoyed the lack of Legion oversight in the noble district, even if it meant they had to rely upon their private retainers to protect their own estates.

"I, then, call it to be voted upon," Trajan said, wasting no time with debate, which certainly ruffled a few feathers around the room. "All in favor of increasing Legion patrols, raise your hands."

For most decisions, little more was needed than a simple majority. The sole exceptions being matters to do with foreign policy and warfare, which was to say matters dealing with foreign states in what little capacity that the advisory council was authorized to administer in the absence of the King and without calling the Assembly into session.

In this case, less than a quarter of those at the table raised their hands, and they were all common-born officials. Both the landed and landless nobles, who comprised more than half of the council, kept their hands down. The Countess of Lindinis actually snorted in amusement at the sight of August's measure failing by such a wide margin, and Octavius gave his younger brother a condescending smile.

"Brother," he began, speaking down to August as if the latter were a child, "such drastic measures need not be taken. A few scattered incidents are nothing to be alarmed about, it's best not to make a mountain range out of a few molehills."

"Why not? As Duke Decimius may attest, there are lives on the line," Trajan said, eliciting a glare from the Duke.

"Not enough to justify such a drastic and unnecessary change," Octavius replied.

"So, then, are we to believe that the Lords of this Kingdom do not require protection from the Legions?" August asked, his face one of stony impassivity.

His attitude took Octavius by surprise, and the Second Prince felt like something was off here. However, before he could say anything, the Countess of Lindinis said what was on the mind of most of the other nobles present.

“Of course we don’t need the protection of the Legions!” she vehemently insisted. “What happened to Lord Tiberias was a tragedy, but such an overcorrection is hardly needed!”

“In that case,” August said as a slight smile momentarily graced his lips and he gestured to one of his assistants. “you wouldn’t mind we made a few *adjustments* to the current Legion deployments?”

August’s assistant quickly passed out a sheet of paper to the voting members of the council, upon which were a pair of simplistic maps of the Bull Kingdom divided into its five territories. On the first map they recognized the current Legion deployment—there had already been a temporary redeployment recently due to the vampiric threat, leaving the current Legion count at six Legions in the west, six in the south, eight in the center, eight more in the north, and twelve in the east. Below that map was what August was proposing, a permanent redeployment to last beyond the end of the vampiric threat, whenever that might be.

August’s proposal was to leave the west and south with a mere four Legions apiece and reduce the Central Territories to a paltry five Legions. Still enough for the royal demesne in all three regions to remain fully patrolled and defended, but it took away a hundred and twenty thousand professional soldiers from lands that seemed to every day fall more and more under Octavius’ sway. Octavius had already essentially won over the nobles in these territories, and August didn’t want to give him half of the Legions in the Kingdom, too.

To that end, the final count of Legions in the second map was four in the west, four in the south, five in the center, twelve in the north, and a staggering fifteen Legions in the east.

Many of the nobles in the room, including both Octavius and the Central Consul stared blankly at the second map, unsure what to make of it. August wasn’t going to wait for their response, though, and pressed onward with his pitch.

“Since all of you profess that you do not require the Legions to remain safe, I did a little digging and came to the conclusion that you all, in fact, are correct. We can safely downscale Legion presence in these regions and maintain the operations that we are currently running without trouble. However, the recent Valeman raid in the Northern Territories, the war with the Talfar Kingdom, and the rise of vampires across the Kingdom—but especially in the sparsely populated regions of the north and east—has shown to me that these Legions are needed in these theaters far more than where they are now. Thus, I propose these redeployments.”

“All in favor, raise your hands,” Trajan said, not giving the nobles time to really think over the issue—he wasn’t technically required to, and though it was incredibly rude, neither he nor August wanted Octavius to come up with some non-hypocritical way to keep those Legions where they were.

While this move had been in the works for a while, the real problem with it was timing. The nobles were loath to give up their privileges and resented Legion oversight, so it was a pretty safe bet that they could successfully swing this and deprive Octavius of potentially one hundred and twenty thousand soldiers, but both Trajan and August doubted that the other Prince would take this lying down. However, Trajan and August were banking on the nobles having more to gain from getting the Legions out of their hair than they had in letting them stay so close to their lands. And with both Trajan and August—among other government officials, including those not on the advisory council—pushing for more Legion patrols

in response to the violence in the city and the uncovered vampire threat, they felt it was a proposal that was quite likely to pass.

Of course, these Legions had been stationed where they had been for the express reason of keeping an eye on those nobles, and moving them away would tacitly increase the autonomy of the King's noble vassals, but in this case, August felt they would be doing much more good away from these territories than within them, at least until the conflicts between himself and Octavius had been put to bed.

Octavius, of course, didn't raise his hand, and neither did the Consul of the Central Territories. In fact, many nobles who would stand to gain from less Legion patrols around their lands didn't raise their hands. However, many others who were more loosely aligned with Octavius saw the benefits of a smaller Legion presence around their land, and in the end, the measure gained the council's approval with a little over half of the votes.

Octavius' face was the very picture of serenity, but inside he was a mess of anger. He couldn't say anything to keep those Legions where they were without alienating some of his support and potentially appearing to be a hypocrite, but he also greatly wanted those Legions. With the council now approving the measure, though, they were now essentially lost to him for the immediate future.

"There's another matter to discuss," Trajan said, pressing forward now that they had some momentum.

"The Serpentine Isles," August said with a smile, "spit on the image of the Bull Kingdom with their recent disregard for the terms of their surrender more than fifty years ago. For years, now, they have failed to provide to the Bull Kingdom the tribute required of them, and that cannot stand! Thus, I propose we send the 3rd fleet on an expedition to the Serpentine Isles and reassert their tributary status!"

Again, Trajan didn't give the other members time for debate. It had, however, much less potential for controversy, since piracy had greatly declined after the subjugation of the Serpentine Isles by the Penitent Paladin more than fifty years ago. Besides, most of the nobility's land was land-locked, and so they didn't worry so much about the fleets watching over them as they did about the Legions. Everyone agreed that the Earls of the Serpentine Isles needed to be brought back to heel before they turned back to piracy, which they all believed to be quite likely, as well as the need to maintain the dignity of the Bull Kingdom on the world stage.

As a result, this measure passed with quite a few more votes than the previous one did, even though it deprived Octavius of a fleet. Still, though, with thirteen of the remaining fourteen fleets operating from the south and the west—the remaining one technically operated from the south but was based out of Ariminium—so he ended up grudgingly voting for it. It was hard to argue against maintaining superiority over the Serpentine Isles when he aspired to be King; he had to maintain the dignity and prestige of the Bull Kingdom, after all.

With that, the meeting ended, with both Trajan and August feeling like it had been a resounding success.

Octavius, on the other hand, had lost seven Legions and a fleet, at least for a while. He was not happy.

—

Octavius slammed the door of his office shut so hard it almost broke the magically reinforced frame. He was alone, save for the Sapphire and Earthshaker Paladins; with Gaius now a knight, he was essentially relegated to being one of Octavius' followers rather than his squire, though since he was acting as a hostage for Octavius to hold over his family, leaving Octavius' retinue wasn't really an option. Gaius was happy enough to leave Octavius' immediate proximity, though, even if he was still stuck as a knight in his service.

The Paladins were silent; they had been present in the meeting of the council, and they had seen this great loss.

"I think..." Octavius began before pausing in hesitation. After a couple seconds of thought, though, he seemed to regain his nerve. "I think that August is getting a bit too full of himself. My uncle, too. I think we might need to get rid of them both, and I think I have just the method for doing so..."

Chapter 353: Practice

Leon slowly exhaled, his chest rising and falling in time with the wind. Down below where he sat upon the throne platform, Xaphan watched with great interest. There wasn't much wind in Leon's soul realm under normal conditions, but there was still more than in his own soul realm. However, now that Leon was quietly meditating with the Thunderbird in her human form sitting right beside him, it almost seemed like they were actually outside, sitting on the side of a mountain in the physical world for how real the wind seemed.

The fire demon had to admit that it was a pleasant change of pace. The air in Leon's soul realm wasn't exactly stuffy, but it was a bit too still to be natural. To add in some decent wind made it seem a lot more lifelike, and thus, a lot more tolerable.

Of course, if Xaphan wanted to, he could probably get Leon to let him outside for a while, but that would be both incredibly risky in such a demon-phobic land and incredibly demeaning. Xaphan wasn't a dog to be let out to piss in the grass before coming back inside, he was a Lord of Flame. He would deal with the very mild discomfort of his situation for as long as he needed to.

Besides, the wind magic that Leon was learning was making him stronger, and the stronger Leon became, the easier it would be for Xaphan to recover. With the Thunderbird now personally training Leon, it seemed like Xaphan would be seeing some fringe benefits relatively soon.

Up above, on the marble platform, the lantern chamber that would cover the throne had been built, but Leon and the Thunderbird were sitting on the platform landing at the tops of the steps outside of the door. It was best to practice wind magic outside, after all, for however much 'outside' counted in Leon's soul realm. But that wasn't the point, Leon would practice with more seriousness in his villa's yard later, but right now he needed to get the proper technique down pat.

He managed to get the hang of creating wind mana thanks to the Thunderbird's patient instruction, and now he was practicing its use. Perhaps it was the Thunderbird's blood within him, but the longer he thought about the concept of flight, the more he felt restricted with his feet firmly planted on the ground. He could fly in his soul realm, but it just wasn't the same.

He needed to learn how to achieve real flight, and wind magic was the way to do that—to that end, he'd gone so far as to put his study of water magic on hold until he could liberate himself from the ground's tyrannical grasp.

Right now, he'd conjured a small cyclone around him. It was a weak thing, barely strong enough to lift dried leaves off the ground, but it had been created with Leon's magic power. Since he was in his soul realm, that had the effect of summoning a gentle breeze to flow through the place, but that had little effect on his performance.

"A little bit more..." the Thunderbird whispered as Leon started to struggle to maintain the cyclone. "If you can't manage this, then flight will forever be beyond your reach..."

Leon held on. He'd only just gotten a handle on creating wind mana a week or so ago, so it was still quite difficult to maintain for longer than a few minutes at a time. Fortunately, the Thunderbird seemed to be more than a little embarrassed and ashamed at the lack of assistance she had provided in the past to the rest of the clan and was determined to fix that with Leon. In that spirit, she was giving him no small amount of instruction.

"Keep it moving, keep it moving," she commanded, closely observing Leon's cyclone. She made no comment about how weak it was, nor did she make any onerous demands of him. She just wanted to push him to use wind magic as long as he could. The more he pushed himself, the longer he'd last.

But this was a new kind of magic for Leon, and he couldn't hold it for long. With a deep gasp, he released his hold on the cyclone and it spun away from his body, quickly dissipating into the air of his soul realm. The wind that had filled his soul realm correspondingly died down.

Leon's magic body didn't sweat, but he was still exhausted and mentally spent. He had plenty of magic power left, but even so, he needed a few minutes of rest before he could try again.

"Not bad," the Thunderbird said as Leon collapsed onto the marble platform, which had essentially become a porch for the small throne room. "Not great, either. Your father was much better with wind magic than you are when he died."

"He was thirty-eight, I'm only nineteen!" Leon protested.

"Excuses are just that: excuses," the Thunderbird said. "Another's circumstances don't forgive your own failures."

"You really have a way with words..." Leon sarcastically grumbled. "More motivating words have never been spoken."

The Thunderbird shrugged and replied, "You're doing fine enough, I suppose. You *could* be doing better, and better is what I want you to do."

"I'll get it, I just need more practice," Leon said.

"Don't neglect your other elements, though," the Thunderbird warned. "Wind magic is incredibly useful, but you would be much better served—"

"Yes, yes, I know all that," Leon said, interrupting his ancestor. "I'll never be good enough with wind magic to use it in a fight, because to become good enough I'll have to practice to the point of neglecting

my training with lightning magic. Since my blood gives me a greater affinity for lightning magic, it's more efficient for me to train with lightning rather than wind..."

"You're not wrong," the Thunderbird admitted.

"But I want to fly, and I'll train as hard as I need to in order to get there," Leon said, his eyes blazing with an intensity that was only present when he thought about getting vengeance upon those who'd destroyed his family. "Speaking of, any progress with that transformation stuff?"

"None to share with you," the Thunderbird said. "As I told you previously, my descendants never managed to transform into more thunderbirds, or even take on any of my physical traits. As a result, I'm working with essentially no information here. I can't even guarantee that I'll find a way, especially since I have no physical body to experiment upon..."

"Are you asking to experiment on me?" Leon asked, a smile tugging at the corners of his lips.

"Maybe I am, would you be willing to indulge me?" the Thunderbird asked.

Several minutes later, Leon found himself back in the physical world. He stood alone in his expansive backyard; Elise was at the Heaven's Eye Tower, Naiad was doing whatever she filled her days with, and Anzu was training with the beastmaster in the front yard.

[Good...] the Thunderbird gently whispered into his mind. Leon had raised his arms above his head and began to channel his power, but he didn't change its element type, it was just his regular old mana flowing through his veins. [Walk forward,] the Thunderbird commanded, and Leon complied, walking across his yard all the way to the dock.

He paused there, waiting for further instruction. He didn't care what the Thunderbird demanded; if it meant he gained transformation powers, even if that transformation was limited, then he would do whatever was needed.

Within reason.

[Call upon lightning, but don't actually use any of it,] the Thunderbird ordered.

Leon quickly compressed his magic power and let it flood his body with lightning magic, though he restricted it enough to hide its power from anyone who might be watching. A few arcs of lightning escaped his body despite his greatly increased control over his power due to the Thunderbird's lessons, causing his body to spark and crackle with golden lightning.

[Now wind...] the Thunderbird said.

Again, Leon changed his mana type to wind, but it wasn't nearly so smooth a transition as it was from element-less mana to lightning mana.

[Water...]

This part wasn't so easy. Leon had only the barest grasp of water magic, but he managed to form some water mana anyway. It seemed to be enough for the Thunderbird because she gave him no more commands.

[That's all I need, continue to practice as you see fit,] she said, and like that, she was gone.

Leon briefly considered making some kind of sarcastic quip about her lack of goodbye, but given what she was doing for him, he held his tongue. She could be as rude as she wanted and he would take it, because she was training him, she was his ancestor, and she was looking into transformation for him.

Well, maybe he wouldn't take it entirely lying down, but the Thunderbird's pride wasn't so fragile that she'd fly off the handle over a few sarcastic retorts.

Fortunately, Xaphan wasn't so restrained.

[Look at that,] the demon said, finally gaining the license to speak again with the Thunderbird gone, [flying away like she owns the place...]

[Got something to add, demon?] Leon asked as he sat down upon his throne, returning to the physical world. [Like, say, that mental communication technique? I noticed that Naiad uses something similar, maybe I should just ask her for instructions...]

[Oh, please do, I don't mind sharing responsibilities,] Xaphan lazily replied.

[I get it, you know,] Leon said, his tone turning far too reassuring for Xaphan's tastes, [I get why you don't want to teach me. It's that you can't, you're too much of a failure to do so. I don't pretend to know your problems, but there's clearly something preventing you from fulfilling your side of our bargain. You're obviously not all you're cracked up to be...]

[So all those fire enchantments I've taught you, those don't count for anything?] Xaphan testily asked.

[Nope,] Leon cheerfully replied. [Compared to psychic communication, a few new ways to set things on fire are nothing.]

[It takes a true uncultured cretin like you to boil all I've shown you into 'a few new ways to set things on fire',] Xaphan growled.

[Prove me wrong, demon,] Leon shot back, reveling in Xaphan's slowly rising anger.

[I could, there's nothing technically keeping me here in your soul realm,] Xaphan said.

[Wait, what?] Leon asked.

[If I wanted to, I could come and play a little bit...] Xaphan said with a strange and uncanny air of playfulness.

[So, if need be, I wouldn't need to call upon your power, you could actually come out to fight?!] Leon demanded to know.

[Potentially,] Xaphan answered. [Doing so would doubtlessly out you as being associated with a demon and likely land you a one-way trip to the headsman's block if I were to be seen, but if things were to be dire enough, I *could* come out and fight. If need be. If I *must*.]

[Why am I only hearing about this now?!]

[I might have an answer for you, but it seems you have an audience that you should probably take care of first...] Xaphan said with the smile on his face evident in his tone.

Leon scowled, chalking this up to the demon being his usual lazy self. It wasn't the first time that Xaphan had omitted a few details about their relationship, and Leon suspected that Xaphan had more capabilities that he wasn't letting Leon know about. To an extent, Leon understood, since Xaphan claimed to be much weaker now than when he was at his prime and coming out of a safe place to fight in a largely strange and unknown place wasn't the smartest of ideas. Still, there were plenty of times when Leon would've liked to know that Xaphan wasn't stuck in his soul realm and could've helped more than he did.

But Leon didn't dwell on it for longer than a couple of seconds. He was used to the demon acting purposefully and almost spitefully mysterious, and it was always better to act like it didn't get to him rather than giving the demon the satisfaction of seeing him getting upset over the matter.

Leon turned to see what Xaphan meant by 'an audience' and found Naiad standing on the back porch watching him. She didn't have any smile on her face, she wasn't even staring at him like she wanted to devour him whole as she often did, she was just calmly watching him train.

It was actually a little more disturbing than her usual behavior. Leon was a bit apprehensive about what this change might mean. He cocked an eyebrow in curiosity and began to hesitantly walk back to the villa from the dock.

"What's up?" he asked Naiad once he drew close enough to comfortably speak.

[Thinking,] she said.

"What about?"

[I... I would like to continue working on fulfilling our contract...] Naiad gently whispered into Leon's mind. She didn't make eye contact with him, as if she were embarrassed at the admission, and her uncertain tone lent to that impression.

Leon nodded. They'd already had sex once, but that had been weeks ago. Still, his reluctance to do so again wasn't that high, he'd just been waiting for Naiad to make her own move.

"Let's wait for Elise to get home," Leon said, not wanting to do anything with Naiad without his more 'official' lover there with him.

After all this time, while Naiad wasn't accepted as anything more than a guest, Elise hadn't treated her with outright hostility or like she was imposing upon them by staying in their villa. It was a cordial relationship, but that didn't mean it wouldn't be cheating if Leon and Naiad did something sexual together without Elise's knowledge.

Naiad nodded her acceptance of that, and the two walked back inside to wait for Elise to come home.

Chapter 354: A Kiss

Leon and Naiad walked back inside the villa. Leon was done with training for the rest of the day, not that he much wanted to anyway after Naiad indicated she wanted to sleep with him again.

The memory of their first time together was still quite potent. Leon wasn't sure why, but when he, Elise, and Naiad all lay together that time, it had been one of the most intense and passionate experiences of his short life. As a result, while his brain was telling him to not go too far, to keep in mind exactly what Naiad was and what she wanted, his body was screaming at him to go all in, to drag Naiad straight to the bedroom and get to work making babies.

But Leon was quite in control of himself; there would be no dragging of Naiad to bed in his future. Or at least, in his near future.

'Or maybe just my immediate future... At least not until Elise gets home...' Leon couldn't help but think as he followed Naiad back inside, his eyes drifting downward in appreciation for the tailor who made Naiad's pants so tight.

[Hesitating to take this woman?] came a scornful voice from Leon's soul realm.

[Shut up, demon,] Leon venomously replied. [How I conduct myself in regard to the women I am involved with is not your concern!]

[All right, no need to be so prickly...] Xaphan said, his amusement plain for Leon to hear.

'There is a need to be prickly, if I'm not, you'll never shut up!' Leon silently bellowed at Xaphan, but he made sure not to share it with the demon. It was fortunate that only the thoughts that he specifically directed at the demon and willed for Xaphan to hear reached the demon's ears. He oftentimes enjoyed bantering with Xaphan, but when it came to more serious things like his and Naiad's relationship, Leon didn't want to hear any sarcastic quips from the demon; he just wanted to focus on the task at hand.

Leon and Naiad sat down in the living room, Leon in an armchair and Naiad on the couch. Leon sat in silence while Naiad stared at him, her deep blue eyes never wavering from his. This led Leon to feel more than a little awkward, and after just a few minutes of silence, he was all-but begging in his mind for an end to it.

"... Soooo," Leon said, drawing the word out because he didn't have anything to say, he was just making noise to try and alleviate his awkwardness and get Naiad to stop staring so intently at him. She hadn't stared at him like this before, and he very much wished that she would go back to that habit, though it seemed like his wish was in vain. "... I have to ask, what's bringing this on?"

[What do you mean?] Naiad asked, tilting her head in curiosity.

"We've been living together for weeks, and yet you're only now coming to me with this now... I can't help but wonder why."

[I see...] Naiad whispered, and her eyes mercifully slid from Leon as she leaned back on the couch to think. [Given how much you resisted fulfilling our contract, I figured you would need some time to adjust to our new circumstances. It helped, I think, that first time, but it wasn't enough. But we've still been wasting time and I don't know how much time I have or how much time that first mating might buy me. I felt so much better afterward, but I have a dreadful feeling that that relief's only going to be temporary. Whether it's weeks or months or years, I don't know, but I do know that I shouldn't wait now that I have a mate. I've already waited too long, we should be doing this a lot more than we have been... I've given you time, and I think we should get back to it.]

Leon pursed his lips a bit and he nodded in understanding. He knew why she was doing this, and he had long since stopped hating her for it. She didn't want to essentially die, to lose her mind to gorgonism. If he were in her shoes, he couldn't honestly say that he would be doing anything differently. In fact, he couldn't even rule out the possibility that he'd be far more aggressive once he found a willing partner.

That Naiad was being so accommodating and willing to wait was far more than Leon could ever hope for.

Of course, there was a growing part of him that didn't mind Naiad being around. The longer she stayed, the more Leon grew used to her presence, even if all she did was stay in the guest rooms, only leaving to get herself food from the kitchen.

[There is... something I'd like to ask,] Naiad began, and she began to look everywhere but at Leon, which the latter noticed. [I have seen many mating pairs of humans since leaving my territory, and I would like to ask about some of these customs I've seen...]

"Is that what you've been doing all this time?" Leon asked. "Whenever you're alone in your rooms, you've been using your magic senses to watch the people of this city?"

[Yes,] Naiad shamelessly and unhesitatingly answered. Most of the villas and government buildings in the city were warded to prevent such espionage, but the homes of commoners weren't so protected; if Naiad wanted to, she could watch a commoner family every moment of every day.

"If you'd indulge one question before we get into more... *involved* subjects, how far can you see with your magic senses?" Leon asked.

[After reaching the... 'sixth-tier', I think you call it?] Naiad asked, continuing after Leon nodded in confirmation, [After ascending to the sixth-tier, a mage's magic senses have the range of their soul realm. I am what you might call an eighth-tier, so my magic senses can almost stretch across this entire Kingdom.]

"*That far?*" Leon incredulously asked. He couldn't even begin to fathom how much information that was. He could already see almost an entire mile from himself, but 'just' that much was already far more than he could ever hope to handle. He could basically only focus on one thing, like Tiberias' carriage, for instance, in that radius. Seeing everything within range was effectively impossible for him to do, the sheer volume of information overwhelmed even his magic-enhanced brain.

[That's my range, I obviously can't see and process everything in that range,] Naiad honestly answered, calming Leon's shock a bit.

"That's still a terrifyingly long way," Leon said, wondering if he had ever been out of her sight after leaving her cave back in the Talfar Kingdom's western borderlands.

[Anyway,] Naiad said, steering the conversation back toward what she wanted to discuss, [I was hoping you could answer a few things for me...]

"I don't pretend to be an expert on human love, but I'll answer what I can," Leon said as he braced himself for whatever questions Naiad wanted to ask.

[Why do humans kiss each other?] Naiad asked, her eyes turning back toward Leon and her expression one of utter seriousness. [What purpose does it serve? Is it just an expression of affection?]

Leon blinked in surprise. A question about kissing was certainly not on the list of things he was expecting to hear from Naiad, but he was certainly grateful it wasn't something more *in-depth* that she wanted to know about. Of course, that question could always come later, but Leon was grateful anyway.

"I'm not entirely sure," Leon honestly said. "I can say it's certainly an instinctual thing, and I like kissing Elise, that's for sure... I'm not sure about practical reason, though. Perhaps it has to do with how our bodies get used to each other? Like we pass on diseases and what not between us, not that disease is really an issue for mages... But it's absolutely an expression of affection. I can't speak too authoritatively on exactly *why*, but it feels good to kiss someone you love."

[I see...] Naiad whispered. [Would you kiss me, then?]

Leon frowned a bit. Perhaps stemming from his borderline wild upbringing, he wasn't the most physically intimate person around. Physical contact with people he wasn't familiar with was something he found quite uncomfortable. He had no problems kissing Elise, but she was his lover and he was comfortable around her. Naiad, on the other hand, he wasn't so close to, and he hesitated to fulfill her request.

Given how reticent he usually was to fulfill her requests, though, Naiad wasn't too surprised when Leon took an unusual amount of time to respond.

"I'm not... entirely opposed to the idea," Leon said, measuring his words as carefully as he was able to with his heart hammering his ribs, "but..."

[You want to wait for Elise?] Naiad asked.

Leon nodded.

[It's a good thing that Elise has come home, then,] Naiad said, turning her head towards the front door.

Leon immediately projected his magic senses and saw what Naiad had already seen: Elise had just walked through the front gate.

When Elise walked inside, she found both Leon and Naiad staring at her as they sat in the living room.

"What's going on?" she asked, her tone one of both worry and playful teasing. "This isn't an intervention, is it? You're both making me feel a little self-conscious here..."

[I would like to mate again,] Naiad bluntly replied.

Elise blinked in surprise, and she glanced at Leon.

"I wanted to wait for you," he replied with an almost apologetic smile directed at both her and Naiad, implying he had already agreed but wanted to be courteous to her.

For that courtesy, she was grateful, but she was still a little surprised and shocked at how... *unromantic* it was for Naiad to simply state her desires so plainly.

“... ok,” Elise quietly responded, but the more she thought about it and the more she remembered how surprisingly incredible the last time they had lain together had been, the more into it she started to be. “Ok,” she said again, this time with much more enthusiasm. “Let me take a few minutes to settle in and get ready...”

Naiad smiled in happiness and almost jumped to her feet. She managed to fight off the urge to drag both Leon and Elise to her bedroom; she was getting better at dealing with Leon and Elise’s preferences, and she knew that she was still considered a guest in their home. It was better not to get too forceful.

As Elise took off her shoes and grabbed a snack, she and Leon made small talk about her day. She seemed to move slowly, but Leon could see a few jerky motions here and there that betrayed her rush; she was pretending to not be too interested in sleeping with Leon and Naiad again. Leon felt like he could read a lot into why she was acting like this, but he didn’t, counting himself lucky that she was allowing this at all.

She had told him months ago that she wanted him to start a harem, since in the Bull Kingdom it was a social expectation that a noble of their respective ranks would have one, thus practically requiring one of them to have one to not embarrass themselves, but the issue of Naiad was one that he and Elise really needed to talk more about. After spending weeks with her in his and Elise’s house, Leon was coming around to the idea of adding Naiad to the family, but as an equal part of the family, he needed to know Elise’s thoughts on the matter. For all he knew, she was only willing to indulge the river nymph because she thought their relationship was temporary, and if he and Elise each made contradicting assumptions about Naiad’s place in their lives and never reconciled them, then it would only lead to pain.

Of course, it would all be meaningless if he got Naiad pregnant and she immediately bolted, but at the very least he and Elise would need to talk about what they would do if Naiad stuck around.

‘After this...’ Leon thought with some hesitation. The longer Naiad stayed, the more permanent her presence would be, and the less they had sex, the longer she’d stay. It was best to definitively work out just where the river nymph stood with them and what their relationship would be with her once Naiad had what she wanted.

At some point. He was also quite fine with letting things play out naturally for a while longer before making any demands that would permanently change all of their lives.

With Naiad waiting on them, they couldn’t stall forever. Once Elise made it clear to Leon that she was ready, Leon rose from his seat, Naiad’s expectant gaze locked on him the entire time.

First, Leon went over to Elise, taking her by the hand and pulling her out of her seat. The two lovers wrapped their arms around each other in a tight embrace and kissed. After several long seconds, they then parted and looked to Naiad. They walked over to the river nymph hand-in-hand, and Leon held out his free hand to her just as he had for Elise.

Naiad cocked an eyebrow, but smiled and took it, letting Leon pull her off the couch. She expected that he would then take the two to his bedroom, but instead, Leon took a step forward and softly pressed his lips against Naiad’s.

The river nymph was so surprised that she froze for a moment, her mind going blank. She'd asked for a kiss earlier, but after Leon's subsequent response, she had thought it would take more pushing on her part to get one.

The kiss didn't last long. Leon didn't do much more than press his lips against Naiad's, but when he pulled away, he stared into her eyes and gave her a wily smile. That smile lit something in Naiad, and she decided that she wasn't going to wait any longer.

However, Leon moved first. Holding both Elise's and Naiad's hand, he steered them both towards the bedroom, all three with bashful but eager smiles on their faces.

As soon as they were in the bedroom and the curtains were drawn, it was like an explosion of clothes; all three were more than ready, and they wanted to get down to business. Unlike last time, though, Naiad wasn't going to be an idle participant.

She didn't wait for Leon to go to Elise first, instead she practically charged at Leon, tackling him into the bed and pressing her lips against his—though she accidentally bumped her nose against his as she went in. With a few minutes to think about it, she'd decided that she had liked it when he'd kissed her, and now she wanted to do it more. It felt similar to when she and Leon first had sex; their magic power was intertwining and connecting them on more than a physical level, and her magic power started to go wild in her body in response.

When Leon kissed her, he hadn't exerted too much pressure; he was relatively tender and gave Naiad plenty of room to pull back if she had wanted to. Naiad, however, was far more intense, pressing her lips against Leon's like she was trying to fuse them into a single set. It was clumsy, but electric for her.

Elise wasn't going to stand there and wait her turn. Once Naiad and Leon were on the bed, she swiftly joined them, crawling over and pressing her face into Leon's neck. Naiad didn't seem to notice and didn't let up on Leon for what seemed like an eternity.

When Naiad finally did become aware of Elise's movements a few moments later, the two women locked eyes for a brief moment, Naiad's seeming to glitter in triumph at Elise for moving first. Elise smiled back, accepting the river nymph's challenge, and brought one of Leon's hands to her ample chest as she let one of hers slowly trace his chiseled abdomen underneath Naiad.

Not to be outdone, Naiad broke the kiss and leaned back, staring directly into Leon's eyes. Leon was already set to go, so she positioned herself directly over his hips and angled him into place. Before she could drop her own hips, though, Leon wrapped his hands around her waist and tossed her down onto the bed beside him, opposite to Elise. He then rolled over on top of Naiad.

A quick glance and a smile to Elise was all his fire-haired lover needed to know what he wanted, and she scooted a bit closer as well, taking a position beside the two.

Leon kissed Naiad once more, teasing her lips with his tongue a bit before moving down to her neck. After snaking a hand beneath Naiad's back, Leon slightly lifted her and pressed their chests together.

With Naiad's mouth now free and Leon holding her in place, Elise slid even closer, until her own face was mere inches from Naiad's. The river nymph's eyes seemed almost glazed over at this point despite Leon not even entering her yet, and for all her power, she could barely muster the strength to turn her

head to see what Elise was doing. The first indication she got that Elise wasn't hovering near their faces for Leon, though, was when Elise leaned over and gently kissed her, doing little more than tenderly brushing her lips against Naiad's.

Naiad had never looked at Elise as a potential sex partner. Her ideas of sex were purely for the purposes of mating, the indescribably pleasurable experience that was her first time notwithstanding. She couldn't make a child with Elise, and so Naiad had never truly considered the two of them doing something like this.

However, with Elise's lips against hers and with Leon's lips against her neck and his arms around her, Naiad's body seemed to almost vibrate in joy. Her magic power blossomed within her, driving away any concerns that she may have had that her body was beginning to gorgonize again. Her brain went into overdrive trying to deal with so much pleasure, and she barely noticed Leon and Elise's hands running up and down her body. She didn't notice Leon holding her even tighter and raising her further, allowing Elise's fit form to snake in beneath her. She didn't notice Leon gently setting her back down in Elise's arms, nor did she notice Leon's lips moving downward.

Leon kissed his way down from her neck to her—in Leon's opinion, at least—delightfully large chest, pausing for a moment to lavish some attention upon her there. At the same time, with one hand on Naiad's chin, Elise turned the river nymphs head to the side where they could continue to kiss, while her other hand wrapped around Naiad's ribs just below her breasts and held her in place. Leon then raised his free hand and lightly grasped Naiad's other breast, drawing a light circle with his thumb around her nipple.

After a few blissful seconds, Leon moved on from Naiad's breasts and continued his expedition south. He gave his red-haired lover's pale arm, tightly wrapped around Naiad's lower ribs, a few quick nibbles, then moved on down to Naiad's tight bronze abs.

With his lips and tongue, Leon traced the river nymph's toned waist, while Elise moved both of her hands to take advantage of Naiad's recently-freed breasts. So much stimulation finally began to elicit a few moans of pleasure out of the river nymph that were muffled a bit by Elise's own lips, and that was enough for Leon and Elise to pause for a moment. But only a moment.

After giving Naiad's abs plenty of affection, Leon kept moving downward, his hand drifting down from her lower back to her butt as he did so. Upon reaching Naiad's hairless lower lips, Leon gave the tanned river nymph a few more kisses; though not the type that Naiad had earlier demanded of him, she savored them all the same, especially when he focused on the aroused nub at the top of her slit.

Naiad was already quite wet and ready down there, but Leon spent plenty of time making sure of that fact, gently biting, sucking, and licking her lips until he was beyond any doubt, reasonable or not, that she was ready for the main event.

It was only then that he straightened up and let Naiad back down onto the bed, fully entrusting the river nymph to Elise. For a moment, though, he and Elise's eyes met each other. Elise was still busy kissing Naiad, but she still gave Leon a smoldering look; it was just enough for Leon to know that this was all right to her, that there was no more reason for him to hesitate.

Leon took ahold of Naiad's legs and raised them up a bit, setting them upon his hips. He then positioned himself at Naiad's entrance and slowly thrust into the river nymph.

Naiad screamed into Elise's mouth from the pleasure and her body began to twitch. Her legs instinctively tightened and wrapped around Leon's waist, preventing him from leaving her. Any semblance of awareness that Naiad had left was obliterated, and everything that happened next was a blur of pleasure and rapturous fulfillment.

Chapter 355: A Question of Family

Naiad was completely out of it. She laid on the bed, barely conscious after her second time having sex with Leon and Elise. Perhaps it was because Elise was participating or because Leon was far less hesitant, but this time had been even more satisfying than their first.

Leon and Elise, on the other hand, were still very conscious, and it took them almost an hour after finishing with Naiad before Elise collapsed into Leon's arms, straddling his hips and resting her head on his well-built chest while he leaned back on a small pile of pillows, his own arms around her to hold her close.

Their breathing was heavy, their bodies covered in sweat despite the amount of magic power at their command usually preventing such a physiological response. The entire bed was a wrinkled, slightly damp mess, and feathers were strewn everywhere—whilst in the throes of passion, Elise had accidentally torn apart a pillow she had braced herself against when Leon had taken her from behind.

Even after the two managed to steady their breathing, for what seemed like hours neither could muster the energy to do much more than smile, giggle, and kiss each other. They had satisfied each other so completely that neither Leon nor Elise could blame Naiad for passing out.

Elise was the first to break the silence.

"... That was... incredible!" she quietly exclaimed, but even then, she felt like her exclamation didn't quite do justice to the pleasure of the experience.

"It certainly was," Leon said as he adjusted his position on the small pile of still-intact pillows, Elise still lying on his chest with one of his hands gently stroking her shapely back.

He glanced over at Naiad on the other side of the large bed and, after seeing that the river nymph was still essentially unconscious—she was still breathing and her aura was quite vigorous, so he wasn't worried that she was somehow seriously injured—he realized that this was probably going to be the best time to talk about her, oddly enough. Most other times he would be worried that Naiad would be listening in on their conversation, so he would've had to find the time to visit Elise at the Heaven's Eye Tower or something like that.

"I have a question," he stated with such an air of seriousness that it caused Elise to stiffen up, for which he was duly saddened. The few minutes directly after sex would normally be a time to rest after their exertions, but there was something to be said for serious discussions in the afterglow of good sex, so he didn't hesitate further.

"What's on your mind?" Elise asked, her tone one of slight anxiety.

"Naiad," Leon replied, explaining himself with the river nymph's name alone but continuing anyway. "I... I don't think I'd mind if she were to stick around for a while..."

Elise adjusted her position, not quite getting off Leon but propping herself up on her elbows and off of his chest so she could look him directly in the eye without craning her neck.

"What do you mean?" she asked, her eyes narrowed with the gravity of what Leon just said.

"You told me you wanted me to start a harem," Leon said, speaking slowly and methodically so that he could clearly state what was on his mind. "You gave up on your right to have a harem with the demand that I start one of my own; if neither of us has one, then it would embarrass us within the noble circles of this Kingdom."

"I did say that," Elise confirmed, though her grim tone hadn't changed. "It's expected of us if we're to both be taken seriously..."

"Naiad forced herself into our life, she demanded that I reproduce with her or she wouldn't have ever let me leave that cave. Or at least, I think she would've eventually just taken me by force. Given her physical state at the time, though, with the threat of transforming into a Gorgon right around the corner and the loss of her mind that would accompany it, I can't honestly blame her for taking more drastic action. I can't even say that I would conduct myself any better were I in her shoes.

"Still, she was relatively patient even under her circumstances, and she let me go with nothing more than a promise. When she showed up again, she proved herself willing to kill to protect us-"

"She proved herself willing to kill to protect *you*," Elise corrected Leon, with some amount of bitterness and accusation in her voice.

"I suppose," Leon conceded. "However, that didn't stop her from saving us, your mother and father, and our friends from those vampires. And since then, she's continued to be nothing but patient and relatively supportive. She even proved herself willing to kill again for us when she accompanied me when I took care of Tiberias.

"She's beautiful, she's powerful, she's rendered us great help on multiple occasions, and somehow, she makes our sex even better."

"Do you love her?" Elise suddenly asked with suspicion.

"I'm not sure," Leon honestly responded. "I think that could come in time, but she's not going to stop until she's pregnant with my child, so we're always going to be connected in at least that way. We're going to be family in one way or another, so I think it's best if we make it official, if we make it a little more formal. If you want me to start a harem, I want to start with Naiad. I want her to be my second lover."

Elise stared into Leon's eyes looking for any sign of hesitation, for any sign that he didn't quite mean what he said, but she saw nothing but an earnest conviction that told her he was deadly serious. He genuinely wanted Naiad to join their family.

If Elise were honest, the rational part of her mind told her that this was a fantastic idea. It would essentially make their family untouchable with such a powerful being on their side. However, the

emotional part of her was still angry at Naiad for the contract she made with Leon, for forcing him to take responsibility for her condition just because he had the blood of the Thunderbird.

And then Elise thought about Valeria. She'd known Valeria for years now, and the silver-haired woman was one of the few people that Elise was actually close to. Elise didn't know many people well enough to consider them friends, and when she learned that Valeria *did* like Leon in a romantic way, she was ecstatic. It meant that one of the people she considered herself closest to in this world could become her bona fide relative—technically her sister-in-law if they were to both marry Leon. To Elise, the best option for Leon's second lover was Valeria, though she hadn't yet gotten around to broaching the issue with Leon again after his first, almost brutal, rejection of the idea. She'd tried to get them closer, to bridge the gap between them somehow, but the two were so quiet that her subtle touches hadn't had any effect, yet.

Elise sighed, then lowered herself back down onto Leon's chest to think. The emotional part of her that was still angry at Naiad had been weakened greatly by how much having Naiad in her and Leon's bed had improved their sex life, and she would be lying if she said she would be happy to see Naiad leave them, if only for that reason. Still, having been so forceful with Leon when she and Leon had first met was a grave offense in Elise's book.

'Of course, how was I any different?' Elise asked herself, remembering how shamelessly she had acted when she had first met Leon. She had been acting as an attendant at that time, and though she had gotten a bit handsy with some of the other attractive and powerful nobles who used the Heaven's Eye Tower in Teira in the course of her duties—as was expected of Heaven's Eye attendants—never had she been as forward with them as she had been with Leon. None of those other people meant anything to Elise, though, and she had never let them touch her back; none of them had lit such a fire in her as Leon had with his power compared to his youth, his gold card, and his adorable lack of social experience.

Ultimately, when she had learned that Leon was coming to the capital to join the Knight Academy, Elise had decided to come home, following him to the capital. She hadn't forced him into a magically binding contract, but how different were her actions to Naiad's on a fundamental level?

At the very least, given the fact that Elise had fallen in love with Leon almost from the get-go, she could hardly blame Naiad for wanting a piece of Leon, too. That much, at least, gave Elise more than a little pride in her choice of partners—it would've been a sad thing if no one else but her wanted Leon, as she would've been alone in her love.

Elise's eyes drifted down toward the sleeping Naiad. The river nymph seemed like she was beginning to stir from her pleasure-induced repose, so Elise had the perfect excuse to kick this can down the road a little more. However, Elise decided not to, she wanted to respond to Leon's sincerity with her own.

"There are a few things I would want to discuss with Naiad first, in due time," Elise said, "but I would tentatively agree with you; Naiad would make a perfect addition to our family. If you wish to invite her into it, to be more than just a guest in our home that we occasionally sleep with, then I will support you in it."

"I don't think I love her, but there is definitely some fondness for her growing within me the longer she's around," Leon quickly reiterated, Naiad's awakening having not slipped his notice. "I think this is the best thing to do, especially given what I believe we're going to face in the future..."

Elise nodded, then turned her head back toward Leon, and the two lovers held each other a bit closer and kissed once more. The three of them were going to have to hash out a lot of things between them if this was going to work, but Leon had at least convinced Elise to give it a try.

The world slowly faded back into her awareness as Naiad woke up. She was somewhat aware of Leon and Elise in the same room as her and that they were quietly talking, but about what she couldn't say. Her deep blue eyes cracked open, but even her eighth-tier eyes were momentarily overwhelmed by the light that poured in, and she immediately shut them again.

The bed was soft and comfortable despite the exertions it had endured, so Naiad decided to just stay there for a few more minutes and relax. Her limbs felt like jelly anyway, so moving was out of the question.

However, the more she examined herself, the more Naiad realized that her body was feeling the best it ever had. She was so relaxed lying there in Leon and Elise's bed that she almost felt weak, but her magic power flowed through her body faster than it ever had before, faster even than before she had started to feel herself gorgonizing. It wasn't like she was stronger, though, more like... she couldn't think of the best way to put it, but 'healthier' would be fairly accurate to say. She wasn't yet pregnant, though, that much she could tell, despite feeling a heat in her abdomen proving that it wasn't due to lack of effort on Leon's part.

Leon and Elise. Naiad's thoughts turned toward them, and as the details of all they had done came back to her, she could practically feel their hands upon her. She couldn't help but squirm a bit as her bronze skin tingled in response, and she couldn't help but wonder what exactly was going on with her body.

It was disconcerting enough for Naiad that she momentarily contemplated returning home and consulting with her mother about what was happening to her. She didn't think that this sensation was specifically bad, but the pleasure she felt being with Leon and Elise couldn't possibly be normal.

Naiad opened her eyes once again, and this time she wasn't blinded by the afternoon light leaking through the curtains. Her body was rapidly returning to normal, leaving her feeling a bit cold but returning strength to her limbs, so she sat back up on the edge of the bed.

"Finally up?" came Elise's voice from behind Naiad.

The river nymph turned around and found both Leon and Elise still there. She had been so caught up in the afterglow that she hadn't fully processed that they were still in the room, but Naiad took it in stride.

She nodded.

Elise was still on top of Leon, but she shifted a bit, pushing herself off of Leon's chest and over to his side with his arm around her and using his left shoulder like a pillow. Both of them were still completely naked, and this shifting put both of their bodies on display to the river nymph Queen.

Naiad's eyes were still a bit hazy, but she drank in the sight with a wide smile on her face. She'd never before been so attracted to anyone, but in that moment, to her eyes, Leon and Elise were the two most perfect people in existence. Naiad couldn't focus well on the details, but she didn't even try.

If either of them noticed her look, they didn't react to it. Instead, Leon just held out his right arm to Naiad in an obvious invitation.

After the trio's first time together, Naiad had awoken to find Leon and Elise cuddling and all-but ignoring her. It had been a cold and sobering end to what had otherwise been an incredible experience. This time, however, it seemed that Leon was inviting her over to him, and it took no more than a second or two of hesitation for Naiad to shamble over as gracefully as her still somewhat numb body would allow.

She took a position mirroring Elise's on Leon's right, with his arm around her and her head resting on his shoulder. She added to Leon and Elise's tangle of legs by wrapping her own around Leon's right, while she rested her right hand upon Leon's chest, right next to Elise's left.

Naiad felt a bit awkward, lying there with Leon and Elise, but it was far more comfortable than she would've ever thought it would be. She had only just woken up, but it was so relaxing that her eyes couldn't help but grow heavy. In Naiad's mind, there couldn't have been a better way to bring this second time making love—not that Naiad would've used that precise term—to an end. It was as warm and comforting an end as it could be.

And then Leon proved her wrong with a long, tender kiss to the forehead that just about stopped Naiad's heart with how unexpected it was. Naiad gently smiled and unconsciously pressed herself against Leon even tighter in response, telling him exactly what that meant to her.

No words were said, but Leon pulled both Naiad and Elise a little bit closer and all three soon fell into a deep, comfortable sleep, with Naiad and Elise's fingers lightly brushing against each other's on Leon's chest.

Chapter 356: Elsewhere

The continent of Aeterna was immense, and the land of the Bull Kingdom was only a small, isolated corner of it. South of the Bull Kingdom was the Gulf of Discord, followed by the desert Samar Kingdom. The Samar Kingdom's southern border was demarcated by a series of low mountain ranges and wide rivers, beyond which lay the lands of the Halcyon Federation.

The Halcyon Federation was an alliance of nine duchies, fifteen counties, and more than thirty city-states, all with various forms of government. Some of these places were feudal, some republics, some ruled by a caste of priests, and some ruled by a small number of wealthy and powerful families. What they all had in common was the Federation, their formal alliance that dictated matters of foreign policy and held powers of mediation over all members of the Federation.

The hegemon of this alliance was chosen from one of the nine duchies, elected by the counties, and confirmed by the city-states. The leader of that faction would then become the Protector of the Federation, responsible for keeping the peace within the Federation and defending all those under its aegis from foreign aggressors. In return for this responsibility, the ruling duchy would then collect a tax from all Federation members. The tax was relatively small, but with so many members, it represented an immense amount of wealth.

Naturally, there was fierce competition to become the Protector of the Federation whenever it came time for a new election, which happened once every ten years.

Around the time Leon was transferred to the Bull's Horns almost two years ago, the time for elections came around. The delegates from all Federation members met in the old Royal capital of the Kingdom that had once existed upon that spot before being destroyed by the founding members of the Federation and began the typical heated debates and campaigning that took place for the three-month-long election.

By the end of those three months, the previous ruling duchy was elected for the fifth time in a row. The rulers of this duchy, the Artabasids, a family supposedly descended from sea serpents, had used their hegemony well and amassed enough wealth to continuously purchase, persuade, and bully their way to the spot of Protector of the Federation.

It was clear enough that the rights of the Federation members were slowly being taken away as this family asserted its dominance, and many of the rest of the influential men and women of the Federation were not going to have that. The city-states vetoed the election and, after almost half a year of intense planning, the family of the ruling duchy was massacred in a single bloody night as they attempted to hold onto power.

Only a single member of the Artabasid family survived, and that was only because he was a mere eight years old and had been given to the Grand Temple of a neighboring city-state to be trained as a priest in their religion.

Regardless, this duchy was quickly handed over to a rival family from within its borders, a new election was held, and the Federation's status quo was tentatively restored, though it would take a few more elections for that to be sorted out. None of that was the business of the surviving member of the Artabasid family, though.

The city the young Artabasid boy resided in was on the western coast of the continent, at the tip of a small inlet that served as a fantastic natural harbor that also possessed no less than three rivers that led further into Federation territory that fed into it. The theocratic city was a hub of commerce, with great wealth passing through its walls every single day.

Perhaps the Artabasid family had originally sent him off as a long ploy that would see one of their own gain influence and a powerful position in this rich city, but of course, it was all for naught in the end. The boy was little more than a child and his family had been broken.

Of course, this essentially gave this theocratic city a strong claimant to the Artabasid's former duchy, and there were a great many ambitious priests who hoped to one day press that claim and expand their own influence into one of the strongest partners in the Federation. However, this ambition would never be realized.

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It was a beautiful day. The sun was shining, a pleasant breeze blew in from the sea, and the air was neither too warm nor too cold. The sea itself was almost uncharacteristically calm, and the fish were out in force, to the delight of the fishermen.

However, there was something wrong, something at odds with this picture of an idyllic port city. The fishing boats were out in force, but among them wasn't a single merchant ship. Under normal conditions, three or four merchant ships would arrive daily, while as many would depart. However,

there hadn't been a single ship that sailed into the harbor in almost a week, while the docked ships had recently departed with alarming speed, leaving the port empty.

Almost a fifth of the city was devoted to the processing and taxation of goods flowing through this port, so that left a significant portion of the city quiet and relatively devoid of people. Needless to say, many in the city were growing worried.

But then, at about noon, ships were finally seen appearing through the mist and the haze of the great distance one could see over the seas of the plane. They were ships of decent size, most not as big as warships, but certainly large enough to be merchants. For a moment, many in the city calmed their anxiety and began to prepare to receive these ships as well as they could.

But the ships kept appearing. At first, it was only a small handful, maybe four or five, but they just kept sailing out of the mists of the Endless Ocean, bound for the city's harbor.

This was a bit much, so a few light signals from the lighthouses were sent to this approaching fleet telling them to slow down, to wait for a little while and that the city officials would meet them out at sea, but they neither slowed down nor changed their trajectory. They were still a great distance away, though, giving the city more than enough time to raise the alarm and prepare the city for a fight—even without raised colors, their refusal to slow down made obvious this fleet's hostile intent. The civilians started to be evacuated to nearby fortified hills, the local officials notified the ruling Grand Temple of the Eagle of Rain, and the militia was called upon.

It was almost beyond a shadow of a doubt that these were pirates. The fleet was great, but the city had fought off pirates before and they had every confidence in doing so again. Their own war galleys were deployed in the small gulf their harbor occupied, the militia of ten thousand assembled in the streets and manned the walls of the forts, and the magical defenses of the Grand Temple were raised.

The city was as ready for the pirates as they'd ever be.

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Jormun breathed deeply, savoring the salty sea air as it whipped through his short black hair and brushed past his smooth, clean-shaven face. He stood at the front of his ship, his eyes closed, and he waited for the fleet at his back to enter the port of Serpent's Fall.

He didn't usually bring his ships this far north—far too close to the Bull Kingdom—but the Halcyonid city was a ripe target. Serpent's Fall's port was relatively unguarded, relying exclusively on galleys and coastal defenses without a single defensive ward in the mouth of the inlet in sight. No chains, no magical cannons...

Jormun smiled, his bright white teeth shining as the bright sun kissed his bronzed skin. He could feel his ship shudder as it broke through the waves of the Endless Ocean, its water engines propelling it forward even without sails—there were still quite a few miles between the ship and the harbor, more than enough time for the sails to be raised.

The sounds of the alarms ringing through the city reached Jormun's ears, despite there being more than ten miles of open sea between the two. Jormun's smile grew almost condescending; Serpent's Fall's population numbered almost one hundred thousand, and the fleet would be upon the city in minutes.

There was not nearly enough time for the entire populace to drop everything and reach the safety of the hill forts or the Grand Temple.

'There'll be more than enough to take to satisfy them...' Jormun thought to himself as he glanced over his shoulder at his thirty-three strong fleet. He had almost ten thousand people in his fleet spread among these ships. Most of these were from allied crews, but Jormun's seven personal ships still accounted for more than four thousand pirates, and consequently were the biggest ships in the fleet.

Jormun's ship was the first to enter the harbor area. It was a long beast, more than five hundred feet of strong, but flexible oak from the Serpentine Isles, and had half a dozen decks. There were three masts with furled sails and a pair of water engines in the back, fed by a truly massive sapphire that also powered other enchantments throughout the ship.

For example, Jormun's ship came with a pair of Fire Cannons powered by that sapphire, weapons similar to the Flame Lances of the Bull Kingdom's largest warships, but much smaller and with significantly reduced range and power, which were installed in a pair of revolving turrets to either side of the central mast.

As Jormun's ship barreled into the harbor, one of the defense galleys moved to intercept by blocking the watery corridor into the harbor with its own hull. The harbor itself was quite wide and open, especially with the fishing boats having mostly evacuated, so there was plenty of room for the dozen or so defense galleys to maneuver. The defense galleys were heavily reinforced, their wooden hulls being near-impervious to magics weaker than the eighth-tier. It should've made it highly resistant to ramming, which was why it presented its weaker flank to Jormun's ship.

Jormun's helmsman cared none, though, and kept his course. Jormun himself, standing at the bow, didn't even move as his ship slammed into the defense galley and tore it in half. His ship cut clean through with barely any effort, and the water around it shuddered as another insidious weapon within was activated: the water corridor churned as water magic poured from Jormun's ship, tearing any sailor who fell into the water from the defense galley into pieces.

In a matter of seconds, hundreds of militia sailors were killed, and the defenders of Serpent's Fall lost a galley. What was more, Jormun's ship was now in the harbor.

Four more galleys began scrambling to intercept Jormun's ship, while the remaining seven angled toward the corridor. Jormun's other ships were following, and if the defenders were going to resist, then they had to do it where their smaller ships would have the advantage. They could move more adroitly in the wide corridor than Jormun's larger ships, so the corridor was where they wanted to fight.

But this wasn't Jormun's first raid, and he had no qualms about using his weapons. He raised both of his arms for a brief moment, then let them fall in the direction of the two closest galleys. His Fire Cannons answered but a moment later, their long metal barrels spitting great torrents of fire two hundred feet long that completely enveloped the two closest galleys, annihilating them in an instant.

Jormun smiled, the screams of dying militia sailors providing a fitting backdrop to his inevitable victory.

This show of force was enough to get the other nine galleys to hesitate—they weren't propelled by either magic or the wind, they had to be moved with great banks of rowers, and seeing a full quarter of their number smashed in a matter of five minutes caused them to lose heart and slow down. Their

captains tried to keep them moving, to keep up the morale of the defending militia, but it was too little too late. By the time the galleys got moving again Jormun's ships were upon them, lashing them with rope to board them or else just ramming through them with superior aged oak and bronze rams made in the Serpentine Isles.

These galleys had no valuable cargo—save for humans, who could always be sold in those countries that practiced slavery—and had little value in their hulls, so Jormun's people wasted little time with them. On the galleys that weren't rammed to pieces, the officers were killed and the rest of the militiamen thrown overboard to be minced by the churning waves, so full of sharp blades of water coming from Jormun's personal fleet.

Just like that, the harbor belonged to Jormun's pirates, and the rest of the fleet followed them in.

Jormun's ship docked at one of the central piers, and Jormun himself finally stepped away from the bow to take command of his people. Those in his personal fleet would follow him to the gates of hell, of that he was sure, and they displayed that loyalty by waiting for him instead of charging immediately into the city. The rest of the pirates in the fleet were doing just that, but not Jormun's people.

With calm, measured steps, Jormun led his people down the gangplank and into the city proper. There were large warehouses nearby that promised valuable loot, and a few stragglers still in their homes, but Jormun and his followers didn't pay them any mind. Jormun had only one thing on his mind right now: The Grand Temple overlooking the entire city from the largest of the hills that surrounded the city.

It was an impressive building, to be sure, shaped like a drum and encircled with a blind arcade upon every one of its six floors. The temple grounds were normally serene and perfectly maintained by skilled nature mages, while the entire place was encased in a thick stone wall that was even more heavily warded than the nearby forts. However, there were no towers in the wall, and not even a gatehouse protecting the iron gate.

What Jormun found most intriguing about the temple, though, wasn't its architecture, it was that it had been built inside the mouth of a titanic serpent's skull. The serpent's skull was easily a hundred feet tall, probably taller, and its jaw was propped open by its two massive fangs. In the center of the dead titan's forehead was a long, curved horn, as sharp as a finely sharpened blade. The entire skull gleamed white in the midday sun, not a trace of yellow discoloration to be found anywhere upon it despite the tens of thousands of years it had laid in that spot. There were, however, a few notable black streaks, winding vein-like burn marks upon the skull, evidence of the climactic clash that killed the massive beast in times long forgotten.

Most who looked upon the skull wondered what it had looked like when it was alive, or where the rest of its skeleton was, how long it had been there, or what kind of power was able to kill such a beast. Jormun, however, only smiled and kept walking, his eyes taking on a strange shine in the city that lay in the shadow of that gigantic skull.

It wasn't long before Jormun and his followers found themselves outside the gate of the Grand Temple. They hadn't met any resistance along the way, presumably because the militia in the city was either too busy fighting the rest of the pirates, or they had lost heart with the abject failure of the militia's navy. It didn't matter to Jormun, though he was mildly grateful that they weren't there to slow him down.

Even when he reached the gate of the temple, wrought iron bars that had enough magic flowing through them that Jormun hesitated to touch them, the guards were light.

“Heeeellloooo??!!” Jormun cheerfully bellowed as if his fleet wasn’t currently sacking the city, as if the screams of those who failed to evacuate in time weren’t reaching this far, his voice echoing throughout the immense serpentine skull and into the ears of the thousands of people who had managed to reach the temple before the gates were slammed shut. “Aaaanybodddd hooome? I’d like to speak with someone about resolving our differences!”

There was a large bell by the gate, and one of Jormun’s subordinate captains, a tall and incredibly muscular man with bright gold hair tied into a long braid that extended almost to his knees, walked up to it and gave it a few rings. It was certainly a strange sight to the priests watching from the windows of their temple, and it began a debate as to what Jormun intended to do.

Jormun himself didn’t care much what they discussed, he simply waited patiently for about fifteen minutes—his subordinate captain ringing the bell every minute or so—until someone of importance finally appeared on the other side of the gate.

“For what reason do your heathen hands defile our sacred city?!” the priest demanded with as arrogant a tone as he was capable of, but his voice quivered and shook, ruining the effect. He was almost two centuries old, a sixth-tier mage, and one of the most important priests in the entire temple, and yet before Jormun, he was fighting not to visibly shake. Jormun was strong enough that his aura was meaningless to the priest, indicating power stronger than the sixth-tier.

Jormun would be able to break down their gate, given enough time, the priest realized, and that terrified him. For all his power, he and the other priests had little to no experience in fighting, and if the gate were to fall, then everyone inside would be massacred, enslaved, or worse.

“Save the rhetoric, I’m here for the Artabasid boy,” Jormun said with the sly smile of a man who held all the cards. “Give him to me and I won’t destroy your city. Choose to refuse me, and I will tear down every stone in this city and raze every piece of timber to ash. Your people will be raped and sold in the south, your city robbed of every shiny piece of metal it has, and your precious temple will be obliterated! If you do not bring me that boy, then your city will cease to exist. If you bring him to me, however, I will turn around, return to my ship, and you will never see me again.”

Backing up his words was an undercurrent of killing intent that sent chills down the spine of the listening priest. Jormun had lived for more than sixty years and had spent nearly all of that time raiding, pillaging, and killing. His killing intent was potent, to put it mildly, and even the small amount he let the priest feel was enough to make the godly man turn around and return to the temple without a word.

It took a while, but Jormun was a patient man. He generously gave the priest no time limit, so he allowed the priests of the temple to talk things over amongst themselves for as long as they wanted. All the while, though, the rest of the pirates were doing what pirates do to the city: raping, pillaging, and burning. The cries of the people and the sounds of the city on fire carried to the temple, and Jormun knew that was enough to motivate the priests. He needed to do nothing more. Eerily enough, the thousands of pirates behind him patiently waited as well, with not a thought in any of their heads to turn to the city and join their fellows in stealing everything and everyone that wasn’t nailed down.

In the end, though, Jormun only had to wait at the gate for a little under an hour before the priest reappeared, the eight-year-old Artabasid boy in tow.

“Take him, he’s yours,” the priest mumbled as he cracked open the gate and tossed the boy outside.

Jormun caught the boy with a warm smile, then conjured a pillar of ice from the ground beneath his feet that slammed into the gate and prevented the priest from closing it.

The priest was thrown back a bit, his eyes wide with terror and confusion, but before he could ask any questions, Jormun summoned a small glass orb from within his soul realm. Hovering in the center of that orb was a single drop of blood.

“It’s okay, you can relax,” Jormun softly said to the terrified Artabasid boy, his calm, smooth voice soothing the boy’s understandably frayed nerves. He even crouched down to look the eight-year-old in the eye and patted his shoulder with fatherly affection. “No harm will come to you now...”

Jormun brought the glass orb closer to the boy, and when he saw the drop of blood vibrate, he smiled and dissipated the ice pillar keeping the gate open. The pirate gave the temple and the terrified priest a sarcastic bow, turned on his heel, and began walking back down the road with the boy in tow. The boy cowered behind Jormun as the pirate led him

Chapter 357: The Serpent

Jormun’s ship cut through the waves as it led the way for Jormun’s fleet to sail away from Serpent’s Fall. The city was starting to vanish behind them, only ten miles away but still beyond what even a fourth-tier mage could reliably see with any detail.

Jormun, on the other hand, could still see the city quite clearly. It was even still in range of his magic senses, and if he wanted to, he could take in every street, every burning home, every corpse left behind by the pirates. It had been a profitable raid, with the holds of all thirty-three ships in the fleet packed with gold, silver, various enchanted items, and many human beings bound for slave markets.

However, it wasn’t the sacked city or the ships filled with looted treasure that caught Jormun’s interest. Rather, it was the skull of the horned serpent, still perfectly visible at the top of the highest hill in the city. The Grand Temple of the Eagle of Rain built within the hill still smoldered, black smoke rising from its burned ruin obscuring a few details of the skull, but Jormun could still easily pick out most of the scorch marks on the great white bone.

Those marks were made by terrible lightning bolts hurled by the gods, or so the legends claimed. Jormun wasn’t a superstitious or religious man, but that skull was proof that it fell in some terrible calamity.

A mysterious smile played at Jormun’s lips as he watched the skull vanish into the distance, the twenty metal plates inscribed with water-propulsion enchantments on his ship pushing them onward far faster than any normal wind-powered ship would be capable of. In fact, Jormun’s seven ships were rapidly separating from the rest of the fleet, so fast were they.

Jormun didn’t care if the other ships were outpaced. They were allied crews, not particularly loyal to him. They’d slowly trickle away anyway as more distance was put between them and Serpent’s Fall, and

he had no interest in babysitting them or getting them to stick around. He'd gotten what he wanted from the city, and he had no more use for those ships.

'Speaking of...' Jormun thought to himself as he turned his attention away from the ruined city and toward the young boy that he'd taken from it. He was the last scion of the Artabasid family, one of the greatest noble Houses of the Halcyon Federation. They had been one of the three leading ducal families that had ousted the monarchy centuries ago to form the Federation, but their own ambitions grew too great and they were massacred by their own enemies within the Federation. Now, this boy was all that remained.

It was a lucky break that he yet breathed, for finding people with appropriate lineages was hard work. Jormun was painfully aware that even a few generations without bloodline awakening would be enough to render subsequent generations completely unable to do so, effectively ending it in all but name.

The Artabasids were one such example; old stories claimed their family came into being when a sea serpent learned to walk on land, take a human shape, and then took a human wife, but their power just a few years ago was entirely mundane. Their magics were no better or worse than anyone else's, and there was no practical evidence of any sort of ancient Inherited Bloodline that had been successfully passed down to their contemporary scions.

At least, the Artabasid boy that Jormun had taken from Serpent's Fall exhibited none of the characteristics of possessing an Inherited Bloodline, and from what Jormun knew from his own research, neither did the boy's immediate family when they still walked among the living.

The boy himself was in a guest room next to Jormun's cabin. When Jormun's magic senses fell upon him, he could see that even after a week in captivity, the boy was still quaking in fear.

Jormun could hardly blame him, of course. The pirate lord knew better than most how badly it hurt to lose everyone in his life along with his home. Despite this sympathy, it didn't shake Jormun's convictions about what was to come next.

With a sigh that was somehow mournful, nostalgic, and anticipatory all at once, Jormun tore himself away from the deck of his ship and descended one level. He'd been sailing with his crew for more than thirty years, some had even escaped the Serpentine Isles with him more than fifty years ago, they were incredibly loyal to him and didn't need him there to micromanage their every movement. They knew where they were going, and they'd steer the ship true. Jormun was free to indulge himself in distractions far more than just about any other captain ever could, for his crew had earned their autonomy.

The second level immediately below the deck was mostly dedicated to the crew quarters, with the rank and file sleeping toward the bow while Jormun, the officers, and guests had their much larger quarters toward the stern. The Artabasid boy's cabin was next to Jormun's, where the pirate lord could keep an eye on his charge, and that was Jormun's destination.

He gently knocked on the boy's door, and though he received no response, he still pushed the door open after waiting for a respectful amount of time—he could see into the cabin with his magic senses anyway, he knew he wasn't walking in on something he shouldn't be seeing.

The boy glared at Jormun as the pirate entered his somewhat cramped cabin. It was roomy by the standards of the ship, but there still wasn't much space between the bed, the one dresser, the one desk, and wooden chair. A door to the tiny bathroom was in a back corner, with a toilet, sink, and shower. The boy was laying back in his bed reading a book Jormun had brought him the day before, and apart from the one glare, he didn't move a muscle as Jormun gave him a polite greeting.

"Ben," Jormun warmly said, his plain face breaking out into a fatherly smile. Jormun wasn't a handsome man, nor was he particularly tall, but he was fit, his aura was immense, and he had an air of confidence that none could deny. He was attractive enough to put most people at ease, but Ben Artabasid couldn't have cared less.

Ben himself was short, skinny, and dressed in rags. The people of the Halcyon Federation were dark-skinned, but he had been bleached quite pale from years spent in secluded prayer and meditations. He was well-educated and about as intelligent as an eight-year-old could be expected to be. He was certainly smart enough to be terrified of Jormun and the situation he found himself in.

After waiting a few moments for a response from the Artabasid boy, Jormun availed himself of the empty chair and sat down.

"You've been quiet this past week. I would've figured you'd have opened up by now," Jormun said as if he were simply an adopted parent or similar authority figure taking in a willing charge, not a pirate who had kidnapped the boy from the only home he had left.

Things were quiet in the cabin, with Jormun sitting, smiling, and waiting for Ben to speak, while Ben did his best to ignore Jormun's presence. However, after waiting long enough to be sure that Jormun wasn't going anywhere, Ben simply asked, "Where are you taking me?"

Jormun's smile grew wider as the boy finally spoke enough to ask a question, and he happily responded.

"There's an island in the southwest of the continent," Jormun explained. "It's located in the middle of a large lake filled with mist, monsters, and all kinds of *unsavory* things. Despite this, it's a warm place, filled with light, clean air, and *very* few people. To call it a paradise wouldn't quite do it justice."

"Why?" Ben asked.

"That, I'm afraid, will have to wait until we arrive," Jormun answered with a mysterious tone. "There's something there that I think you can help me with, something I think *only* you can help me with."

Ben frowned. He didn't think anything Jormun could want would be good, nor would it be worth the amount of blood he'd spilled in the raid on Serpent's Fall, but he had no way to articulate that sentiment, so he simply glared at Jormun again and went silent.

"I understand what you're going through, you know," Jormun said, sensing that Ben wasn't going to speak again. At the boy's doubting look, Jormun continued, "I grew up in the Serpentine Isles. Have you ever heard of them?"

Despite himself, Ben shook his head.

"I didn't think so," Jormun said with an almost wistful tone. "The Serpentine Isles are a group of islands to the west, perhaps a bit southwest of the Bull Kingdom. I assume you've heard of that place?"

Ben nodded.

“Good. Well, the Isles were a beautiful place, and the island I grew up on, in particular, was known for its gorgeous beaches, sturdy trees, and tough sailors. We lived on the shores, for the mountains and jungles further inland were too dangerous for our people to live—too many monsters and beasts that we couldn’t deal with. We were weak. And poor. The best land on the islands was essentially ceded to the wilds, for we lacked the strength to claim it, leaving us with naught but the shores.

“Our land was too poor for our people, we couldn’t farm it well with what few nature mages we could entice to our cities, and to survive, the Jarls that ruled us had little choice but to use the one thing that we had that we could afford to lose in order to put food on the table: our ships.”

So far, Jormun’s smooth, nasally voice had the airy and nostalgic tone expected of one recalling fond memories of home, but that quickly changed. His smile turned bitter and his voice grew sharper. He stared out the window of the cabin, his eyes glazed over, glaring at something he could only see in his memories.

“We raided up and down every coast on the continent. Wherever our sails were seen, people prayed to their gods for salvation. We took what we did not have with blood, steel, and fire. Obviously, the nations on the receiving end of this treatment tried to take the fight to us to put an end to it, to protect themselves from our mighty and fearsome sailors, but our ships were too fast and our people too determined, and all attempts to conquer our islands failed. A few fleets were burned, but we always recovered and the Serpentine Isles themselves remained safe.

“Until, that is, the Bull Kingdom finally got its act together and built up a proper navy. They sent more than two hundred ships to our homeland and burned everything they found to the ground. Our people were subjugated, and those that resisted were massacred.”

Suddenly, Jormun’s darker tone lightened and he began to smile again, but the shift was so abrupt that Ben couldn’t help but feel some discomfort.

“My father was a Jarl, did you know that?”

Jormun stared at Ben so hard that the boy couldn’t help but shake his head, if only to relieve the pressure put upon him by the gaze of someone so much stronger than him—Ben was mortal, not even a first-tier mage, and Jormun might as well have been a god as far as the boy was concerned given the power difference.

“As I said before, our islands were ruled by the eight Jarls. We had eight islands, so one Jarl per island, or so it was *supposed* to be. A few Jarls in our history had tried to become High Kings by conquering the other islands, but one Jarl per island tended to be our norm, and that was what we had when the Bull Kingdom arrived.

“My father was the Jarl of the island furthest from the shores of the Bull Kingdom. We fought as well as we could for our land, but our fleets were burned and our hardened sailors slaughtered. We had little to fight back with after that defeat, and of our eight islands, five submitted. My father and two other Jarls, however, did not.”

Jormun's tone darkened once more, and his eyes darted back to the window. However, Ben was starting to get into what Jormun was saying, and he was no longer pretending not to pay attention. He wanted to know where all of this was going.

"For almost a year, my father resisted those that had come to enslave us, those that had come to subjugate our ancient homeland. The fighting was so intense that the other two Jarls were killed, and their islands obliterated by some fell weapon devised by the Bull Kingdom.

"And then the Bull came for my island. I remember the day that they came like it was only yesterday. So many red sails appeared from the haze of light and distance that it seemed like the sea itself was birthing ships to punish us for our crimes. We had no more ships to defend ourselves, so my father took all who were willing to continue to fight and shuffled us inland, away from the safety of the shore and into the jungles of the inner island.

"Still, the Bull came for us. Those we left behind in our cities and towns were murdered by the Bull's Legions, and those who fled fared little better. However, we fought well enough that it seemed the Bull decided to turn its island-destroying weapon upon us."

Jormun paused for a moment, seeming to search for the proper words to say at this moment. He wasn't the most articulate of men and describing the absolute destruction of his home wasn't something he was equipped to do, even more than five decades after the fact. Still, Ben remained silent, finally seeing what it was that Jormun believed made them so similar.

"The ground opened beneath my feet," Jormun said, finally finding the words necessary to continue. "I was barely even your age at the time, and I was as weak as a newborn kitten. My father hadn't even started my training, yet. So I fell into the depths of the earth, and into the darkness waiting for me. From above, I could hear the screaming of my dying countrymen, I could *feel* the earth continuing to rend and the Endless Ocean rushing in to fill the cracks, and most of all, I heard the laughing of the Bull's Legions as my people died."

Asking how Jormun could hear these things didn't occur to Ben, but he did have some questions.

"How did you survive?" Ben couldn't help but ask.

"There was water at the bottom of the ravine that opened up beneath me," Jormun said, a smile blooming on his face with Ben showing interest in his story. "Fortune favored me that day since the water cushioned my fall enough that I wasn't killed on impact, and I missed the stones and the spikes that many others fell upon. All around me, my home crumbled and shook itself apart, but I managed to climb out of that ravine despite my age.

"What I found when I reached the top of the ravine was heartbreaking, and it's not something I'll ever forget. Some of these details have escaped me with the help of time, you understand, but that sight... I will remember that with perfect clarity even on the day I die.

"What I found was bare earth, devoid of the jungle that had once covered the interior of the island. Massive portions of the island were in the process of falling into the sea miles in the distance, while the mountain at the center of the island belched fire from its summit. The ground kept shaking itself apart, and the sky had turned black from the mountain's rage. My father was locked in combat with the leader

of the Bull's fleets, and he was, only moments after I pulled myself back up, struck down by that man's fists.

"The island, however, kept breaking into pieces, and it eventually grew too much for the Bull, so the Legion soldiers fell back to their own ships. My people, however, had no more ships of their own, and they all drowned. I was the only survivor."

"No one else got away?" Ben asked, even his eight-year-old mind doubting Jormun's story.

"The only one I know about," Jormun admitted to the boy. "I managed to remain on the fragments of the island surviving on fish until a ship from another Serpentine Island that had been sent to look for survivors picked me up. I was the only person they'd found, they told me."

"And so, there you have it," Jormun concluded, giving Ben a smile filled with camaraderie. "The story of my people. Of how my family fell."

Ben nodded, his eyes filling with tears. It wasn't due to Jormun's story, though, that brought them on. Rather, hearing all of this was reminding him of everything that he had lost only a few years before, and those wounds were still raw.

"Listen, Ben," Jormun said, leaning forward in his chair to impress upon the young boy the seriousness of what he was about to say. "The only goal I have ever had in life, the only thing I have ever truly desired, was to bring ruin to those who brought it to me. I have a plan, and for that, I need your help. Will you lend me your aid? If you do so, I will give everything I have to help you achieve your own revenge. What do you say?"

Ben wiped his eyes and looked back at Jormun, his bright blue eyes meeting the pirate's dark green. He'd likely never have another opportunity like this, and he wasn't quite savvy enough to realize any other options.

So, he nodded. Ben wanted revenge as much as anyone else would for the deaths of his family, and if Jormun could deliver on it, then Ben was going to do what he could to help Jormun with his own revenge.

That the pirate kidnapped him and sacked Serpent's Fall was entirely forgotten, lost in the recollections of Ben's own lost family, just as Jormun wanted.

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It took three weeks to reach the island that Jormun had told Ben about, the one in the middle of the lake. Jormun's ships were fast and made great time, but it was still just barely this side of eternity for the young boy, and he was excited to reach their destination.

In those three weeks, Jormun made sure to speak with him at least once a day, and they would swap stories about home. Jormun talking about how his father would leave on raids and return half a year later with some gold or silver trinkets for him and his mother, while Ben would just babble a few barely coherent stories about how nice his mother was. Not terribly interesting for Jormun, but the pirate listened anyway.

Ben was even let out of the cabin on occasion, and now that they had reached their destination, he was gleefully staring over the deck railings into the lake below. The boy didn't see any of the sea monsters that Jormun claimed inhabited the lake, but he did occasionally see a few brief flashes of light beneath the deep black waves. The lake gave off a cloud of mist that he couldn't see through, though, and it had a quiet stillness that somewhat unnerved him. The waves barely made any noise as the ship cut through them, and the other six ships in Jormun's fleet quickly vanished into the mist.

Still, Ben couldn't help but be elated that they had reached their destination, and he practically ran to the rowboats when it was time to come ashore.

It was about noon, but the mist covered the island and gave it an eerie darkness that began to weigh on Ben as they reached the shore, blunting his joy, somewhat.

"Something wrong, Ben?" Jormun asked, noticing the young boy's subdued behavior.

"This place is scary..." Ben said, the forest just beyond the sandy beach as dark as night.

"Oh, it's not that bad!" Jormun said with a hearty laugh. "I'm sure it'll be no problem for a brave young man such as yourself!"

Ben nodded, grateful for the compliment, but his attention was fixed upon the dark forest on the island, not on Jormun, so he missed the pirate's brief, avaricious smile directed his way as the rowboat reached the shore.

"Let's go, then," Jormun said, and he and Ben got out of the boat. There had been about half a dozen others in the boat, but none of them got out, and Ben's heart began to race as Jormun took his arm and began to steer him towards the trees.

"Isn't anyone else coming?!" Ben asked in panic, but Jormun just smiled at him and kept leading him onward. The pirate was so confident and Ben so scared that he didn't press for an answer, and he just concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other. He kept his eyes locked on the ground, and when he looked up, he only ever looked at Jormun.

They kept going like this for what seemed like an eternity. They must have gone miles inland from the shore, but Ben was far too scared to ask any more questions. It was dark in that forest, and he could feel eyes upon him, even if he couldn't see them beyond the veil of inky blackness within the forest.

Every so often, he felt something cold slide along his body, as if some unseen revenant had brushed their cold, dead fingers along his skin, and it was only Jormun's presence that kept him from losing his nerve and running away. Not that he even knew where he was, anymore, and his only anchor to reality was Jormun's hand firmly wrapped around his wrist.

Jormun eventually came to a halt in a small clearing, and by then, Ben was an absolute mess. He could barely see from the darkness and the tears in his eyes, and he wasn't even bothering to hide it anymore. He was sniffing and jumping at the slightest of sounds, his shirt completely soaked through from sweat, and any excitement that he once had for reaching their destination was long gone.

In front of the two in the center of the clearing was a small pond filled with more black water surrounded by tiny crystals that emitted soft, white light. It didn't seem entirely natural, and Ben had no idea what it was doing here, but he was too scared out of his wits to question it. All he wanted was to

get out of the forest and never return, to return to his home with his mother and father and curl up in his bed and sleep for a month.

But his parents were gone, his home inhabited by others, and the only person left he felt he could rely on had an iron grip upon his wrist, keeping Ben from fleeing from the forest.

“Let’s get in,” Jormun said with a warm smile, barely visible to Ben through the darkness thanks to the crystals by the pond.

Ben, at this point, was practically frozen in fear, but Jormun didn’t care. He just dragged the boy towards the pond. Ben began to resist as they approached the pond, but Jormun was so much stronger than he was that he might as well have been trying to stop the tides from receding.

Ben’s feet entered the pond, the water so cold that his feet, already cold from his sweat and the trek through the cold, damp forest, began to stiffen. Ben tried pulling away one last time as Jormun pulled him into the center of the pond, but again, he couldn’t get away from the pirate.

His heart racing, his blood thundering through his ears, Ben couldn’t hear what Jormun said next. However, he saw a quick flash of something in Jormun’s other hand, and when he glanced over to see what it was, he felt something sharp slide into his throat.

Ben sputtered, his mouth filling with blood. He had no idea what had just happened, but he felt such indescribable pain in his throat that he blanked on everything else. He tried to scream, but he couldn’t, and when he looked at Jormun in terror, he saw the pirate calmly wiping blood off of his knife on his shirt.

Blood poured out of Ben, and when the boy tried to stem the flow with his free hand, it did nothing. He couldn’t make a sound, the wound in his throat preventing him from making anything more than a pained whimper as the strength left his limbs. The eight-year-olds body grew cold and he lost the ability to stand as his legs weakened.

Drops of blood slipped from Ben’s fingers, landing in the pond. They didn’t dissipate in the water, however, instead keeping their form and glowing a bright blue for some reason—Ben’s blood was normally crimson, just like everyone else’s. Each drop of blood that fell into the black water was like a star in the night sky, but Ben was hardly in a state to appreciate it. Eventually, only a few seconds after Jormun slashed his throat—or a few lifetimes, Ben wasn’t sure as time lost all meaning—the young boy slipped from Jormun’s grasp and collapsed into the pond, all of his blood flowing out into the water.

Jormun stepped away, letting Ben’s body sink into the pond as if pulled under by some unseen force. The boy’s blood continued to leak from him, glowing blue in the black water. Soon enough, Ben’s body completely disappeared, vanishing into the pond as if the pond were bottomless. But his blood remained, drifting up to just below the surface.

With a strange fascination, Jormun watched as the glowing blue blood twisted into ancient runes, shapes so aged that they had fallen out of memory. First forming one rune, then twisting into another after holding the first for a moment, and then another, and a fourth, until the blood had formed more than twenty runes in sequence, all but the last relatively familiar to Jormun from the nineteen other sacrifices he’d made across the world.

The water suddenly erupted from the pond like a geyser, accompanied by enough magic power that even Xaphan or Naiad would've been fearful of whatever was in the depths of the pond if they had been present. But the eruption lasted only a moment, and then a silent serenity fell upon the clearing.

Old magics that had been cast upon the pond were undone with that sacrifice, and whatever being that slept in the depths of the earth, bound by the power concentrated in that pond, seemed appeased. Jormun smiled, his job here done, and he turned to leave. However, just as he was about to leave the clearing, he heard a soft slithering in the grass behind him and a hiss in his mind.

[Just one more... You know where...]

Jormun's heart rate finally began to accelerate and he spun around to see what was slithering through the grass behind him.

He saw nothing but the empty clearing, but he knew who that voice belonged to. It was the same voice that had called out to him when he was alone on the shattered remnants of his home island. It was the same voice that had soothed him when his body had sunk beneath the earth after the island had been destroyed. It was the same voice that had assured him that he had dormant power within him, something that the voice could bring out.

And now, that voice only needed one more seal removed before it could act upon the world once more.

Chapter 358: Rabbit Hole

Months passed in the capital, and soon enough, Leon had been back for more than a year. He and Elise had gotten settled into their villa, Anzu's training was going incredibly well, and things seemed great for Leon on almost every front.

But Leon's schedule wasn't filled with relaxing leisure, rather his days were more often than not exhausting, with little time to truly relax. He had to go to the Royal Palace in the mornings and help analyze information about the vampires that were still being rooted out as well as keep an eye on the investigation into Justin Isynos—the latter hadn't gone anywhere, as Justin seemed absolutely squeaky clean as far as anyone could determine. In the afternoons, Leon would spend a bit of time with Trajan going over what little if anything they had learned, and then he'd check in with Lapis.

Once he got home, he'd spend an hour or two with Anzu and the beastmaster, and it was time to train. Leon would spend a few hours every day working on his Mind Palace or receiving instruction from the Thunderbird. He did his best to follow his ancestor's recommendation to focus on water magic, but the possibilities of flight were just too tantalizing, so he found himself practicing wind more than water.

What little time he had left in the day was spent on enchanting practice and study. He had all of his enchanting supplies from his vault in Teira brought down to him in the capital in case he needed them, and he threw himself completely into his studies. After seeing the necklace Elise had worn to Marcus' party, Leon realized that he'd been quite limited in his thoughts about enchantments, in that he'd focused almost entirely on defensive enchantments. He was ignoring so many other possibilities that when they occurred to him, he suddenly felt overwhelmed with how much he was missing out on, especially since so much of it was staring at him right in the face.

He wanted to completely overhaul his armor. Most of the enchantments he'd placed upon it were designed to protect from fire based attacks and facilitate his use of fire and lightning magic. However, the more he thought about it, the more he realized that he could do so much more, such as increasing his physical strength, his movement speed, perhaps even achieving flight or getting additional invisibility enchantments other than his ring. He even thought it possible that he might be able to increase his movement speed in water, maybe adding the ability to breathe when beneath its surface.

The possibilities were essentially endless, and he wanted to know them all. To that end, he spent more time working on brushing up on his knowledge of enchantments than he did working on his Mind Palace.

The biggest problem he had in that regard, though, was the material he'd commissioned his armor to be made of. Magmic Steel, which comprised all of the metal parts of his armor, didn't take well to any enchantment other than fire, which had forced Leon to use the leather straps and Skyflax padding for many of his lightning enchantments. This wasn't the best solution given how prone to tearing cloth could be—especially in battle—forcing Leon to find another solution if he wanted room for all of his other enchantments and not be worried about their fragility.

The solution he came up with was to have a lattice-work of thin silver strips attached to the inside of his armor which could hold the enchantments that the Magmic Steel couldn't. Additionally, Leon had a few silver arm rings made that he could wear beneath his armor, so that like his invisibility ring, he could enchant some items that he could then use without wearing all of his relatively bulky armor.

The more he did, the more Leon thought about his meager use of enchantments until this point, the deeper he realized this rabbit hole went. His work on enchanting was rapidly taking up much of his time, especially once he started thinking about the possibility of storing elemental attacks the way Elise's necklace that had started his descent into this mental mire could, which was why he needed the gemstones from his vault. He just couldn't figure out the best way to integrate them into his armor, assuming that's what he even wanted to do.

Regardless, Leon had a ton of work left to do on that front, and it was some of the most satisfying work he did in the entire day. However, once the sun fell below the horizon, he had other priorities, namely Elise and Naiad.

Elise still had a lot of work helping to administer the Heaven's Eye Tower, but Naiad largely lazed around all day. The river nymph didn't seem to mind this relaxed life, especially so after Leon, taking inspiration from the obelisk Artorias had built in their compound back in the Northern Vales, installed a few enchantments that doubled the amount of magic power in the air around the villa. For beings of their power, it didn't do much to help Elise, Leon, or Naiad, but it did make the villa's air more comfortable and invigorating to breathe.

When it came time to go to bed, though, more often than not Naiad slept in Leon and Elise's room. Their second time together had practically opened the floodgates, and the three seemed like they simply couldn't get enough of each other's bodies.

Leon was a rather family-oriented man. Growing up, he had no one but his own father around, and since coming south, he had little else but the stories of the fall of his family to motivate him onward. After

starting a relationship with Elise, she became the single most important person in the entire Kingdom to him, which was why he was so reluctant to sleep with Naiad in the first place.

Quite simply, Leon was not a man that had sex casually. Naturally, then, the more that he and Naiad had sex with each other, the more he found himself starting to care about her, despite everything that had happened to bring them together. By the time he had spent a full year back in the capital, Naiad was already considered a part of his small family, whether he was willing to accept it or not.

During this time, Naiad's fertile period came and went, and she was yet without child. It most certainly wasn't due to lack of trying, but with Leon's bloodline and with both his and Naiad's power, fertility issues were to be expected on both sides. No one was too upset by it, since it gave all three the opportunity to continue what they were doing without confronting what would happen when Naiad did get pregnant.

As for Elise, she threw herself completely into training whenever she could. She made plenty of time for Leon, her friends, and work, but after Leon told her about his intention to go to the Nexus and reclaim what his family had lost so long ago, she realized that she needed to be much stronger than she was if she didn't want to be left behind. She didn't think Leon would physically leave her behind—and Leon was careful to reassure her of that—but she was determined to both accompany him and not be a burden in any way.

Beyond that desire, the simple prospect of seizing divine powers lit a fire in Elise that hadn't been there before. With the Thunderbird helping Leon, and her own leveraging of Heaven's Eye's resources, Apotheosis didn't seem like an esoteric concept, it seemed perfectly achievable to her. She only had to train hard enough to take it.

However, ascending through the tiers wasn't nearly so easy, Leon's experience notwithstanding.

All-in-all, things seemed great for Leon and his ladies. There was little he could truly complain about, assuming things stayed the way they were.

But things never stay perfect forever.

—

"Leon!" Trajan said, his face pale and gaunt from a year of trying to keep things together in the capital.

Leon, in contrast, seemed healthier than ever, with his normally pale skin decently sun-kissed and his body perfectly sculpted from training to be exceedingly well-built, so much so that it was almost as easy to see Leon's musculature through his clothes as it was to see the much-larger Trajan's.

The Prince couldn't help but feel some amount of jealousy at how obviously happy and healthy Leon seemed, but that part of him was miniscule in comparison to his pride in his young protégé.

"Your Highness," Leon responded, giving the Prince a respectful bow.

"How're things going with you?" Trajan asked as he rose from his desk and waved Leon over to the sitting area. "It's been all business here for too long, we haven't had much of a chance to catch up!"

"There're going well enough," Leon said with a smile.

“Well enough to marry Lady Elise?” Trajan asked with an eyebrow cocked in a teasing manner.

“Uhh,” Leon sputtered as he reeled from the question. He and Elise hadn’t spoken about marriage quite yet, and Leon himself wasn’t looking forward to the prospect. A ceremony wouldn’t change how he felt about Elise, and it would be a massive pain in the ass, so he preferred to let the issue remain open for as long as he could swing it.

“There’s been talk around town lately about it,” Trajan said.

“Why!?” Leon incredulously asked. He was a sixth-tier Legate in the service of a Prince dating the daughter of the Tower Lord, but he still thought himself to be nobody special given how politically inactive he was. But people still talked, if only due to his connection with Elise.

“I believe Lady Emilie has been dropping hints that you two are quite committed to each other,” Trajan said. “Naturally, there are quite a few people who would love to deepen relations with Heaven’s Eye, and a marriage ceremony would be the perfect time to make that happen.”

“Well, they’re going to be a bit disappointed, Elise and I haven’t thought much about such an arrangement quite yet...” Leon said, quickly regaining control over his surprise.

“Not too shocking,” Trajan said with some disappointment, his excitement dying down a bit. With his work, he had few outlets for his stress and disillusionment with politics and talking with Leon about the younger man’s life was one of them. “There are quite a few people who stay with each other for a long time before getting married, if they ever do so at all, but such a long courtship is quite rare for nobility...”

“We’re hardly nobility, though, are we?” Leon asked with a half-smile that was at once dangerous and self-deprecating.

“That would depend on who you ask,” Trajan said.

“We have no lands that our children will inherit, and we don’t have any plans for children in the near future, anyway. Since we don’t have to worry about the legal hurdles of inheritance and bastardy, why rush?” Leon explained with surprising comfort.

Trajan sighed in response, and replied, “If only we could all be so lucky to have so few problems...”

Leon’s half-smile turned to a frown. He was hardly without his own problems, with Justin Isynos and the vampires still remaining quite the threat, but neither were trying to break down his front door, so he could—with some difficulty—forgive Trajan for not considering them immediate threats.

‘Trajan did renounce his claim to the throne for a reason...’ Leon thought to himself, at this point used to Trajan’s general blunt and sometimes oblivious attitude when he was in private company with only a few people that he trusted.

“There happens to be a fantastic solution to that,” Leon said as he regained his smile. “You need only get married! I’m sure that would grab the attention of all those gossip-mongers!”

Trajan began to laugh so hard that he was left a bit out of breath when he was done. “No, no,” he said as he took a few deep breaths. “My problems are numerous enough without adding another person into my life...”

“Do tell, what’s going on?” Leon asked, offering his ear. He essentially already knew due to his own work in the palace, but that wasn’t the point. He wanted to give Trajan some time to vent, even if that venting was about things he already knew about.

“Ah, most of it’s nothing of consequence, but there’s still a lot that’s been keeping me up at night,” Trajan said with deep fatigue etching dark lines into his face. “The investigation into Tiberias Decimus’ assassin has been called off due to lack of evidence, and his father’s apoplectic over it. Duke Decimus has even threatened to have his troops march on the capital if the investigation isn’t reopened.”

Leon nodded, wisely keeping his mouth shut about this matter and doing his best to keep a straight face. Inside, though, the mention of Tiberias’ killing still filled him with more than a bit of pride. He had a long list of enemies and it was beyond gratifying to scratch even one relatively insignificant name off of it.

“The vampire menace seems to be in hand, I suppose,” Trajan continued. “Attacks are down by more than seventy-five percent compared to last year, so I’d say we’ve been making some good progress. The investigation into Justin Isynos, on the other hand, has gone exactly nowhere.”

“That’s surprising,” Leon humorlessly said. Trajan had the Spymaster assisting him in this endeavor, and though Leon knew that there had been no results, he wasn’t privy to the daily goings-on of the investigation.

“There’ve been no leads at all,” Trajan said. “We have someone in Lord Justin’s household reporting his movements to us, but Justin’s done nothing particularly noteworthy. We have to assume that he’s working through his three powerful subordinates, since they’re seen so infrequently these days. Hells, one of them hasn’t even been seen in months!”

Leon nodded. The one who hadn’t been seen in a while had been killed in Emilie’s estate by Naiad, and he debated with himself for a moment about whether or not to tell that to Trajan. He hadn’t at the time as he didn’t want to put Naiad in an awkward position, and he figured that telling Trajan now wouldn’t do him any favors, so he kept his peace.

“What about the other two?” Leon asked.

“A few glimpses here and there, mostly in the Northern Territories or purchasing supplies here in the capital,” Trajan said. “All-in-all, nothing too outrageous that we’re able to tell. Justin Isynos’ finances are even in top-condition, we can’t find anything in them that are even remotely suspicious. In fact, they’re so perfect that that’s the only suspicious thing about them!”

“That’s unfortunate,” Leon said. “This person who you have in his household, are they in any position to provide us with, say, a map of his estate?”

“Why? Looking to infiltrate the Isynos place yourself?” Trajan asked in an almost mocking tone, but after remembering Leon’s past actions, he decided to take the question completely seriously.

“I figure... it’s just best to have a plan for everything,” Leon said.

“I’ll... see what I can do...” Trajan said, not dismissing the idea out of hand. He would never let Leon anywhere near the Isynos household, though. “It’s just... I trust your word when you say Justin Isynos is related to the fall of House Raime, I do...”

“... *But?*”

“*But* others are not so convinced, especially after spending almost an entire year looking into this man’s history and yet finding nothing.”

Leon nodded. He wasn’t particularly surprised, but there was still some disappointment there. He was grateful that Trajan started the investigation, of course, but he had never relied on it finding anything of substance.

No, Leon was mostly relying upon himself for that. And for the moment, with his own rise in power, Naiad at his side, and Xaphan in his pocket just in case the demon truly needed to make an appearance, Leon felt like he was ready for anything. He just wasn’t ready to destroy everything he had invested in the Bull Kingdom by making the first move.

Besides, if he were to act against the man who probably destroyed his family, one of the most powerful noble families in the Bull Kingdom, if not the entire continent, then he wanted every ounce of power he could scrape together at his fingertips before doing so.

“Beyond that, we’ve just got a huge pile of political shit to dig through, and it seems like this pile is only getting bigger with time, no matter how much we shovel.”

“How so?” Leon asked.

“We lost contact with the expedition sent to the Serpentine Isles, Octavius has been absent from a lot of advisory council meetings lately—my gut is telling me that he’s up to something *big*—and there’s been some troubling reports of nobles who’ve declared their support for him hiring mercenaries and running their knights and men-at-arms through large-scale battle drills. I can’t help but be afraid that at least the last two are related. Additionally, Aquillius over at the Horns has opened trade negotiations with Talfar and the Samar Kingdom at August’s request, and we’re trying to shore up support for him in the Eastern and Northern Territories, but we’re not going great on those fronts...”

“I can understand the Northern Territories not jumping straight into August’s camp, they’ve little practical reason to,” Leon said with a thoughtful expression. “Why not the East, though? I would’ve figured having you on his side plus his taking the initiative to help defeat the Talfar Kingdom would’ve endeared him some to the Eastern Lords.”

“You’re not wrong, and the Eastern Territories is without a doubt where August’s strongest support lies, but it’s not the nobles we’re having trouble with, it’s the Blasted Furnace...”

Leon nodded again. The Blasted Furnace was the largest weapons and armor manufacturer in the Bull Kingdom. Heaven’s Eye made better quality goods, of course, but since they were supposed to be politically neutral, they didn’t provide military gear in the quantities that Kingdoms needed to supply their armies. A Legion at the most could be equipped by Heaven’s Eye, if what Leon had picked up from Elise was anything to go by.

The Blasted Furnace filled that gap, providing not only most of the weapons and armor for the Legions that Heaven’s Eye did not, but also affordable weapons and armor to less well-off knights and private citizens. Leon hadn’t really had to deal with them much given his connections with Heaven’s Eye, so he wasn’t entirely familiar with them. He had always wanted to see their foundries in the Eastern

Territories, though, as Artorias had told him that the Blasted Furnace's headquarters was like a city with so many forges that they would turn the night sky orange.

"Whatever, they'll come around eventually, I'm sure of it," Trajan continued. "The political situation is relatively stable, with the West, South, and Center in Octavius' hands. The North is still relatively undecided, while the East can be said to belong to August, despite our own troubles there. But still..." Trajan suddenly sat forward, and his tone and posture turned deadly serious. "There's probably going to be some shit happening in the next few months, I can feel it in my bones. One way or another, if my Royal Brother doesn't wake soon, things will come to a head. I want you to be ready when that time comes, understand?"

"I do," Leon said, answering Trajan's seriousness with his own.

"Good," Trajan said, leaning back into his chair. "On a more cheery note, done anything interesting lately? Has your tinkering with enchantments borne any fruit?"

Leon raised an eyebrow in interest, then nodded. "Just a few days ago, I managed to make something fairly interesting," he said, reaching into his soul realm to procure a thin, plain silver bracelet. It had no decorations, save for a single bright purple amethyst set in the center.

"What is it?" Trajan asked, sensing a moderate amount of power within.

Suddenly, one of Trajan's pockets began to glow red, and noticing it, Trajan reached into it and retrieved something that Leon hadn't seen in a

Chapter 359: Yearning for the Sky

Leon's Mind Palace was coming along quite well, with much its skeleton already in place. The Thunderbird had asked him a question before that had sent a tiny sliver of doubt worming into his mind about what he was doing, but overall, he still thought he was on the right track.

And so, after getting home from speaking with Trajan, Leon put the finishing touches on the first of many halls that would soon surround the mountain in his soul realm.

"Not bad, it's actually looking pretty good so far," Xaphan observed as he looked down at the hall Leon had constructed. It was made almost entirely out of gleaming white marble, capped with three ruby-red domes, and had three terraces built into its outer wall held up by thick intricately carved columns.

The hall within was even more ornate, gilded in many places and with stylized mosaics of Thunderbirds, mountains, and storm clouds. The Thunderbirds had topazes for eyes, the rain falling from the storm clouds were tiny sapphires, and in the center of the floor was a ruby mosaic with the sigil that Leon had found in the records of Artorias and Serana's villa.

There were long galleries on either side of the hall four levels high, each opening into the great hall on the inner side with balconies, while the outer side had dozens of rooms per floor—much like the 'arms' of the cross-shaped Cradle. Leon wasn't entirely sure what he was going to fill those rooms with, though, so for now, they were empty. He hadn't a need for offices and guest rooms, so for now, at least, the rooms would serve as storage for items that he didn't feel like storing in his vault closer to the lantern throne room at the top of the mountain.

Not that he really had so much stuff that all that space was needed, of course, but space was there just in case.

"I'm glad to have your approval," Leon replied to the demon with far less sarcasm than he'd intended.

"How many more halls like this are you intending to build?" Xaphan asked.

"Perhaps five or six more, enough to circle the mountain that far down," Leon answered. That would still leave a significant gap of space between their upper floors and the lantern, though, which Leon was planning to fill with his own 'living quarters'. No palace was complete without a proper residence for its owner, and just for the hell of it, Leon figured he might even add additional living spaces, just to complete the palatial feel of the place.

But that was only half of the palace. Leon still had an entire underground section built in the trapezoidal style of the Thunderbird Clan to get started on, and he was looking forward to that much more than the more conventional white marble and red ceramics of the Bull Kingdom.

He settled into a sitting position on Xaphan's platform to survey his soul realm, quietly envisioning where exactly everything would go, thinking about what kind of decorations might be appropriate, and other such concerns.

"I... don't suppose I might get something a bit more... suitable than this bare platform?" Xaphan hesitantly asked, waving a burning hand around at the simple stone platform Leon had carved from the mountain for him.

"Oh? I wasn't aware that you wanted even more," Leon said with an arched eyebrow. He hopped back to his feet and, before Xaphan could respond, said, "I'll tell you what, demon, teach me the method you used for mental communication and you'll have a deal."

"Still haven't asked that water girl about it, huh?" Xaphan grumbled.

"She gives me enough, I won't ask for more," Leon said, smiling at his demonic partner. "In fact, I'd say she's provided me with a lot more of late than you have."

"I've given you plenty!" Xaphan indignantly replied, though if Leon could see through the orange flames covering his obsidian body, he would've seen Xaphan's sharp features twisted into an almost comical grin.

"Sass is not enough, I need knowledge and power," Leon said. "You haven't managed to increase your power since I brought you those gems more than a year ago, and neither have you taught me much other than a few disparate enchantments and spells. Teach me that communication technique, and I will find a place for you with... *reasonable* accommodations."

"Very well..." Xaphan replied. His attitude was so lax, so completely informal that Leon was having trouble of late reminding himself that Xaphan was a self-proclaimed 'Lord of Flame'.

'Hardly matters what his attitude is like, though, so long as he delivers on his promises,' Leon thought to himself. In fact, he much preferred this kind of Xaphan to the much more prideful and boastful demon that he had been not long after being sprung from that prison in the mountains. Leon wasn't sure how

long he could've tolerated a dry, boring, wizened old sage of a partner. The casual, somewhat lecherous, teasing Xaphan was far more to his liking, despite Leon's own penchant for stoicism.

Unfortunately, the Thunderbird chose this moment to fly out of the Mists of Chaos for Leon's daily training, so he and Xaphan were forced to postpone their lessons until the next day. The rest of the time Leon allotted to himself for training was devoted to practicing with lightning magic—for all that he wanted to learn how to fly, keeping his combat skills sharp was far more important.

When Leon emerged from his soul realm, his body a bit sweaty from the exertions of training despite only performing them in his soul realm, he felt as energetic as ever. It was like he hadn't just spent a couple of hours depleting his reserves of magic power with the Thunderbird, for he had something far more interesting to capture his attention.

Leon swiftly made his way out of the villa. He had only a few more hours left before Elise would come home, so that was how long he had to devote to his work with enchantments. A large building built of the typical white stone seen in noble estates had been constructed in the backyard, within which were all of the tools and supplies that Leon needed for his enchanting work, all sealing behind a series of *very* sophisticated magical locks.

The workshop itself had been divided into two halves. The northern half was Leon's research area, with a large drawing board, mountains of cheap spell paper, various pens, styluses, and other tools useful for the precise, intricate drawing required of enchanter's, and enough ink to fill a pond. The southern half was more akin to an armory than an enchanter's workshop, with racks of every kind of armor that Leon was interested in, as well as weapons, arrows, and rudimentary accessories, all of it—save for the arrows—made from the cheapest materials that could hold an enchantment of reasonable power, all of it there for Leon to practice inscribing the enchantments he created onto for rigorous testing.

In the center of the workshop was a long table usually covered in the work that had captured Leon's attention most recently—in this case, the wind enchantments and their corresponding pieces of test armor that he hoped would allow for independent flight. Specifically, they were relatively powerful wind enchantments designed to be placed upon boots to get him off the ground and provide propulsion, along with a number of stabilizing enchantments scattered over the rest of his test armor so that he could keep his balance while the enchantments on the boots did most of the work keeping him aloft. He also kept in mind the need for brakes, but for the time being, he was concerned with simply getting off the ground and keeping his balance rather than going so fast that brakes were needed.

Near the table were a few shelves with some examples of what Leon had accomplished so far in the past few months, including several more wind blade bracelets just like what he'd shown Trajan a few hours before, a shortsword that could burst into flame for about five minutes, a portable lightning rod that could fire off a single bolt of golden lightning with roughly fifth-tier strength, and an amulet that could provide some small defense against fire-based attacks. None of these items were particularly practical, but they were only proof of concept models, and Leon had every intention of refining their design to become much more powerful, cost-effective, and magically efficient.

But that was for the future, right now Leon's focus was flight, and then probably some looking into light magic for passive healing. Leon had been injured enough times to greatly desire something that could increase his natural abilities to heal—as a sixth-tier mage, he could probably heal a broken arm in a

matter of days if not quicker, but even that stellar speed of healing wasn't enough to be useful in combat where life and death could be decided in seconds. But still, flight was too great an attraction for Leon to pass up, and he already had the Thunderbird teaching him wind magic, sooo...

Notably missing from both Leon's workshop and his soul realm vault were the two invisibility rings he'd looted from Tiberias' guards. He knew that to Heaven's Eye, they probably weren't all that special, but they didn't seem that common in his experience. As a result, he'd given both Elise and Naiad a ring, despite neither specifically needing one.

They had both happily accepted, though Naiad's joy was more subdued than Elise's, who practically jumped into Leon's arms and attached herself to him at the lips for a considerable amount of time afterward. The three spent a passionate night together, and afterward, all three wore their emerald rings of invisibility proudly, despite the minor risk that such a thing might get back to Duke Euphemius Decimus, Tiberias' father.

Leon pushed all that out of his mind for now. His priority was flight, and he felt like he was extremely close to achieving it, not that he'd tell anyone. He had to save a bit of face just in case he failed.

For an hour, Leon looked over the enchantments he'd made, confirming everything and making sure every rune was inscribed perfectly upon the equipment he'd chosen. Then, satisfied that he'd done all he could, he began to get dressed.

First and most importantly was the leather vest. This part of the armor set had the most stabilization enchantments out of all the pieces he'd chosen for this test, and it would be critical for maintaining balance. He'd already tried to fly with little more than a few propulsion enchantments on his boots and he'd almost broken his neck. Test dummies were suggested by Elise, but they couldn't control the enchantments like Leon could, and he wasn't going to test on anyone else but himself, so onto his body went the untested armor.

Next came leather gloves and bracers which would be his primary means of steering once airborne. Then came his helmet, which had no real enchantments but he wisely donned anyway, just in case. The propulsion boots came last, a pair of leather boots with soles as thick as his thumb was long.

He had no gems attached to these pieces of armor, so he'd have to power all of the enchantments with his own magic power. No need to waste perfectly good gems when his own magic would suffice, or so he thought. Besides, he'd have better control this way, and the gems could be saved for other, more proven enchantments.

Leon took a deep breath, then walked outside. The incredibly spacious backyard was still devoid of any real landscaping, as most of the work that had been done had been concentrated in the front yard where Elise's herb garden was flourishing. There was even a pond and plenty of space for Anzu to run around and play in, even with as large as he'd gotten.

This also meant that Leon was essentially alone, though he was sure that Naiad could probably see him. He put that out of his mind—as he'd done several times by now—and slowly began to activate the wind enchantments one-by-one.

First came the enchantments on his vest, and he slowly began to feel like a mortal would in a stiff breeze; not quite like he was in danger of being pushed over, but there was a noticeable push on all

sides of his upper body. Then, he activated his gloves, but there wasn't enough wind being generated by the gloves for them to be in anything more than standby mode. The boots came last, and Leon tried to bring them up as slowly as possible.

He'd gotten this far only twice before, and the first time he'd tried to activate his boots too quickly, sending him flying about forty feet into the air. He'd managed to land his on feet at that time, but the second time he wasn't so lucky. He tried going a bit slower then, but he'd still lost his balance due to wearing nothing more than boots and gloves, and he'd practically plowed a ditch worthy of an experienced farmer into his backyard after his boots sent him ass-over-head and pushed his face through the dirt. When he rose, he saw that the ditch his face had made was an impressive seventy feet long.

That wouldn't happen this time, he was sure of it. Keeping a tight control over the amount of magic power he supplied the enchantments in his boots, Leon slowly began to feel himself rising up off the ground, and it took every fiber of his being to use his hands to keep himself righted, and not to flail his legs as his sense of balance started to freak out.

He increased the power just a bit, and his feet fully left the grass. Leon rose up about four feet from the ground, then tried to hold himself there. It seemed similar to a wheelless cart, but the enchantments Leon had were completely different. Wheelless vehicles generated pockets of air strong enough for the vehicle to almost weightlessly sit upon. Leon was just using the propulsion from his boots to stay aloft, rather than a dense air pocket.

There were a few heart-stopping close calls, but Leon managed to keep his balance for five minutes, hovering there four feet off the ground. His heart beat like it was about to explode, blood roared in his ears, and the widest, stupidest grin made an appearance on his face. He was leisurely spinning in place, indicating an imbalance somewhere in his vest stabilizers, but that was but a small note in this obvious step forward.

Leon felt ready to take another step, and after getting as comfortable as he could with his current circumstances, he began to lean forward...

... and his boots promptly slipped out from under him, sending him hurtling toward the ground. He barely managed to get his hands below him to avoid another face-full of dirt and a second ditch in his yard, but he was still sent forward dozens of feet before he managed to right himself and hover once again.

Leon set himself back down to the ground, letting his heart calm itself a bit. He was close, that much was clear; he just needed to tweak the enchantments a bit, work on his balance, and he figured he'd be right as rain.

When Leon went back inside, he just so happened to coincide with Elise's return and Naiad's subsequent emergence from his guest room.

[You did it,] Naiad said before anyone else could offer any greetings.

"You did?!" Elise asked as she excitedly kicked off her shoes and ran over to Leon.

Leon's face was still split open by his childish grin, but he shook his head and said, "There's still some work to do, but I had a very promising test today."

Elise glanced out of a nearby window and said, "You didn't plow our land again, so it must have been a *good* test indeed!"

[I saw it, it looked like fun,] Naiad said as she sat down on the couch.

"You *have* to help us fly when you get it figured out!" Elise said with almost as much excitement as Leon felt, and Naiad nodded her agreement.

"I will," Leon said, his smile growing wider.

"Just be careful, got it?" Elise said, suddenly turning serious. "I don't want to come home and find out you've splattered yourself all over the roof!"

"Don't worry, I want to fly more than just about anything, but I *am* careful," Leon said.

"More than *anything*, huh?" Elise said with interest, sending a quick look Naiad's way, which the river nymph shared.

Before either could run with that line of thinking, Leon quickly clarified with, "Certainly not more than either of you, I did say *just about* anything."

"Is this a Thunderbird thing?" Elise asked as she took a seat on the other side of the sofa from Naiad.

Leon got the message and sat down between his two ladies. "I think so," he said with some trepidation. He'd told Naiad everything about the Thunderbird by now, so he wasn't concerned about saying too much in front of her, but he still hesitated because it still felt too much like bragging about what he had through the accident of his birth. "It's just that, even if I can jump a hundred feet in the air, even if I throw lightning bolts and conjure fire, the simple fact that I'm essentially locked to the ground is something that I find frustrating to no end. Flight is just... Well, I can't really describe the allure it has for me. I want to fly, and I'm not going to stop until I figure out a way for me to do so. Fortunately, I have the Thunderbird in my corner teaching me more about wind magic than I think anyone else possibly can."

Elise nodded in understanding. She knew from Leon talking about the Thunderbird that his ancestor wasn't specifically teaching him about enchantments, but she was still teaching him a great deal about wind, water, and lightning, and that understanding had some application in understanding their corresponding enchantments. Whatever the Thunderbird was teaching Leon wasn't enough for him to figure out how to fly under his own power, but it was more than enough for Leon to start trying puzzling out other means to do so, a task which nearly all other enchanters had failed in accomplishing.

"There are some problems I foresee, though," Leon said. "If I get the current configuration to work, I won't be able to apply it to my regular armor. It simply takes up too much space. Even if the Magmic Steel could take the wind enchantments—which it can't—there wouldn't be nearly enough room left on the armor for other enchantments of significant size or scale. So, I think I'll be restricted to my boring, stuck-to-the-ground armor for certain circumstances, and some kind of 'flight suit' for others."

"I'll look into finding something more suitable for wind enchantments tomorrow, I can't have you wearing a flight suit made of nothing but a few pieces of leather," Elise said with a smile.

Leon nodded in agreement. Layered cloth often made for better armor than leather, and it was cheaper, too, but plain leather stood up to wind enchantments slightly better than cloth, which was why he was using it for his prototypes. Most of the rest of the cheap test armor in his workshop was made of cloth and low-quality iron and steel, though.

"Don't jump the bow too quickly, though," he cautioned. "I'm still making refinements, and I have some hope to find another solution to this problem before needing to shell out thousands for expensive materials..."

[I, personally, don't care about that,] Naiad declared. [Fashion doesn't concern me, and the people in this Kingdom who can harm me are few and far between. If it's just a few pieces of leather, then I don't mind, but I can't help but be fascinated by the concept of flying... It's just so far from my usual domain, I can't wait to experience it!]

Leon smiled at her, took her hand, and simply said, "You will. Soon."

A hint of a blush came to Naiad's cheeks as she made eye contact with Leon. She was still trying to puzzle out her feelings about where she and Leon might stand, and the longer she waited, the more flustered she got whenever she and Leon got close to each other.

It was a slightly intoxicating feeling, and it was one that both terrified and excited her. She didn't want to go anywhere, at least not anytime soon.

"That's that, then!" Elise loudly said, drawing both Leon and Naiad's attention. "I think the chef is about done with dinner!"

There wasn't much more to be said about flight. Leon could've gone much deeper into the mechanics that were making it work, but neither Elise nor Naiad had the enchanting expertise to really understand what he would be talking about. Of course, Elise had some skill in enchanting, but that was mostly limited to her nature magic helping her to grow her medicinal herbs, and Naiad had next to no experience in enchanting at all.

Leon was fine with this, though. He was excited enough without boring his ladies to death with technical explanations. He'd let the experience of flying explain itself once he managed to get it working properly and, more importantly, *safely*.

Chapter 360: Blades in the Dark

Papers. Papers and more papers. The damn things kept stacking up, no matter what he did with them.

Trajan sighed from behind his desk. The moon was high in the sky, but his assistants and secretaries just kept bringing him papers for him to look over.

Of course, at the sixth-tier, Trajan's need to eat, drink, and sleep weren't quite what they used to be—he could probably go for weeks without any if pressed—the human mind still needed those things to function well. In short, Trajan was tired, and while he could keep working if he wanted to, he *very much* did not.

At least August had been taking more of the reins since his bloodline awakening, taking some of the work from Trajan's desk. The elder Prince silently hoped that this meant he could return to the Bull's Horns soon, but he wasn't going to count on it. There was a tension in the air, an almost terrifying silence to the Royal Palace that gave him the creeps. Made him think that something was going to happen.

There hadn't been any serious concerns brought before the advisory council, no changes in the King's condition, no public quarrels between August and Octavius—both Princes seemed to be actively avoiding each other whenever possible, which Trajan believed was for the best—but Trajan still couldn't shake the feeling of dread he felt as he continued to read through his papers.

Within these dreaded sheets of pulped wood and plant matter was a story that he didn't want to read but couldn't stop himself from doing so. He was a Prince, after all, and though he had renounced his claim to the throne and allowed his younger brother to become King, he still felt it was his duty to see peace reign in the land.

But the mercenaries being hired by the high nobility was not a sign of peace. Fifteen percent or so of the nobles living in the capital practically fleeing over the past few months for countryside estates was not a sign of peace. The recent sharp spike in the price of weapons and armor indicating an increase in demand for such things was not a sign of peace.

At least the vampiric threat seemed to be in hand. The Legion had gone after them quite aggressively, and thousands of the blood-suckers had been found and killed, but most of them had been worshippers of a fire demon, lending a troubling amount of credence to Leon's claim that it was a single demon responsible for so many of the monsters appearing within their borders.

What was more, the investigation into Justin Isynos had, so far, gone nowhere. Not even a single solitary clue had been found connecting Isynos to the fall of House Raime. By all accounts, he hadn't even been in the Kingdom when Argent Palace had been attacked and Kyros Raime killed.

Trajan couldn't account for the activities of Justin's subordinates, though, and so far, the one person that the Spymaster had managed to subvert in Justin's staff hadn't found anything of import—just matters to do with Justin's place in August's retinue. There were no indications that Justin and his people were doing anything nefarious.

The investigation had gone on for a year with little to show for it. The end of the report that Trajan quickly finished reading concerning these matters ended with a recommendation to end the investigation by the woman that the Spymaster had appointed to spearhead the investigation. Perhaps her recommendation might have been different if she had known that Prince Trajan himself had ordered Justin Isynos to be looked into, but without his word, there was no evidence that Justin was anything but a steward with great diligence toward magical training.

In fact, the only thing truly worthy of noting about Justin other than his being a capable manager and administrator was that his power was still unknown. There were no records of what magical tier he had reached, and no one who had personally interacted with him knew what tier he stood at, though the seventh seemed most likely.

'Perhaps Julius would know, he appointed Isynos as an Exarch in the first place, but my brother is hardly in a position to divulge anyone's secrets...' Trajan bitterly thought, praying to the Ancestors with all that he had that Julius would soon wake.

He momentarily played with the idea of bringing Caecilius back out to chat. The Bluefire Guild founder wasn't that talkative—or even useful when it came to navigating politics—but he could hold a conversation quite well. The ruby was nearly always in Trajan's pocket, but as he was still thinking about taking a short break to talk to an old, long-dead mage, his door burst open.

Just behind the door came a knight practically falling into Trajan's office. He was sweaty, his clothes were in relative disarray as if he had just run a marathon to reach Trajan's office, and on his face was an expression of pure terror. Trajan recognized the young man; he served as a squire to one of Trajan's lower-ranked knights and had been recently knighted for his part in killing a small group of bandits along the Gold Road. He had then transitioned into a full-fledged member of Trajan's retinue.

"Your Highness!" the knight shouted in panic before Trajan could say so much as a single word. "Sir Leon Ursus has been found dead, killed by vampiric assassins!"

Trajan's vision went red just as his heart seemed to stop. His instinct to act from two centuries of preparing for war kicked in, and without even asking for details, he said to the young knight, "Take me there! Now!"

"Yes, Your Highness!" the knight replied, hurriedly turning around and wasting no time running out of the office.

Trajan had a large retinue, and because of this, he could afford to have a relatively significant amount of force waiting just in case situations such as these came up. When Trajan came barreling out of his office with soaring killing intent, his twenty fourth-to-sixth-tier knights waiting in the wings leaped to their feet and joined their Prince without a word. They didn't need orders to move when the Prince was so clearly agitated.

As they ran after the messenger knight, those who weren't already armed and armored retrieved their accoutrements from their soul realms, with Trajan, in particular, pulling out a massive war hammer that seemed to vibrate with earth magic as Trajan's magic power flowed into it, and a suit of thick plate armor made mostly out of wyvern scales and rare manticore leather. It was expensive, destructive equipment, and Trajan could sense that he'd need it if Leon had been so quickly killed without alerting half the city to the battle.

For the sake of the weaker and slower members of the party, Trajan and his retinue jumped into a few wheelless carriages pulled by fast horses, though they had to wait for an excruciating five minutes as the arrangements were made, during which time Trajan both explained to his knights what was happening and pressed the messenger knight for more details as his head cooled.

For their part, the rest of his knights were at least passingly familiar with Leon since he was so prominent in Trajan's retinue, and whether or not they liked him all that much didn't much matter; they were all angry that one of their own had been supposedly killed while they were stuck in the palace not doing a damn thing about it.

"What was Ursus doing?!" Trajan demanded of the messenger knight.

"I'm not entirely sure, Your Highness," the knight replied. "I simply happened to be in the area and responded to the sounds of battle. Since I could relay the information to you quickly, I left the site to bring word back to you. Knights of the 1st Legion were already arriving by the time I left."

"And the battle?" Trajan asked.

"Again, Your Highness, I'm not sure, but it seemed to have been short and brutal. No bodies other than Sir Leon's were found, though a few of the responding knights managed to get a brief look at the assailants and determined that they were vampires."

Trajan frowned, clarity returning to his mind with the cool night air, and along with that clarity, he started noticing strange things about the knight. The young man seemed nervous—understandably so, but Trajan was still bothered by it—and he was being quite vague in his answers.

However, Leon's possible death wasn't something Trajan was going to take any chances with—*something* was clearly going on and he wanted to investigate it—so he only had one more question.

"Where did this take place?"

"A deserted part of the market district, Your Highness," the knight hastily replied, quickly furnishing Trajan with all the details that the Prince wanted. The area was on route to the Heaven's Eye Tower from Leon's villa, but the zone was commercial and thus devoid of people when it was so late.

As the wheelless carriages pulled up in front of the palace's main building, Trajan momentarily glanced back over his shoulder. The palace was in a bit of an uproar over one of the Princes sprinting through it fully armed and armored with twenty knights of his retinue in a similar state of agitation, but he wasn't going to stop and explain himself, even as he saw a number of other knights starting to trickle outside either to watch or to ask him questions. However, he did glance at the weakest member of his party aside from the messenger knight and growled, "Stay here. Find Minerva and tell her what's happening."

"... Yes, Your Highness!" the middle-aged fourth-tier knight unhappily replied. He was a strong warrior and had earned his place in Trajan's retinue. If the Prince was going to battle, then he wanted to be there with Trajan, not looking for Minerva like a lowly courier. Still, if Trajan was asking that of him, then perform that duty he would.

Trajan, his nineteen knights, and the messenger packed themselves into three carriages and they sped off, the messenger guiding them along the way. They didn't encounter much traffic this late, so the going was quick, and they arrived close to the location before too much longer.

When they arrived, they were ushered in through a cordon of Legion soldiers that had secured the entire zone of the district. The presence of these soldiers quieted some of Trajan's doubts about what had happened, but in doing so increased his fears that Leon was truly dead. Whether or not that was the case, *something* had clearly gone down here just based on the Legion presence alone.

The Prince's heart madly beat and there was a lump in his throat. It was hard for him to fathom that this was happening, but as the messenger led them further into the locked-off part of the zone and they passed more Legion knights, burn marks started to appear on the ground and walls. Marks reminiscent of lightning magic could be seen on nearby walls, and the air itself seemed choked with lightning magic, the stench of ozone permeating through the nearby buildings.

“In here, Your Highness,” the messenger said, bringing Trajan’s group to the door of a warehouse guarded by four Legion knights who bowed on Trajan’s approach. The warehouse itself was clearly in shambles, even from the outside. The door was barely hanging on its hinges, the glass in all of the windows had been recently shattered, and Trajan could see broken furniture inside.

Trajan projected his magic senses in an attempt to survey the battlefield where Leon had supposedly fallen, but when his magic senses touched the building, they were immediately scattered. The entire building had been warded against magic senses.

With a deepening frown, Trajan gave a few practiced hand signals to his knights, and most of them stopped outside the warehouse while only four accompanied Trajan inside. Trajan himself was suddenly aware of just how many knights from the 1st Legion were around; he and his knights were outnumbered by a good three-to-one.

“What was Ursus doing in here?!” Trajan wondered out loud, hoping to get the messenger talking—he knew the place was between the Heaven’s Eye Tower and Leon’s villa, and if Leon did get ambushed here, then he was probably only passing through on the way to either his home or the Tower.

“I couldn’t say, Your Highness,” the messenger smoothly replied.

The warehouse offices that they stepped into were certainly trashed like there had been an intense fight inside, with hardly an intact chair or desk to be seen and papers covering the floor, but Trajan was starting to look more and more to the messenger rather than to the rest of the building.

To his credit, the messenger didn’t bat an eye under Trajan’s scrutinizing gaze and simply led the group on through the offices to the warehouse proper.

Stepping out onto the warehouse floor, Trajan found the place as dark as a moonless night, but he and his knights could still see perfectly fine. The warehouse was relatively large, but not overly so. Large enough that the shelves of goods created a maze that would take a few minutes to search through, even if most of the shelves hadn’t been knocked over, spilling the goods stored on them all over the ground.

“Where is h-“ Trajan began as he turned his attention from the warehouse to the messenger, but a spear came hurtling out of the darkness and pierced right through his armor, soundly interrupting him. Trajan was hurled into the wall by the force of the blow, while the stone floor of the warehouse erupted into spikes, instantly impaling the four knights accompanying Trajan, killing the two fifth-tier knights instantly and mortally wounding the two sixth-tier knights.

Trajan groaned in pain, the spear biting deep into his chest and blood rapidly soaking into the gambeson padding beneath his armor, but he was still alive. Using as much strength as he could, he looked up, and in his darkening gaze, he saw the proud, handsome features of the Earthshaker Paladin stepping out of the shadows.