

# The Emperor

There is no greater place in the venerated halls of the High Magister of Freymoor's Residency than the Grand Library. Although more gilded sights exist (no room could ever replace the divine splendor of the dining hall or the opulence of the artifact chamber), the library is known not for its aesthetic appeal. Rather, it is known that the Grand Library is one of the single largest collections of knowledge on the face of Nevarine. From first-hand accounts of centuries old events to simple folk tales, the many varied tomes amidst the hundreds of tall shelves create a deep pool of knowledge no high magister has yet to fully explore. Some have come close, but the day-to-day excitements of politics prevent any magister from ever plumbing the depths of the pure concentrated cultural heritage that lay dormant on the myriad shelves.

Every magister, however, has a particular "favorite" amongst the tomes in these halls. Reginald Gallant-Born of House Justinia was quoted in the 7th era as loving the collections of ancient Teutanic poetry. Isabella Redivena gave a speech to students in the 8<sup>th</sup> Era proclaiming the virtues of *Monstra Spira*, a famous collection of bestiaries. It was even said that Petronius Hard-Heart enjoyed a flavorful collection of Freylian children's stories. No matter how involved a high magister was in his or her daily tasks, they all came to love The Grand Library in a unique way.

High Magister Leon Sucheres was no exception to this.

Leon sat reclined on one of the many soft couches that dotted the libraries halls. A soft amber glow cast itself over the reading area, the dancing light of the oil flame casting flowing shadows onto towering shelves and stern busts of high magisters and mighty kings long past. Spread across Leon's lap, caught squarely in the brightness of the light, was the Codex Solis.

The Codex Solis was the greatest holy text in the library (in the humble opinion of Leon). It recounted a detailed history of the world stretching from creation to the crisis of eras long past. Peppered in between were allegorical tales, recounting of saints and kings, and the ever so often cautionary legend warning against the folly of sin and vice. It held knowledge of thousands, millions of authors before him and taught lessons no one man could ever hope to teach.

For Leon the Codex Solis was a book of passion and pride. His faith, that of the Solar Church, has been following the teachings of this book for thousands of years. Men and women in eras long past sung songs from this book, broke bread to tales from its faded chapters. In his head, he heard the songs of gospel fluttering as he read. A comforting voice reminding him that in his times of need the lessons of this book can guide him.

Even beyond that, his position as high magister conferred a need to know the tales from this book. Sure, the position is a fairly elected one. A position guided by the people. But even

those in the far country hills of Teutania know that the high magister is never just his secular position. As often as the sun rises, the candidate elected for high magister concurrently holds the position of Summa Ignis of the Solar Church. As much as he wanted to know this book, he also needed to know this book.

No occupational need could ever quell his love for this book, however. He knew this as his fingers glided across the worn vellum pages. As he read tales of shepherds being led away from pastures and angels giving coals of warmth to the tribes of men, he felt as if he could feel the warm touch of En'tr Herself reaching up from the pages.

As he once again felt enraptured by the grandiosity of his holy text, a knocking on one of the nearby shelves sent Leon into the air with shock. Leon fell back onto the couch, the Codex falling to his side and lodging between the cushions.

Leaning relaxed onto one of the shelves in front of him sat Duke Theodore Hill-Guard. Theodore was a formidable man, standing a head and half above Leon. His face bore a smiling youthful energy betrayed by wrinkles and frown lines accrued over years of governing. Framing his face was a thick salt-and-pepper beard and swept back black hair. He bore the traditional Freylian blue and silver robes standard for leaders of the Silver-Heights province. On his chest, right above his heart, he bore a small silver pin depicting a blue moth.

Leon adjusted himself, putting the codex onto the end table next to his seat. Theodore chuckled.

"Did I interrupt your precious worship time, sir?"

Leon shook his head, smiling. "A bit, yes. I hope whatever you have for me is more important than the grace of Her Light, Teddy."

Theodore held his hand out, helping Leon to his feet from the couch. "Well, the Curia's scheduled meeting IS in an hour, and I tend to think government beats out old books."

Leon frowned at this reminder. "Damn, whatever will Lady Braun do if I'm a few minutes late? She might have to reschedule her fencing practice."

"You know how catty she can get when her meticulous schedule is upset Leon. I'm only trying to save you from the lecture."

Leon put his hands up. "Stop, I need no reminder!"

They both laughed and began to walk towards the entrance of the Grand Library.

As they walked towards the meeting chambers, Leon separated from Theodore to make his way to the dressing room. The room, a long meticulously organized collection of uniforms and robes, always bored Leon. Some high magisters loved the dress and pomp that came with the job. To him, it was only a mask he wore on stage.

Regardless, he donned the dress traditional for such a meeting and discarded his previous outfit of loose robes.

He now wore the brown, gold and red uniform of a general. Steel bracers, leather boots, and canvas trousers and tunic all portrayed the image of a strong leader. Above this uniform he wore a loose white and purple shoulder cape, a sign of his spiritual status. At his side sat a ceremonial gold arming sword, the final seal that told his status as both military leader and passer of law and judgement.

He tugged at his collar. It was all tight, gaudy, and ever so itchy. For as long as he had held this position, he had hated the costume it forced upon him.

The mirror at the end of the room caught his eye. He walked towards it, taking in the shining pompousness of his uniform. He looked like someone gilded a peacock and let it loose in the house of commons. But this uniform of power and faith could not hide the face which wore it.

Though his uniform held all the traditional markings of Urban dress, his face betrayed his farmers heritage. His face was marked and rough from years of war and stress. His hair, receding and greying from age, sat close to his head. The mark of a man who had long ago given up the pompous luxury of product and care. His beard sat still full and only slightly kemp.

Framing the left side of his face sat the scar of burned skin, stretching down to his neck. He traced his fingers down the edge of this scar, an absentminded tic he often fell prey to. It stood out, a light-reddish brown against his darker complexion. The scar, a “trophy” from the great war, sat as a reminder of the price of failure. Often it stung during meetings, sometimes distractingly so. But he wore it with pride. He has failed, as any leader has, and this scar serves as a visual reminder to move forward and grow.

To him, the scar mattered more than any golden sword of spiritual cape.

A cough from the door alerted Leon. A mousy little secretary stood in the door, her large glasses barely hiding anxiety.

“Apologies Sir Sucheres, Lady Braun sent me to rem-“

Leon waved a hand dismissively. “Yes, yes, tell her I will be there soon.”

*Adina and her damn timetables.*

The secretary fled from the room. Before Leon followed, he took one more glance into the mirror. With a soft motion, he ran his fingers down his scar once more, before marching out the door into the hall.

<LS>

As Leon walks into his office chambers, he sees an eclectic gathering of the foremost political figures in his country. The group was spread out across the office, marveling at some of his accrued religious relics on various shelves or staring out the large picture windows onto the golden landscape of the grand city of Vision and its many wards and walls. He caught himself staring out the window for a second as well, taking in the golden hues of a rising sun painting the city and its surrounding farms and plains in a way only En'tr could. The artistic hand of Her Grace filling the city with color like an expert painter showing her craft for the world.

His chamber, an old-fashioned room of oak and smooth stone, stood distinctively less grand. The eclectic gathering of dukes, barons, and seigneurs normally spend their time arguing about gold distribution in the house of commons, so to see them all gathered in his chambers is troubling.

Standing front and center is Theodore, currently locked in conversation Adina Braun. Adina is the young up-and-coming daughter of the Braun Dynasty, a family of well-to-do Teutanic human merchants who have long stood at the forefront of her province's politics. Her face was sharp and beautiful, adorned in makeup familiar to nobles of her province and people. Her fiery hair shot back over her fur cloak in a mane-like ponytail, which combined with her stark-white complexion made her appear like a fire elemental in human form. Over her shoulder, stretching down to the knees of her godet skirt, sat a traditional Teutanic "lovelock". The traditional braid spoke to an arranged marriage between families. This detail made sense for a woman of great beauty such as Adina but clashed with the rapier at her side and the breastplate she wore over her gown.

Adina was an interesting lady to be sure, with a calculating charm and biting wit that earned her a seat at Leon's side on his Curia Magistri.

As Leon approached, Adina greeted him with a wide smile and the traditional one-armed bow. Theodore quickly followed suit. Leon chuckled, clapping Theodore on the shoulder.

"I hope this old dog hasn't been giving you too much trouble Baroness. He's been looking for a date to the Heights Guild Ball, and I know how persistent he can be." Leon said, shooting a wry smile at Theodore. Theodore chuckled, waving Leon's hand off his shoulder.

Adina mimed shock. "And here I thought you were simply being nice! My mother was right about southern men!"

The three laughed, before Theodore turned and motioned the other two in the room over. As the other members of the Curia Magistri approached, Leon felt the tension grow ever so slightly thicker.

From his right, approaching from a shelf of elvish relics, came Lord Seyong Xixao. A Lixao Human from Freymoor's western colonies, his nouveau riche family transplanted to the frontier lands to the east in his youth. Gossip in the house of commons says this was to escape some kind of scandal, but Leon's personal guess is that they simply wanted to find a place where their

newly acquired wealth wouldn't be scrutinized. He knows better than anyone how insular the western colonies can be.

Seyong wore a very modern two-piece blue military uniform, a sign of his service in the Frontier Corps. Several gold medals were pinned to his chest, a projection of strength showing both great pride and great insecurity. Over this he wore a long black overcoat. This dress was common for those in the Gold Front and was necessary to help cement power in such a wild and untamed land.

Unfortunately for Seyong, this whole uniform was framing a very obviously young and inexperienced face. Seyong slicked his black hair back and wore stygian steel spectacles to try and mask this fact, but no expensive accessory or amount of product could conceal his naivete.

Seyong approached Leon before bowing. He held the bow for a bit longer than necessary, before quickly righting himself and mumbling a simple "Sir."

Leon smiled at this, holding his hand out for a friendly shake. This eased Seyong up, the young lord relaxing his shoulders and shaking Leons hand heartily.

A wise, sultry voice spoke out from behind Seyong. "I hope you aren't intimidating the young lord!"

Stepping out from behind Seyong was Villia Netsera, Duchess of the Ubridian Province. She was an older Flore Elf with greying brunette hair, golden face paint and spectacles, and a fire behind her eyes. Her hair was tied into an intricate bun, a golden hair pin and accompanying barrettes decorating the style. Her smile was as wide as the Vision Riviera and as beautiful as the white sands of Barbatos. She looked as though wrenched from a painting, the golden face lines striking out against her deep brown tones. Her milky eyes had intensity behind them and portrayed such emotion to kill with a glare. Right now, they gazed at Leon with joy and affection.

She carried in her arms an E-Scroll, a modern anachronism compared to her rather traditional dress. A golden Flore Elven shawl hung over a green, low-collar Freylian dress. It was clear from her dress alone she paid heed to her heritage as an elf, but the Freylian dress was a clear loving homage to her late husband. The passing of her husband, only a year gone at this point, was a point of contention in House of Commons gossip. Some thought ill of her sudden ascendancy to ladyship, but Leon welcomed it. As much as he loved her husband, she was much easier to deal with. Not to mention she could actually hold a conversation.

She approached and bowed, before Leon took her hand and kissed it. Seyong and Theodore looked on in confusion, while Adina giggled. The hand kiss was near ritualistic in elvish culture but was often seen as strange by human nobles.

"How fares Lady Netsera this graceful morning?" Leon smirked.

“Better. To think a lady as young as I could meet the Summa Ignis!” She held a hand to her face in mocking shock.

Leon rolled his eyes, before chuckling. “Mockery is but faith in disguise, my lady. Besides, you have at least 90 years on me. To you, I am but a babe.”

Villia furrowed her brow. “Surely you know never to mention a ladies age, High Magister!” She said, holding back a laugh.

Theodore raised his hand, pulling the groups attention to himself.

“Please, stop, we will be at this all day.” Theodore said, shaking his head.

Adina nodded solemnly. “We should get this meeting started soon. If my schedule gets set back any further, I’ll be buried in paperwork for the rest of the day.”

Leon stepped back, moving within speaking distance of the Curia. “I concur. Gather your materials and let us convene this meeting of the Curia Magistri.”

<LS>

## PART 2

Leon and his Curia Magistri gathered in a vaguely rectangular shape in his office chambers. His desk was pushed back towards the windows, making as much room as possible in the center of the chamber.

Leon gestured to Villia. “Could you set out the chairs?”

Villia nodded, clapping her hands together. A vibrant golden hue emanated from between her clasped hands, creating a sharp trailing line as she separated them. Her hands moved intricately, crossing and circling to form floating elvish ruins. After drawing these ruins, she thrust her hands forward and materialized a fanciful mahogany meeting table in the middle of the group. With a quick upward swipe of her right hand, chairs soon followed.

The group politely clapped as Villia sighed, catching her breath. The group took their seats at the table, Leon at the head of the table and the rest at its sides.

As Adina took her seat, she waved for her mousy elvish secretary.

“Helena, would you be a dear and grab us a drink? Perhaps a snack if you are able?”

Leon furrowed his brow. “Drinks? I assume whatever you have gathered here for requires a *sober* hand, Adina.” He pinched the bridge of his nose, sighing. “Besides, its 7 in the morning.”

“Nonsense! All of the best discussions are had over a bottle of Freylian wine!” Adina giggled. She waved her secretary off, who scuttered off out the door and down the hall in a frantic search for the kitchen.

Leon stretched out his arms and leaned into the table, clasping his hands in front of his face.

“I assume you all have a good reason for convening before I’ve had my coffee?” Leon said, letting slight frustration leak out.

As he said this, Seyong and Adina began to speak at the same time. After a few seconds of nearly indecipherable racket, Theodore held his hand up.

“The High Magister didn’t ask for whinging. Seyong, you have the summary?”

Seyong blushed, before searching his bag. He pulled out a large E-Scroll, and laid it flat on the table. Tugging on his collar he fiddled with some of the controls, causing a large holographic screen to appear above the table facing Leon.

“W-well sir, there is a series of issues we wanted to bring to your attention. First is the wilden ways appearing in the The Gold Front.”

As Seyong said this, the screen scrolled showing several pictures of various fey portals in the frontiers of The Gold Front. Fey flora leaks out of each portal, overtaking the area next to each wilden way.

“We don’t know much about how or why these are appearing, but some of our best mages are thinking it has something to do with the mining efforts near each way. Whatever the reason, the combination of leaking fey magic and incursions from fey warriors is losing us people, materials, and gold.”

As Seyong said this, a hastily drawn sketch of a satyr appeared on his screen. Its form was twisted and clearly exaggerated, but its monstrous features and curved sword still spoke to a cruel and efficient warrior. Leon nodded solemnly, gesturing to move to the next point.

Seyong cleared his throat. “Uh, well, next up I guess would be the Free Human States.”

The screen slid over to several news clippings of various southern cities in a blaze. Various scenes flashed by of soldiers and militia fighting, mages slinging spells, and towns being overrun by people waving flags of the Free Human States. Adina cringed at the sight of the fighting.

“The invasion from the Free Human States is, on its own, bad enough. But the Human States invasion is also causing unrest in the- *ahem*, more urban areas.”

“The Elvish Communities, you mean. I don’t think it’s necessary to beat around the bush on this issue Seyong.” Villia said sternly.

“Apologies Lady Netsera. I’m simply trying to be polite about my wording.”

Villia stood up, pushing her chair back. “Whats the point of being polite about wording at this point? The invasion from those humanist asshats is sending fractures through the elvish communities. Just in Ubrid alone, there have been near constant protests and near-riots. It’s a tinderbox, and the invading army is the match!”

Leon motioned for Villia to let Seyong continue. She clears her throat and sits back down, as Seyong nods towards her.

“Lady Netsera actually touched on the next issue.” With a press of the scroll, the next slide pops up. The screen displayed several large city squares, overtaken by large protests in favor of Guild Unions, better treatment for elves, and declarations of a want for uniform democracy.

“As I’m sure you have noticed out your own window, protests have overtaken the streets of many cities in the republic. I can’t say I disagree with many of their points, but the protests have reduced many critical industries to an alarming crawl. Even in the Gold Front, which has- er- well its basically killed PSYKE mining in the frontier. Combine that with the other issues at hand and you can see the problem.”

Leon nodded solemnly. “Obviously I can imagine the stress that the slowed production is putting on you specifically, Seyong, but I’m not exactly sure what my office can do about this particular issue.”

As Seyong tried to stammer out a why to this statement, Villia interjected. “What Leon is trying to say is that the Republic charter specifically enshrines a citizen’s right to protest, and even the High Magister cannot rescind that right. Especially for citizens rightfully protesting their current treatment, Seigneur.”

Leon nodded towards Villia, before continuing. “Besides I’m sure you saved the most pressing issue for last.”

Seyong nervously nodded, hesitantly tapping to the next slide. On screen, the image of a horrifyingly dark mass appeared. The image was difficult to look at, almost as if it was extricating all gaze from itself. Leon focused, trying to keep his eyes on the image, but no matter how hard he tried his gaze instinctively moved to anything *but* the dark mass. Its very appearance caused a marked hike in the tension at the table, forcing every person around the table to avert their gaze nervously. That which he could make out worried him, as from what little he saw it appeared to have a *face*.

Leon shielded his eyes from the image to alleviate the discomfort.

“Please tell me I’m not the only one having difficulties looking at this thing” Leon sternly asked the group.



Seyong spoke up, his nervousness audibly increased “N-no sir, this mass is j-just hard to look at apparently. Several mages from the Vision Arcane Institute of Higher Learning have been studying it this past month, and they are calling it a ‘sensory hazard’ in their notes.”

Leon waved wildly, signaling Seyong to remove the image from sight. He followed this order quickly, alleviating the tension slightly.

Leon shifted in his chair, clearing his throat. “Can you please explain to me what in the nine hells that was?”

Seyong nodded quickly, before pulling out some paper notes from his bag and fumbling them onto the table. As he anxiously sorted them, he managed to hastily put together a summary.

“The VAIHL mages are calling it ‘The Cold’, and apparently its some kind of entity leaking out from the Decay in the northwest, right over the United Khaganate’s territory. As you can imagine, there is some worry on the part of the ork’s that this is a kind of new magical weapon on our part, and its very presence is causing tension between our diplomats.”

“Can you really blame them for thinking its us? It’s our fault the decay is there in the first place.” Villia dryly added.

“No, I don’t blame our friends across the sea for being wary of us considering our shared past. Seyong, is it doing anything more than just being an eyesore?”

“From what the VAIHL people can gather, it’s been raining... things, from the cloud. Best they can make out is that these creatures look like gangly humanoids, but due to the cloud’s general vicinity to Orkhi territory and reasonable caution on the part of the mages they have not been able to investigate closer.”

Leon sighed deeply, running his hands over his face. “Respectfully, it sounds like you 4 have brought a diplomatic and economic nightmare to my table. Any particular reason these issues could not have been brought up earlier in their development?”

Theodore leaned forward, a furtive look sitting uncomfortably on his face. “High Magister, these issues have been manageable up until now. With all due respect, the provinces can usually handle protection and trade. Its only now that all these issues are becoming catastrophically disruptive.”

Theodore stood up, gesturing Seyong to scroll back through the presentation in summary. “The Gold Front is far enough from primary supply lines that its military presence relies heavily on the swords of adventurers and guilds. We are, frankly, in an informal hot war with a rapidly growing separatist power to the south. Some kind of extraplanar *thing* is rapidly decaying relationships between us and a power that *already* despises us. And to put a nice little bow on top of all of this, protests are sweeping our major cities, led by an already disruptive populace of Mer.”

Villia cocked her head at Theodore, a sudden fire in her eyes. "Sorry, what do you mean by 'already disruptive' Duke?"

Theodore glared back at Villia. "Nothing, dear Lady, but if you had the same experience you would understand my meaning more."

Villia's eyes widened at this, quickly followed by her rising to her feet in disgust. "*Excuse me?* Who are you to speak of experience, child!"

The chamber quickly devolved into a cacophany of arguments, with only Leon remaining seated. As this argument raged on in the quickly self-destructing chamber, Leon looked on the presentation as it moved issue to issue. The noise closed in on him, his scar slowly starting to sting with more and more pain and his ears ringing.

Adina slammed her fists on the table, quieting the chamber and pulling attention to her. "Well Leon, are you going to say anything or just sit there like a lobotomized piff?"

After a round of gasps from the chamber, all eyes sat on Leon. He ignored the pain and motioned the group to sit down. As the chamber retook their seats Leon left his, standing tall above the group.

"You 4 have brought to me a fervent kaleidoscope of issues, ranging from economic to diplomatic. This quilt of troubles is far from something me or my office can make a simple descision on, and you know this. The Free Human States to the south will not back down without anything less than a movement from the entire Republic Army and a declaration of defensive war, something that requires a *house* decision to do. Moving funds for more protection to the Gold Front is yet another house issue, and I cannot *force* guilds and companies to provide their workers with better pay and treatment. Such republic laws, *once again*, would require a passing of new laws by the House of Commons. I shan't even mention the ridiculousness of the idea of the High Magister's office overruling the local governmental structure of your provinces, an idea which hasn't been floated since the sixth era. In fact, the only issue you have brought me that I CAN handle is the- "Leon stopped, turning to Seyong. "Sorry, what did they call it again?"

Seyong looked at his notes, before responding "The Cold"

"The Cold, or whatever it is. Even then, a statement from my office to the Prime Khan can only do so much and we cannot get closer to examine without a discussion of treaties with the Khaganate, something that will take months to organize."

The room sat quiet for a moment, the curia glancing at each other with nervousness. Leon looked between them, catching Seyong, Adina, and Theodore glancing at each other. Theodore nods at Adina, who leans forward and clears her throat.

"You could declare imperatorship, sir."

The very suggestion of this felt like a punch to the gut. Leon staggered back in disbelief, before taking a seat. He looked over to Villia, who looked just as flabbergasted as he did. Her eyes were wide with sheer disbelief, jaw agape and ears flared back.

She wiped her face with her hands before asking. "Please, I need to know, exactly what kind of Shenk have you been smoking Adina?"

Adina turned to Villia, a smirk over her face. "Nothing I couldn't afford, dear lady Netsera." She stuck her tongue out at Adina, who shook her head before turning to Leon.

"Leon, this is madness. These issues could be all be handled with a deft hand and patient planning. A small movement of funds to provincial militia and local relief groups could help tourniquet the issue, while a statement to the house could provide it with much needed direction for a *legal* movement of troops. Doing something as rash and shortsighted as declaring imperatorship would turn the house AND the people against you."

Leon shakes his head, before turning a stern gaze to the group of three at the other end of his table. "Villia is right on this, Adina. I can only assume this is a certain someone's idea." As he says this, he shoots a sharp glance at Theodore, who stands his ground.

Leon sighs. "Just to be clear, you 3 are advocating that I declare imperatorship and take control of all 27 provinces, including your own, under my own banner. A functional return to an Empire, which would significantly decrease your own power?"

Theodore throws his hands up. "High Magister, my fellow members of the Curia and I understand the significance of this, and we understand when something so drastic is necessary. Right now, it is necessary for the people of our great republic to remain in the safety and peace that we have provided them for the past 2 decades."

Villia leans over and places a hand on Leon's forearm, shaking slightly as she says "Leon, dear, this is not something to be declared lightly. You would be turning the republic into an empire. You would be undoing 2 eras of democratic rule."

"T-Temporarily, as we solve these pressing issues" Seyong interjects.

Villia lets a quick breath out her nose, before continuing "Either way, this is not something to declare lightly. You would be using a club where you need a scalpel. Please think about this."

Silence falls to the room. All in the room lean back into their chairs, letting the tension flow out in deep exhales. Even Adina sits with a look of solemn contemplation, looking down into her binder of schedules and paperwork. Seyong nervously fidgets with his spectacles, rhythmically cleaning the same spot in the steel frames. A darkness frames Theodores face, cast by the morning light as it frames his steeled expression.

Villia sits, hand on Leons arm, staring at his face with a fire in her eyes. Leon looks back up at her, connecting with her gaze for but a moment. For a moment, less than a thought, they share but an instant communication. That nonverbal communicate that only those who know each other truly can share.

A cough broke the silence. Adina's mousy secretary stood in the door, carrying a tray of bottles with a small serving bowl of bread in the middle. "uh- Drinks, Lords and Ladies?" She stood, with a slight shake as she quickly gathered that she had intruded on some tense moment.

"Yes, come here. Villia, could you get that?" Leon waved the secretary in, glad to have an interruption.

Villia took a deep breath, in then out, before flicking her hand. The bottles and bowl gently floated to the middle of the table, a series of wooden cups appearing beside the bottles.

Leon thanked the servant, and the room took a moment to pour themselves wine and take a bite of the bread. As the secretary stepped back out of the chambers, the moment felt markedly less tense than before, but unease still clung to the back of the Curia like a tick.

As the room ate, Seyong clears his throat. The room looks to him, wary of what he will say next.

"Sir, the Seigneurs of the Gold-Front and the surrounding 4 territories would support such a measure. I have sworn statements from them all, of course." He stammers out, before hiding back behind his drink and bread.

"Save for my provinces, of course" Villia says, trying and failing to contain contempt.

"I must admit Lady Netsera, I was hoping to gather your support during this Curia meeting. I do apologize."

Villia sighs. "It's alright Seyong."

Adina pulls out a bundle of letters bound in a golden ribbon. "The Braun family has met with both local community leaders, the Dzhezzerate of several Arctic Elf communities, and a few of the independent kingdoms to the north who all agree that Imperatorship is the best option moving forward. We were hoping to get Seocht's approval as well, but you know how introverted that little city-state can be."

Theodore nods, placing a hand on Adinas shoulder before turning back to Leon. "I've convened with several prominent guild leaders. The E.S.T.C, Apidae Consortium, Alchemist Guild, and VAIHL all show sympathy towards the idea. Other major guilds have not outright given support but have all floated indirect support for such a change."

Leon rubs his temples. "I would prefer to consider alternate options before such a drastic change is made. My lady, you must have an alternative in mind."

Villia nods, pulling out her own E-Scroll and displaying a screen in the middle of the table, covering the presentation. As she quickly flicks through the scroll, several tactical plans, maps, and graphs appear.

"Some well-placed strikes and funding from the Freymoorian military could allow her provincial troops to break through and cut off supplies from the south, effectively starving the Free Human States advancing army. This could solve issues regarding the invasion, and would help quell some of the unrest involving the mer community who are, despite the insistence of some of our *distinguished colleagues*—"Villia shoots a scowl at Theodore. "Generally reasonable and open to discussion. The amount of funding needed could come from the High Magister's office alone and would neither require House approval or a declaration of imperialism."

Adina scoffs, letting out a little chuckle. "Thinking of your province first, I see. What of the fey incursions to the east or the infernal cloud to the west?"

Villia smirks at Adina. "Such problems require patient and calm decision making. Fey can be negotiated with and such a problematic extraplanar force will best be handled with the support of the Khaganate."

Seyong furiously drops his now organized pile of papers on the table with a loud thud. "Sorry, negotiated with? I understand you have some kinship with them, but the fey are not to be negotiated with. Have you seen what they can do? Have you witnessed a friend turned to wood, a lover's veins filled with vines, a fellow soldier torn to shreds by a cloud of fairies? Their morality is totally unlike ours, their demands nonsensical. These incursions have happened few enough times in the history of our nation that I can count them on one hand. We *cannot* negotiate."

"What do you mean by 'kinship', Seigneur?" Villia says, her face barely holding back a scowl.

"You know exactly what I mean, Netsera." Seyong says back, the acid in his voice barely contained.

Leon slams his fist on the table. The stinging of his scar growing from a dull pain to an electric thrum. "Can we please continue with an *actual discussion*? And Seyong, watch your damn tone."

Before Seyong can continue, Theodore raises his hand and gives Seyong a commanding glare. He sits back down, the embarrassment flooding his face.

Villia continues. "Regardless of the insensitive comments of colleagues, do trust me in that Fey can be negotiated with. The Mer community has done so for eras upon eras, and I can

guarantee that however complex and theatrical their etiquette and speech may be, their demands will end up being simple and attainable.”

“But can you guarantee any of this will work beyond the short term, Lady Netsera?” Theodore asks, his voice possessing a certain hardness Leon was not used to.

“No, Duke Hill-guard, but these will provide enough buffer time to allow for the house to come to a wise and democratic descision.”

Theodore wipes his face, before turning to look Leon directly in the eyes. The pain in Leon’s scar ascends to a shooting flare.

“Sir, pardon my directness. This set of issues is far from something that can be solved with such slow and overly-cautious movements. I must reiterate, we are dealing with threats of a militaristic, social, and extraplanar nature for En’ters sake. We are sitting on a confluence of crisis that could evolve into that larger than the Great War itself, an era of chaos we only surpassed through your own decisive action. In such terrible times as now, legacy defining moments one might say, decisive action has historically been the best option and you know this. You lived it. My father, may he rest peacefully, always told me of the man you were.”

Theodore leaned in, his face still and statuesque.

“Are you still that man?”

Suddenly Leon felt a great weight push him down. He sat back in his chair, looking at the people in front of him, the needs of their own people slowly accumulating on his own back. The pain in his scar rose to a firey blaze.

He stood up, pushing his chair back to the wall.

“I need a moment to consider the options you 4 have presented me. Please wait here.”

The chamber was silent as he quickly walked from the room, the door to the office shutting with a quiet click.