

## **Storm King 671**

### **Chapter 671: Ilian's Tools**

At first, Leon found himself not particularly interested in the exhibition between the Forest Watchers and the Ilian Empire. It was between a pair of fifth-tier mages, so it wasn't like he was going to see much in the way of magic that he'd never seen before, anyway. He was far more concerned about having the Lord Protector himself sitting next to him, even though the man had been unfailingly polite, almost more so than his station even required; and with the fact that both mages fought with weapons incredibly reminiscent of the blades of light used by the two angels he'd seen. The exhibition itself was hardly something that he thought he'd pay much attention to.

However, things changed when Emperor Adam announced the beginning of the exhibition, and the two combatants began their spar. Their styles couldn't have been more different, and Leon found himself fascinated in watching their interplay, despite his other distractions.

Both combatants fought with ferocity, but from the moment the fight began, Leon thought that the Ilian was going to win. He fought with a bigger blade than the Watcher did, drawing what at first appeared to be a bladeless handle of a longsword, but which soon sprouted a golden blade about four feet long. The Watcher's blade of golden light, meanwhile, was shorter, at only about three feet long. Both weapons were still magically impressive, and from what Leon could sense of their magics, were fully functional weapons, not training gear.

Blows were exchanged quickly, neither giving an inch to the other. Their defenses were practically flawless, leaving no holes that Leon could see the other could exploit, and they didn't overcommit to any attacks. However, the Watcher seemed to have more trouble getting past the Ilian's slight range advantage, with the longsword keeping the Watcher too far away to properly use his arming sword.

Leon was impressed with the few opening moves they made, noting that neither held much back, striking with purpose and intent and not a shred of hesitation. If either one made a mistake, they would be seriously injured or potentially killed.

Aside from that, their first exchanges were without magic, leaving it an impressive display of martial prowess, but little more than that. Leon hadn't even a fraction of the exposure to the Forest Watchers as he'd need to form expectations, but for the Ilian Empire, he was rather disappointed.

And then, without a word from anyone else, both combatants' auras spiked. The Ilian's skin hardened into mottled gray stone, while the silver tattoos that covered the Watchers' deep purple skin began to glow with magical light. Leon wasn't entirely sure what the Watcher was doing, but both combatants threw themselves at each other, their fighting styles changing completely as they appeared to abandon all defenses.

For the Ilian, this was understandable: his stony skin could protect him like armor. The Watcher's behavior was a little stranger, but it soon became clear why he was so willing to do this when the Ilian's blade scraped across his ribs in a barely-dodged stab that left blood and a few drops of bright red mana running down the side of his waist. But, with a flash of light magic, the Watcher's wound closed so quickly that only a few drops of blood were spilled, and the Watcher didn't even slow down. In a vicious riposte, the Watcher had thrown the Ilian back, though only managing to scratch the man's stone skin.

As the two exchanged more blows, the Ilian just taking everything the Watcher could throw at him, while the Watcher simply healed all strikes that came his way, Anastasios leaned over to whisper to Leon, “So, what do you think so far?”

Leon’s brief reverie analyzing the magic and fighting styles at work was instantly shattered, and all his momentarily forgotten discomfort came roaring back. Before he answered, he cast a quick glance around, and saw that while most people were politely watching the exhibition, there were a few whispering people taking glances of their own at him. More worryingly, the Lord Protector had turned to regard him expectantly, a strange smile on his lips.

Forcing the words out of his mouth, Leon said, “Interesting weapons.”

“That they are,” Anastasios murmured back. “Not much use in a practical setting, though. Too expensive to power—enchanted steel is still the best bet we have for serious one-on-one fighting. But for exhibitions like these, the flashier, the better.”

Leon almost snorted. “It doesn’t *seem* like those two are paying much mind to performance—they look like they’re actually trying to kill each other.”

“Of course they are,” Anastasios practically growled, though he still wore his pleasant smile. “One ought to never take half measures when dealing with their enemies, should they?”

Leon forced himself to smile as he stole a look at Anastasios, and found the aged man still looking at him, a smile on his lips.

The Lord Protector continued, “An enemy that lives is an enemy that can strike back at you, so the problem must be dealt with using whatever tools are available, wouldn’t you agree?”

Leon caught a strange glint in Anastasios’ nebulous eyes, and the man’s graceful smile tightened fractionally.

‘*He absolutely knows who I am,*’ Leon thought. Were he not with his family and a couple members of his retinue, he thought he might’ve started running right then, despite the complete lack of killing intent he could feel from the Lord Protector, and the seeming indifference to their conversation that the Emperor held—Adam was busy watching the fight and commenting on it with the ambassador from the Forest Watchers, while Cristina nodded along with whatever he was saying.

Leon couldn’t bring himself to quickly respond to Anastasios, and could barely even bring himself to smile back at the man. After several long, awkward seconds, he finally managed to asked, “And... what tools do you have at your disposal?”

Anastasios’ eyes narrowed slightly. “Steel and magic, among other things. Those who threaten my Empire pay for their transgressions in blood.”

Leon cleared his throat, forcing himself to return to his usual stoic composure. “As well they should,” he said.

Anastasios hummed in agreement, then turned his eyes back to the fight. But he was hardly done speaking with Leon, saying, “In the old days, I think steel and magic would’ve been the first resorts of those in my position, but these days, we try to work our differences out with words as much as we can.

We don't take half-measures, but we strive to ensure that when we must take more drastic measures, it's because the situation demands them."

With a nod, Leon asked, "When were these 'old days'?"

"Before my time," Anastasios replied. "The wars with the Sacred Golden Empire fifty thousand years ago. The unification of this Empire ten thousand years before that. The expulsion of the Sky Devils twenty thousand years earlier."

Leon felt more than saw the Lord Protector's eyes sweep over toward him for just a moment as he spoke his last sentence, and it took a titanic effort for Leon to maintain the stoic façade that he'd desperately rebuilt. The attention of a tenth-tier mage was no light thing; it settled in around his shoulders and felt like it pressed him down into his chair for as long as the Lord Protector's eyes remained upon him.

Vaguely, Leon was aware that the Watcher was losing out in his fight, being forced more and more on the defense as the Ilian pushed, more and more wounds marring the wine-skinned man's otherwise perfect physique. The Watcher's aura flickered and declined, his magic unable to keep up with the damage his body was taking; likewise, his body wasn't healing nearly as quickly as it was, and his wounds lasted longer and longer. But even with his opponent weakening, the Ilian pushed hard and moved with purpose, striking with deadly accuracy. The fight was soon decided when the Ilian sliced through some of the muscles in the Watcher's wrist, causing the man to drop his blade and collapse to the floor, his wound not closing.

The Ilian, however, didn't stop moving, and Leon thought he would've killed the Watcher right there as he lay on the ground since no one seemed to be stopping the fight, but as he raised his blade and brought it crashing down on the Watcher's supine form, the Lord Protector tapped his finger on the armrest of his chair, and the Ilian's blade froze mid-swing, looking like all momentum simply vanished. To Leon's magic senses, though, he could see the Lord Protector's opaque power surround the Ilian combatant, and without even transforming into elemental magic, it seemed to exert physical force upon the Ilian, squeezing him into motionlessness.

The Watcher fell unconscious with the Ilian's blade hovering only a few inches above his nose, and as if appearing from nowhere, several uniformed healers surrounded him, one of whom was seventh-tier. Her magic was so potent that only ten seconds later, the Watcher was back on his feet, looking grim, but not angry about his defeat.

There was some scattered polite applause, but no one got loud enough to make things embarrassing for the Forest Watchers, and the two combatants even clasped each other's wrists once both were fully healed in a show of solidarity, and they set off toward the tables of food together.

Leon, however, just sat in his seat quietly impressed that the two could come so close to killing each other and yet just walk off practically as friends like that, but any good cheer he had built up in those last few moments of the fight vanished as he felt Anastasios' gaze upon him again.

"We live in more civilized times," the Lord Protector stated as gravely as Leon had ever heard anyone speak with such a wide smile on their face. "Blessed by the gods are we to live with such peace and prosperity; this has given us much better tools for dealing with our enemies than our forebears ever

had. We rarely use force of arms as our first resort anymore. But that has not made us weak, or soft. We've never forgotten our roots, and if pressed, we will slaughter our enemies without mercy or hesitation."

Anastasios stared at Leon for a long moment, his eyes narrowed, his aura towering, pressing down upon Leon, making him feel small and insignificant in a way that he'd never experienced from someone not trying to actively kill him. But then it was all gone like it had never been there in the first place, with Anastasios giving Leon the widest, friendliest, most welcoming smile that his face seemed capable of giving and still seeming genuine. The pressure that seemed to accompany Anastasios' gaze lightened considerably, and Leon felt like he could breathe again.

With the fight over, everyone rose from their seats, and Leon did what was expected of him: he thanked Anastasios for the invitation to sit with him, and the Lord Protector graciously denied that any favor had been rendered. Then, the Lord Protector went back to making the rounds, welcoming people into the palace, while Leon returned to Elise. The two reunited with his retainers and the rest of the Heaven's Eye cadre and ducked out as soon as they could. Fortunately, as representatives of Heaven's Eye, they weren't expected to stay too long, and none of them wanted to stick around in Ilion's Imperial Palace for too long when Occulara, and the Director of Heaven's Eye, were so close. Cristina and those members of her retinue stayed a while longer, with their carriage remaining behind to ferry them back to the guest house once they were ready to leave.

But Leon wasn't going to wait around with Anastasios in the same room—besides it wasn't like Cristina really needed him there. He felt like the Lord Protector had been almost *looking* for a reason to kill him, and if he had his way, after they left Ilion, he wouldn't be returning for a *long* time.

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"He knows who you are?" Valeria asked with deep concern etched across her face.

Leon slowly lowered himself into a chair around the hearth, so exhausted and his mind so taxed with worry that he couldn't appreciate the luxury that surrounded him. "Yes," he said, no doubt at all in his mind that he was wrong.

"And he just let you go?" Valeria wondered more than asked. "Why would he do that?"

"I don't think it's quite accurate to say that he's 'just letting me go'," Leon whispered.

Elise agreed, saying, "We should get used to the idea that the Ilion Empire will be keeping an eye on us from here on out."

Maia visibly bristled at that statement, but remained characteristically taciturn. In fact, aside from a muttered curse from Valeria, all four of them fell into momentary silence.

Leon broke it first, quietly saying, "I'm Leon Raime. Not Ursus. Raime. I'm not going back. I can't."

Elise smiled at him and said comfortingly, "No one's asking you to. Hells, if you tried, I think I'd have to give you a good whack to the head to try and get your brain working properly!"

Leon looked to his wife, and her playfully intense smile spread to him.

"You're Leon Raime," Elise whispered as she slithered into his lap. "I love you, and I don't want you to be anyone else."

From behind, Valeria wrapped her arms around his neck. "Same here," she said, and no more.

Maia said the least, merely taking one of Leon's hands and entwining her fingers around his.

Leon's smile grew wider, and he leaned back into Valeria's embrace as Maia hugged his arm tighter and Elise snuggled up against his chest.

This was his family, and they weren't going anywhere. The attention of the Lord Protector was distressing, to be sure, but they weren't going to run from this problem. They'd face it head on, and just as they had so many other obstacles, they would surmount this one, too.

With his ladies with him, Leon was certain in that beyond all doubt.

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"So," Leon said as he sat down with Helen and Anna in a small sitting room in the guest house, "what's been going on with you two?"

"What do you mean?" Anna rather curtly asked.

"You've been quiet since the party yesterday, and I wanted to check up on you two," Leon explained.

Anna looked just about ready to jump down his throat, but just as the indignity was spreading across her face, she paused and took a deep breath. "We're... fine," she quietly said as she took Helen's hand. "Just some personal issues that we're dealing with. Nothing imminent, nothing that's going to cause you any problems."

"Is it related to whatever the ambassador gave you last night?" Leon asked.

"You saw that?" Helen sniped, her eyes narrowing in anger.

Leon shrugged. "You two are my retainers. I try to keep an eye on all my people, especially when they draw the personal attention from important people, like the ambassador from one Empire to another."

Helen almost replied, but Anna squeezed her hand and gave her a silencing glare. The green-haired woman then said, "I'm sorry, Leon, but this is a personal matter, and as you can see, it's one that *does* have us a bit out of sorts."

"I understand completely," Leon responded. "But if the two of you need anything, I'm here for you. What would be the point of this arrangement if I wasn't?"

"I... We appreciate it," Anna said, a sad smile spreading across her face. Leon almost left there, with the assurances that he'd been given that this wasn't an issue that necessarily needed solving, but after a quick glance to Helen, Anna continued. "It was just some news about... our parents..."

Leon cocked an eyebrow and sat back in his chair, silently waiting for Anna to continue, if she wanted to. Over the past few weeks, Leon hadn't yet sat down and had a long discussions with Helen and Anna about their past and their family, but in some off-hand remarks, he had learned that their parents had died some time ago, and the two sisters were the only family they had left. He could understand her not

wanting to talk about them with him when he was still barely more than a stranger, but if she was willing to, then he would listen.

After giving herself a bit of time to work herself up to it, Anna told Leon, "Our parents were killed by vampires. We don't have any other family, so things were bad for a while after it happened. The vamps who did it were never caught."

Leon nodded, respectfully averting his gaze for a few moments as Anna tried rubbing at her eye without quite making it seem like that was what she was doing. "I'm sorry to hear that," Leon said. "Were there any possible clues as to who did it?"

Anna shook her head, and Helen whispered, "We only know that it was someone powerful. Our family lived in our country estate, mostly, but our mother worked for Heaven's Eye. A bunch of vampires hidden in a cave somewhere afraid of entering civilization wouldn't have... they wouldn't have the nerve to... It had to have been someone powerful, someone who wasn't afraid of Heaven's Eye's retaliation."

Leon nodded again as he turned the issue over in his mind, instinctively trying to figure out some way to 'solve' this problem. "How did they know it was vampires, then?"

Anna answered with as clinical of a tone as she could muster, "Bite marks. Exsanguination. Signs of demonic magic."

Leon cringed in response, quickly saying, "I'm sorry if I'm prying, I guess I just..."

He trailed off, not quite knowing what to say, but Anna just smiled and said, "Don't worry, Leon. We're not upset." She gave Helen a quick look, the sisters seeming to communicate something without saying a word. "The reason I'm telling you all of this is because the ambassador shared with us the results of her investigation."

Leon listened with rapt attention, remembering that Anna had told him that the ambassador had been a friend of her family's.

As Anna paused for a moment, Helen interjected, growling, "And the result was a fat load of fuckin' nothing!"

Anna's smile twitched, and she responded, "Accurate. Very accurate statement. Anyway, Leon, we're not looking for revenge. We just want to live as we see fit. And we're alright, this investigation thing just picked at an old wound. But we're alright."

Leon smiled as comfortably as he could. "I know what it's like to lose a parent," he said. "If the two of you need anything, don't hesitate to ask. You're my people now, and I won't tolerate someone screwing with my people, no matter who they are."

"Thanks, Leon," Anna replied, a sad smile now gracing her lips. "We don't need anything, but thanks for listening."

"Anytime."

## **Chapter 672: The Hexagon**

Leon hated Ilium. Quite fiercely, in fact. It was a city that even if he hadn't had the nerve-wracking interaction with Anastasios that he did, he would never want to return to.

The city glorified in the death of his Ancestors and the downfall of his Clan. The whole place was practically a living monument to the death of those who bore the power of the Thunderbird. He couldn't exactly blame them, but he still felt profoundly unwelcome in the city.

It really got started not long after the welcome party that the Emperor threw for the Heaven's Eye convoy. Fortunately, there weren't any more summons to the Imperial Palace, but even still, Leon didn't leave the guest house for the next couple days, not wanting to attract too much attention to himself after the subtle and not-so-subtle threats that Anastasios had levied against him. But eventually, he and his family did get out for a while, trusting in the power of Heaven's Eye and their lack of ill intentions to protect them from anything untoward. Besides, even if the Ilium Empire was keeping an eye on them—and all of them were convinced that they *were*—they didn't exactly have anything they wanted to hide.

So, as something of a date, Leon, Elise, Valeria, and Maia all went out for a walk through some of the more scenic parts of the city. The city was massive and sprawled across the plains around the Scamander River, but that didn't mean that there no green spaces—a great many public parks had been built for the pleasure of the Ilium people, and it was to the biggest and most famous of them that they initially went.

At first, Leon thought the park to be quite the beautiful space. Fields of bright green, perfectly manicured grass surrounded a large grove of trees, with hiking paths extensive enough that it would take more than an hour to walk through the whole thing.

In other words, just the sort of thing he needed after being so long in the cultivated and urban world of the Ilium Empire.

However, things took a turn for the worse when they reached the start of the hiking trail. It was a large courtyard, the entrance flanked on both sides by various monuments of mythical events in the history of the Ilium Empire. And right at the beginning, Leon saw a huge sculpture of a man in armor standing victorious over a fallen humanoid figure with the head of an eagle. There were other sculptures of other scenes from other times in the Ilium Empire's long history, but Leon fixated on that one, dampening his mood enough that he didn't really take anything in until he and his family had already entered the grove.

That alone wouldn't have completely soured the day, but the hiking trail wasn't just one singular path, there were multiple branches and loops that one could walk down, and at every fork in the path, there were rest stops with stone benches carved with intricate mythical scenes. Many of these scenes showed the fall of the eagle-headed representations of the Thunderbird Clan.

Leon had been content to merely enjoy the day with his lovers, so his lack of speaking wasn't that stark of a change, but as they continued on, Leon's mood grew worse and worse, the reminders of the fall of the Thunderbird Clan seemingly being thrown back in his face with every step.

It was a strange feeling, and one that he didn't even have in the Bull Kingdom. There, for a long time he was regarded as a barbarian, a savage from the Northern Vales, a foreigner and an interloper. However, there had always been enough people around who didn't seem to care about those labels that Leon had

never truly felt unwelcome in the Bull Kingdom. The nobles had certainly made it clear that he wasn't particularly appreciated, but Leon had always had people like Charles, Henry, Alain, Alix, Trajan, and others around him, helping him to settle in, even if he didn't recognize that at the time.

But here... Leon didn't feel like he belonged. Anastasios had been the only one to really threaten him should he make moves against them, but with all the art around showing the death of the Thunderbird Clan, he couldn't help but feel like if the citizens around them knew his lineage and the power in his blood, they would tear him limb from limb—or at least, call for his arrest and flee in terror at the sight of him.

The hike was cut short, Leon's souring mood proving infectious—not that anyone was particularly happy seeing these carvings and monuments, either, but Elise, Valeria, and Maia were a little more determined to enjoy the day, and took a little longer to admit defeat.

When they found themselves back at the entrance to the trail, they found that in the half hour or so they'd been in the grove, recruiters for the Ilian military had moved in, dressed in blood-red uniforms, one of which was trimmed in gold, leading Leon to think that the man wearing it was an officer of some sort.

"Come join the Air Guard!" the handsomest of the five recruiters called out to the passers-by. "Do your part in keeping the Sky Devils in check! Even now, their dread ships ply the Argonaut Sea, appearing from behind their misty shroud without warning, attacking our merchants, disrupting business, and looking for any and all chances they can seize to spill our blood! Do your part to protect your fellow citizens and sign on with the Air Guard! Train in war arks and win honor and glory in battle against the Sky Devils!"

The man continued on in the same vein, attracting a few people, from restless youths to older, but still passionate people to speak with the other four about enlistment. Leon did his best not to listen, but it was hard not to when the idea that the Sky Devils were the remains of his Clan's power base on this plane still ran unchallenged through his mind.

With a dejected sigh, Leon passed the recruiters and the crowd that was slowly gathering around them, trying with all his might to tune them out.

Elise, Maia, and Valeria did their best to get his mind off of these things, but as they moved through the city, Leon saw much more that kept his mood foul. Most of the buildings made of stone rather than the strange golden metal of their towers were painted in various shades of bright pinks, reds, or yellows, but in the alley walls as graffiti, on benches, on decorative pillars and vases for the multicolored trees, shown in figurines in store windows, on posters, and so many other places, Leon saw either his Clan being slaughtered by the Brilliant Eleven, or he saw his Clan slaughtering innocents, prompting their destruction at the hands of the Empires' founders.

There were other artistic depictions, too, of course, but it seemed clear that the fall of the Thunderbird Clan was essentially the founding myth for the Ilian Empire, and as a result, it seemed almost ubiquitous in its art. At least half of all statues and paintings and other pieces of art that Leon and his family saw while they were out were either in celebration of the fall of the Thunderbird Clan, or showing the justifications for that fall.



Tyranny, murder, enslavement, carrying away women, all crimes under the sun that the Thunderbird Clan could commit, Leon saw them accused of in various ways in those few hours that he and his family were out of the guest house.

What made things so much worse was the fact that, thanks to Nestor, Leon understood that many of these art pieces were reasonably accurate, if exaggerated and distorted by time. The crimes committed against the people of Aeterna were so great that eighty-thousand years later, the Thunderbird Clan was still remembered as the national antagonists, the devils that stood in opposition to all the good that the Ilian Empire had done.

It was easy for Leon to see the propaganda in all of this, especially since the Sky Devils were still apparently such a concern, but that didn't make it feel any better to see. By the time they returned to the guest house, Leon's mood was so thoroughly ruined that he had no intention of heading back out into Ilion again until it was time for their convoy to sail down the Scamander River and head for Occulara.

He had plenty to fill his time with, anyway, so losing out on some sightseeing was hardly much to worry about.

Soon enough, the time came to leave Ilion, and for that, Leon couldn't be happier.

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The Scamander River was enormous, with an almost unimaginable amount of water flowing down its channels and tributaries. This meant that the convoy was able to take a single massive ship east, as they'd done for the first real leg of their journey when leaving Ariminium months ago. Their ship this time was much more luxurious, leaving the passengers to spend three days in lavish extravagance as the ship sailed down the river.

On both sides of the river were more buildings, the city remaining unbroken save for the imaginary administrative lines drawn up by the Ilian government. They passed through a dozen different cities, but looking out of the window, it wasn't even remotely apparent aside from a few signs.

Leon, however, noticed when Occulara came into view. The monolithic architecture of the Ilian Empire continued in Occulara, too, but the headquarters of Heaven's Eye was not a thing easily missed, even to one used to such sights as the Imperial Palace in Ilion.

The headquarters of Heaven's Eye was practically lost in a forest of golden towers, save for the fact that its primary buildings were so much taller. Six enormous black towers, each one seventy or eighty stories tall and made of no material that Leon was familiar with, rose from the ground like lances, the top of the towers tapering off from the outside corners to the opposite. They were arranged in a circle, the tapering of the top floors leaving them almost looking like they were 'facing' outwards, protecting the space between them. If that were true, then it would've only been one function the towers served, for they were covered nearly from ground to roof in tall windows so opaque that they were only identifiable as windows by their regular placement and the fact that a couple of them were open.

But it was what lay between these towers that Leon was far more focused on. These six towers formed a hexagonal courtyard between them of great size, big enough that one of the fortresses that made up the Bull's Horns could've fit into it with room to spare. The courtyard was mostly empty save for a

colonnade that ran along its edge, providing a covered walkway for people to travel between the buildings, and a small hexagonal building about three stories tall in the courtyard's center that was surrounded by another colonnade.

Floating in the air directly above this comparatively tiny central building, appearing to be completely unsupported by anything, was what Leon could only describe as a gigantic hexagonal brick. No windows dotted its sides, and no other decorations covered it, save for the glossy black material it was built out of. It just hung in the air in the middle of the six towers. When Leon tried to examine it with his magic senses to try and figure out just how it was floating, his magic senses were scattered before they even made it past the towers, leaving the mystery of this floating brick unsolved. However, Leon guessed that if the Director were to be based anywhere, it was probably inside of that brick. If he was correct, then there could be as many as five hundred or more people working inside of that thing, judging by its size. More, if their managers didn't care over much about their comfort as they worked.

Additionally, there were Heaven's Eye Towers surrounding these six huge towers—three apiece. Their architectural style was generally what Leon was more used to, being all white stone with blue roof tiles, and standing about twenty stories tall. Each of these towers was connected to a boxy complex of buildings about five or six stories tall, and further out, the normal golden towers of the Ilian Empire rose.

Everything save for the black towers and the black hexagonal brick was about in line with Leon's expectations, but he found himself quite taken by the sight of those towers and what floated between them. As he stood on the deck at the front of the ship admiring the sight slightly under two hundred miles away, he sensed Emilie approach.

"Can you see Headquarters?" she asked as she slid in beside him.

"I can," Leon replied. "It's quite a sight..."

"Indeed it is," she replied. "I haven't seen it in more than a century, not since I left this place when I was much younger. I'm looking forward to returning. Maybe flex my new position on some old rivals if they're still around..."

Leon's mother-in-law wore a gentle smirk, leading Leon to think she was just playing around. But he was still curious about what he ought to expect.

"How's this going to work?" he asked. "We don't really have anything that resembles a plan, mostly just what we intend to do once we get there."

Emilie nodded. "That's the main reason I came to find you," she said. "I've been in contact with the Director a couple of times and passed on my recommendation that he take you in as one of his Hands. He's agreed to at least hear you out, though between you and me, I don't think there's a chance in any hell that he's going to let an eighth-tier mage slip through his fingers, no matter how aloof or uninterested he may act. Even if he may despise you, but he can make use of your power, and to my understanding of the Director, that's all he really cares about."

"That sounds like it could be pretty dangerous," Leon observed, understanding at least somewhat the pressure to recruit not only the most powerful people, but the *right* people. "If he brought in the wrong person, they could probably wreak quite a bit of havoc within Heaven's Eye..."

"A reasonable worry," Emilie conceded, "but one born of ignorance, I think. The Director has managed Heaven's Eye for centuries, he's mastered the art of recruiting people and maintaining his power. At this point, whatever he says is practically law within Heaven's Eye. He's 'only' ninth-tier, but within Heaven's Eye, his power is neither matched nor challenged. If there ever *is* any hint of challenge, he quickly nips it in the bud. Despite all that, he's a very straight shooter. He only resorts to schemes when he thinks he can't get what he wants in other ways—but don't take that to mean he isn't a talented schemer, it's just a tool he rarely uses."

Leon took a deep, steadying breath. "Good to hear what kind of guy he is... What more could I expect from this?"

"He'll want to interview you one-on-one, I think. I have no idea how long this will take, but the decision to take you on as one of his Hands is an important one, and he may not decide on it right away. Regardless, as I said, it's nearly guaranteed that he's going to recruit you in some capacity, but you might want to get used to the idea of sitting on your ass for a couple of years while you build up some trust with him."

"I can do that," Leon said with a smile. "There's plenty for me to distract myself with."

"I'm sure there is," Emilie replied. "I hear you're making another version of your flight suit. How soon until it's ready?"

"A while, yet," Leon replied. "I'm working on a new propulsion system, and it's giving me no small number of headaches. If you were holding your breath to get one soon, I'd suggest you let it go, at least for a year or two."

Emilie impishly grimaced. "Damn," she said. "I was hoping to take to the skies like all of you have been doing."

Leon smiled, remembering him and his family going for a brief flight while still in Ilion. They couldn't go too high or too far while in the city, but a bit of playing around in the guest house's courtyards wasn't illegal, thankfully. Princess Cristina joined them with Asiya and Maxima, and they all had quite a bit of fun, though Leon limited himself to only riding Anzu rather than transforming into his avian form. He didn't know quite how well that might go over with the Ilion authorities, and he wasn't in a hurry to find out.

"Anyway," Emilie continued, "we'll likely be put up in one of the apartments in those big towers. Extremely nice places, probably the height of luxury in all of Aeterna. But once we arrive, you, Penelope, Damien, and I will all have to present ourselves to the Director and the rest of the Board. Expect that to take a few hours as I take up my new position. Then I'll meet with the Director, and then he'll meet with Penelope and Damien individually. When that's done, you'll be called for. I can't say anything with certainty past that."

"Understandable," Leon responded. "Good to know at least that much. What about the Princess?"

"I think she'll be busy setting up an official embassy," Emilie replied.

"In Occulara? I'm a little surprised that she's not planning on heading back to Ilion at some point for that."

“She has the authority to set up the embassy wherever she pleases, and she wants to do so in Occulara.”

Leon shrugged and turned his attention back to the Heaven’s Eye Headquarters. “Will all of our business be taking place within that floating brick?”

Emilie’s smile sharpened, like she was glad that Leon brought that up. “That floating brick is officially known as *The Heaven’s Eye*,” she said. “More colloquially, we call tend to just call it the Hexagon, to not confuse it with the name of our guild. And yes, that’s where we’ll be meeting. That building below it will ferry us up. There’s a landing space for arks on the roof, called an ‘arkpad’, but that’s reserved for the Director’s personal use only. Everyone else has to use the lift to enter the Hexagon.”

“And the Hexagon is where the Director usually works?”

“Yes. It’s also where the Director lives. He rarely leaves, only doing so for the most serious of reasons. It’s also where the Board meets, though most of them work in one of the surrounding towers.”

“How many people are on the Board?”

“Only six,” Emilie responded, her smile turning prideful.

Leon returned her smile, saying with complete sincerity, “I don’t think I ever really understood just how much this promotion means, then. Congratulations, Emilie.”

Emilie pulled Leon into a loose hug, and when they separated, they continued to chat a little bit longer about Leon and Elise’s plans. Elise was already putting out feelers for a nice country villa where they could get to work on their farm, but they hadn’t found anything on such short notice. If the worst scenario came to pass, they’d just buy someplace that was lacking, and then slowly build it up into what they wanted, though they were holding out hope for a place that was more in line with what they needed—as private as could be, space for Leon to make and test his enchantments, farming space for Elise’s herbs, and room for an alchemical workshop for Helen to use. Not a lot of farms even here in the Ilian Empire had such spaces, but Leon was confident that they’d eventually be able to settle on a place.

Emilie, however, when she took over as the Chief of Acquisitions, would be living in one of the black towers, so Leon had to promise not to move too far away. Emilie still wanted her family as close to her as possible.

But after that conversation was over, Emilie was pulled away by one of her secretaries. With Occulara drawing close, she had more work to see to, leaving Leon to watch the headquarters of Heaven’s Eye coming nearer and nearer, and hopefully, his immediate future along with it.

## **Chapter 673: The Director**

Occulara. They’d finally arrived. After almost half a year, they’d reached their destination.

They were hardly in a place where they could start getting settled in, but it was an enormous comfort to know that there weren’t going to be anymore cross-country carriage rides, or long trips up or down rivers. Leon, his family, and his retinue had finally reached a place where they could start building their new home.

Things started off quite promisingly: their welcome had always been splendid no matter where they found themselves, but the crowd that awaited them at the river docks in Occulara was something else.

At least a thousand people were waiting at the bottom of the gangplank, while thousands more crowded the riverbanks, waving and cheering at their ship as it passed by. Leon was a little surprised, but Emilie explained to him that members of the Heaven's Eye Board weren't often replaced, and when they were, the Director and his predecessors had made it a tradition to declare the occasion a holiday in Occulara. The career of the outgoing Board member was celebrated, as was the arrival of the new Board member.

Unfortunately, there wasn't much they could do to enjoy that holiday atmosphere, as after they met up with their escort after disembarking, they were whisked into waiting carriages and taken directly to the guild's headquarters. Once there, nearly their entire party was shuffled into one of the towers—the one that Leon assumed Emilie would be taking over—and presumably shown to the apartments they were to be spending their immediate future in. Leon could only make a presumption, though, because he, Emilie, Damien, and Penelope were instead brought to the building directly beneath the floating Hexagon. Once inside, Leon found that the building was nearly identical to the tower that had brought them up to the Imperial Palace in Ilion, with little else filling the building save for the storage pad for a huge magical lift that traveled up and down the blue beam of magical light that connected the building to the Hexagon.

The lift moved quickly, and Leon reveled in the feeling of ascending into the sky. The interior of the Hexagon was surprisingly hollow. Leon had assumed that there wouldn't be much in the way of open space within, despite its size, but he was proven wrong when the lift came to a halt within a massive hexagonal chamber in the center of the floating construct. It was tall enough that it clearly ran from the bottom of the Hexagon all the way to the top, with the ceiling proving to be completely transparent from this side, letting in enough natural light that the chamber was decorated like a park, with long stone paths and several small courtyards surrounded by vibrant gardens. A colonnade ran along the entire outer edge of the chamber, off of which branched dozens of doors. Six of these doors were clearly the primary entrances for the six different wings surrounding the chamber, being more than two stories tall and intricately carved with gorgeous floral patterns.

Leon wasn't given much time to admire the chamber, however, for the serious, all-business escort they'd been given hurried them along through one of the huge doors, through the lavish hall on the other side, and to another set of enormous double doors at the opposite end. These doors were heavily guarded by no less than a dozen sixth-tier mages, with another half dozen in the antechamber on the other side.

Once there, Emilie said to Leon, "You'll have to wait here for the moment. I have to meet with the rest of the Board, and then we'll start getting our meetings with the Director out of the way."

Leon nodded. The antechamber was exactly as luxurious as he'd expect of the headquarters for Heaven's Eye, and he found a supremely comfortable armchair to relax in while Emilie went through the next set of doors with Penelope and Damien. Three sixth-tier mages who were part of the escort detail took seats by the door, while the rest either followed Emilie into the room or left the way they'd come, and for the first time since arriving in the city, Leon was left essentially alone with his thoughts, with no one hurrying them along trying to get their business done as quickly as possible.

However, he wasn't given even a full minute to relax his anxious mind, worried about how the next few hours were going to go or what kind of impression he was going to make on one of the most powerful

men on the plane—especially after how the party with Anastasios had gone—before he heard Nestor whispering, [Disgusting. Apes. Can't even build properly...]

With a heavy sigh, Leon asked, [What is it, Nestor? Something catch your eye?]

[Yes, boy. This whole place. It's rather like being with those rampant golems back north, but at least the golems had respect for what they aped. They followed the old instructions I'd given them, building palaces in the mountains, and have held an appreciable respect for the Clan throughout these millennia. This place, however... makes me sick. They have no idea what they're trying to do here...]

[What is this place supposed to be, then? Don't tell me these towers used to be the Clan's arsenal...]

[Of course not, boy, this place isn't nearly large enough for that! The arkyards alone were practically a city unto themselves. These towers and this thing floating between them are clearly designed after the defensive observatories that our Clan built upon arriving on this plane.]

[Observatories? What were you observing? And how?]

[We had to keep an eye on the sky, of course,] Nestor explained, his tone frustratingly condescending.

Leon had to stifle his instinct to scowl and start curling his fingers, knowing that the escort detail that was still with him was keeping an eye on what he was doing. So, with some struggle, he closed his eyes and pretended to meditate as he spoke with Nestor.

The dead man continued, [We came here with great force, hundreds of arks and thousands of warriors. But we knew that even that grand armada wasn't enough to deter our enemies. If we were ambushed by the forces of another Elemental King, it could've proved disastrous for our mission and for the Clan as a whole. As a result, we had to maintain constant watch on the sky, and to do that, we built observatories all across this plane. In a *properly* built observatory, there were only three support towers, each only needing to be about half as tall as those here. However, the main body of the observatory was the structure that floated between the towers, which could ascend with magical support from their towers so high that they nearly left the plane entirely.]

[These observatories were then used to watch the Void between planes for any incoming threats, as well as act as relay stations for arks that were used to patrol the entirety of the plane—the observatories can't exactly keep an eye on the backside of the plane, after all. Keeping an eye open for extraplanar threats was a titanic undertaking involving serious investment of resources. And it was necessary, as so many who've been slaughtered for failing to stay vigilant can attest, assuming they survived that mistake.]

Leon, feeling the urge to contort his face in confusion, just decided to admit defeat and not even bother pretending to meditate, instead casting his consciousness into his soul realm and into his magic body. He rose from his throne and went to continue this conversation with Nestor in person.

"And how, might I ask, do you know that this place *can't* do that?" Leon asked.

"Judging from what I've been able to tell of the enchantments holding this thing up," Nestor replied. "The amount of magic flowing through this not-observatory is barely enough to keep it in the air, let alone rise higher."

Leon wasn't convinced, but he didn't press the issue. Nestor was just being his usual judgmental self, and while Leon could see where he was coming from in some form, he was still more interested in hearing about the old Clan. For instance, he'd never heard of these observatories before, but if they were as grand as Nestor claimed, then he figured they should've been famous landmarks. Instead, this was the first he was hearing of them, leading him to think that they were no longer intact after so long.

Summoning a map of the plane, Leon asked Nestor, "Can you show me where these observatories were located?"

With Nestor's direction, Leon marked down nine different points on the map, none of which corresponded to any of the points on the map from the Cradle. Those places were locations of great importance to the Clan, such as Nestor's lab, the arsenal, and Teira. The observatories, however, were located in a rough circle around the edges of the plane, mostly deep in mountain ranges and far from any place that could sustain large populations.

"Observatories were mostly built on mountains," Nestor explained. "Having them be a little higher from sea level meant less magic power to raise them to the edge of the Void."

"Wouldn't that also mean that they were further from the centers of power?" Leon asked. "How would they communicate what they could see with the higher-ups in the Clan?"

"Comm stones," Nestor replied. "It was a fairly low-level position to be assigned to an observatory, and below my purview, but I know at least that they were in constant contact with the rest of the Clan, with daily check-ins and frequent supply runs. The comm stones we had were quite useful, able to let two people on opposite sides of the plane communicate with each other like they were right next to each other, but rather less useful when trying to communicate between planes. That's why they were used to relay messages from arks that were sent out on patrols around this plane, for having these relays allowed our patrols to extend their coverage by many thousands of miles."

"Mm," Leon hummed in thought as he appreciated the fairly simple ingenuity and practicality of the observatories. He didn't think he'd think of something like that on his own—at least, not without having to be on the wrong end of some kind of ambush that these observatories might prevent, first.

There wasn't much else to say about them, though, so he turned his attention to something else.

"What about the arsenal?" he asked. "Now that we're here in Occulara, it's something I ought to keep an eye out for, right? And I've tried, but I haven't seen even a single broken pillar or ruined statue of our Clan anywhere in the city. Granted, I haven't done an exhaustive search, but I haven't seen anything that might lead me to think the arsenal is still here..."

"I'm not surprised," Nestor said. "If many of our vassals *did* evacuate this plane, then they likely didn't leave much behind. Tell me, if you were in their shoes, what would you do?"

Leon lightly smiled as he considered the question, having considered it many times before. He placed himself in the situation of being in charge of an evacuation, with former allies turning against him and his King who kept them all in line now dead.

"I'd take everything that wasn't nailed down, and most of what was," he said to Nestor. "If I couldn't take something, and there was even the slightest chance that it could be used to follow me, or to harm those who remained, then I think I would destroy it."

"A wise answer," Nestor replied. "That's what I'm guessing happened here. The arsenal was probably destroyed when Koukouva evacuated whoever responded to his call. The arsenal was a vast complex even by Nexus standards, so there might still be something around, but expect the place to have been completely leveled, with nothing left."

"Disappointing," Leon whispered, though without surprise. He'd known without much doubt that this was what he would find upon reaching Occulara ever since he'd heard the message back in Ancon. "I suppose if anything *was* left behind, then it's either so buried that I'd never find it, or has probably fallen into the hands of Heaven's Eye."

"That would make sense to me," Nestor agreed.

For a while, Leon poured over a map of Occulara that he'd been given by Emilie, hoping that either he or Nestor might be able to see something there that could prove promising. Unfortunately, neither of them saw anything on the city map that indicated a remnant of the Clan, but Leon, not wanting to give up so easily, resolved to see if he could dig any deeper into the matter later. The map wasn't that in-depth, after all, so it was easy to imagine there were things he was missing.

He couldn't do much more than that, for he soon felt a light tap on his physical shoulder. In a matter of seconds, Leon was opening his eyes back in the physical world to see Emilie standing before him, a grin of satisfaction on her face.

"Welcome back," she said to him as his gaze landed upon her. "The meeting was mercifully brief, and my position has been confirmed. You are now looking at the newest member of the Heaven's Eye Board."

Leon smiled as he rose to his feet, his arms spreading as he invited Emilie in for a hug. His mother-in-law took the invitation, and he whispered, "Congratulations," when they separated. "They couldn't have made a better decision."

"I'm sure there are others who might disagree," Emilie replied. "The vote was unanimous, but with the Director in my corner, that was to be expected. Still, I think I may have a few hidden rivals here given some of the discussion in there... But I shouldn't say any more about that."

Leon nodded in understanding. "Penelope? Damien?" he asked.

"Still with the Director, but they should be out in only a few minutes," she said. "Shouldn't be too much longer now..."

Emilie, even though she was effectively done with her work in the Hexagon, took a seat with Leon, waiting with him until his meeting with the Director was finished. She didn't have to wait long, for only about fifteen minutes after Emilie walked out, Damien Makedon followed, with Penelope only about ten minutes later. Finally, it was Leon's turn to meet with the big man himself.

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The Director's office was both grand and simple, in a strangely overpowering way. The floors were beautiful, being some kind of almost impossibly glossy black stone, with the walls and ceiling made of similar material. The office itself was quite big, the back wall taking up an entire side of the Hexagon, showing it to be just like the roof in the central chamber: transparent from this side, while completely opaque from the other. The room was thus filled with harsh light from the afternoon sun, and lacked any other light sources that Leon could see. The Director's desk was extremely large, too, looking almost like it had been carved from a single massive tree.

Other than that, the entire office was stark and empty. When Leon was shown in, his footsteps echoed loudly, adding to the anxiety he felt as he saw the dark figure sitting behind the desk, quietly reading through a stack of papers in front of him. Leon couldn't see much of the man, the sun shining in and rendering the Director little more than a hazy black figure. What was even more intimidating was the fact that Leon's magic senses were completely suppressed in the Director's office, meaning he could only rely on his physical eyes to see the man; and even then, the dark figure was all his eighth-tier eyes could see.

*'Probably some kind of enchantments amplifying the effect,'* Leon thought as he took slow steps forward, his eyes only drifting from the Director after he'd made it halfway to the man's desk. The thought helped him to keep calm and remain stoic, but he could practically feel the ninth-tier Director watching his every move.

As Leon drew closer, the Director finally spoke, his voice deep and resonant, the cavernous office giving it an echo that Leon found incredibly pleasing to the ear.

"Leon Raime," the Director stated, his tone even. "Welcome to the Heaven's Eye. I've heard much about you and have been looking forward to this meeting."

Leon cocked an eyebrow, the Director's monotone voice indicating less enthusiasm than he claimed.

Not sure about the protocol, Leon decided to just respond without ceremony.

"I've been looking forward to this, too," he said. "So far, I have to say that I haven't been disappointed."

The Director seemed to hum in acknowledgment and didn't say anything as Leon continued to walk toward his desk slowly and deliberately, only stopping about two arm lengths from the thing. The Director didn't once move, and neither did Leon sense anything strange about the flow of magic in the room, indicating that the ninth-tier mage's aura was steady and not at all perturbed. However, even from such a short distance away, the Director was still shrouded in both light and darkness, with the sun backlighting his chair so harshly that Leon found himself starting to strain as he tried to focus on the man within the shadow.

"I've heard that you're here to seek a position as one of my Hands," the Director stated after several long moments.

"That would be swell," Leon replied, his eyes narrowing as his heart began to beat faster in anticipation, excitement, and dread.

"Why?" the Director simply asked.

Leon, expecting the question, explained, "I'm not one to enjoy swearing myself to others. Employment is one thing, because it can always be ended. Oaths of fealty are harder to escape from, especially since I don't much like avoiding my responsibilities. I have some plans that need resources to accomplish, and I don't think I can get those resources on my own. I need partners, but those partners can't be any of the Empires. That's why I'm here."

"Partners?" the Director whispered. "We're not in the business of taking on many partners..."

Leon shrugged. "I understand. Though, before I go further, I'm curious. Might I ask you a question?"

The Director paused a moment, leaning back in his chair. For the first time, he looked at Leon, really *looked* at him, and Leon felt the man's aura settle in around his shoulders. It wasn't nearly as weighty as Anastasios' had been, but it certainly him working a little harder to remain standing.

"I'll permit you one question," the Director said.

"Thank you," Leon replied with as much respect as he could put into his voice. "I was curious how much you've heard about me. You've clearly 'heard much about me'..."

The Director didn't answer immediately, instead just staring at Leon for an uncomfortable amount of time. But finally, he answered, "I was sent a report on you after you left the Bull Kingdom detailing your time as a knight. Impressive for such a short tenure."

"Those were impressive times," Leon humbly stated. "Everyone who lived through them has just as impressive resumés."

"No they don't," the Director bluntly stated. He didn't elaborate, though, and chose to just move on. "My daughter doesn't like you."

"Your daughter doesn't know me," Leon shot back a little testily. But after a moment, his attitude softened a bit and he added, "Though, to not like me wouldn't exactly make her unique. I think she thinks I'm trying to rely on Emilie to get into Heaven's Eye."

"Aren't you?"

Leon shrugged again. "I'd be lying if I said that her being a new Board member wasn't a big reason why I'm here now, but I have a feeling that no matter what she said about me, if you didn't want me here, I wouldn't be."

Leon let that statement hang in the air for a while, the Director likewise not saying anything. The Director looked fairly relaxed, but Leon could feel the tension in the air. It pressed in around him, demanding that he buckle under its pressure, that he cracks, and flee from the Director as fast as he could, his future plans be damned.

But Leon didn't run away. He had faced a Primal God before; the Director was nerve-wracking, but only a man, and Leon could deal with men.

After that long moment, the Director asked him,

**Chapter 674: Preparing for a Hunt**

“This is fucking horse shit,” Alix muttered, speaking the words that were on everyone’s mind.

Leon had returned to his family and retinue, who’d been shown to what would be their quarters until more permanent residences could be worked out. They were set up in apartments in one of the black towers surrounding the Hexagon, on one of the highest floors with entire walls given to windows that gave incredible views of the massive city. The apartments themselves were extremely luxurious, taking up nearly the entire floor. Smooth marble floors, spectacular furniture, large bedrooms, opulent bathrooms, a pool fit for a monarch, and even space for artisanal work, such as enchanting.

But all of that luxury might as well not have mattered, for the mood in the huge dining room was dour and depressed. None of them wanted to head back out on another journey when they’d just finished one that had been nearly half a year long. They all just wanted to relax for a while, get used to sedentary living again before heading back out. He could see it in the faces of his lovers and all of his retinue, who were gathered around the dining table.

Leon, however, seemed to be the only exception. He, too, wanted to get settled in, to let the knowledge that he had a place of his own for just himself and his family lift some of the pressure that weighed on his mind.

But...

“He’s testing me,” Leon said after Alix’s statement of incredibly profundity.

“That much is almost insultingly obvious,” Anshu stated, his tone even, though he spoke the words with intensity enough that his own anger was betrayed.

“I know that,” Leon replied. “It’s not even hidden. This is a test. That’s just what it is. But the thought of hunting this thing, this ‘tau’, is... well, it’s kind of got me chomping at the bit, so to speak. I understand it’s a legendary creature...” He looked to Anna for confirmation, and she gravely nodded.

“It’s more than that,” she explained, a dark look in her deep green eyes. “Tau don’t exist. Simple as that. They’re myths. We’ve been sent to hunt down a myth.”

“Oh, fucking great!” Alix cried as she threw her hands up in frustration.

Leon ignored the outburst, but he could feel some amount of anger in his heart, too. However, the emotion that dominated his mind wasn’t anger, but competitiveness. With an almost sinister smile, he said, “The Director claimed that most people think it’s mythical, but he seemed to think otherwise. Either that, or he’s just trying to not have me abandon the quest right away. Still, if this tau does turn out to be entirely mythical... I almost want to say that he gave me this test expecting me to fail, but that’s not quite right. I think it’s more that he’s not really expecting me to come back with the requested pearl, he’s testing to see if I give up or not.”

“How can you say for certain?” Marcus inquired. “It seems to me like sending someone after a myth would be a good way to get rid of them, at least for a little while. How can you say otherwise? Does he expect us to find something else of comparable value? How can we do that when he only told us to find a pearl? Is there some special property of these pearls that would make faking it impossible?”

“In a way, yes,” Helen answered. “The myths ascribe many aspects to tau pearls—and I mean *many* aspects. Think of anything you want, and there’s probably some myth somewhere that

claims a tau pearl is capable of it. If all of these myths are to be believed, then a tau pearl can heal any injury, cure any disease, conjure gold from nothing, allow a mage to rise several tiers if they eat one, power an ark of any size with its stored magic power, return life to the dead, and so many other things that I can't even list them all. But in short, no matter what pearl you bring to the Director, no matter how powerfully you enchant one, he'd always be able to say that it's not enough, that the pearl you brought him isn't 'real'. Because what he's asking you to find doesn't exist, so you *can't* complete this quest as it's been given."

Her words almost seemed to echo in the silence that followed. It was as if she told the entire room that Leon's plan of joining Heaven's Eye, and thus ensuring their immediate futures, wasn't going to happen.

But Leon's smile didn't drop one bit. Instead, it only grew slightly wider.

"As the Director of Heaven's Eye," he said, "I think it's reasonable for him to have access to information none of the rest of us have. And while I only broke words with him for a short time, I've also heard some things about him from Emilie. And the impression I have of the man is that he doesn't play these kinds of games. He wouldn't send me out on an impossible mission just to get rid of me. There's something else he wants, even if it isn't an actual tau pearl, I can feel that, I just can't see what it is."

Elise spoke up for the first time, offering her thoughts. "I don't think we should give up so quickly. I agree with Leon, the Director doesn't do these kinds of things. If he wanted Leon gone, he wouldn't have to resort to methods like this."

"He would if he just wanted to feel superior," Anshu bitterly spat.

Elise, ignoring the Indradian, continued, "Let's give it some time. Maybe look into these tau. See if there isn't anything we can dig up that might explain the reason why the Director is sending us out like this. It's not like we'll lose much even if we spend a couple of days focusing on this, and who knows? Maybe we'll find something. If we don't, then we'll know without a shadow of a doubt that the Director was just playing around. At the very least, it'll free us up to do focus our efforts elsewhere without regrets."

Leon gave his wife a glowing look. "I couldn't have said it better myself." Leon cast his gaze around the room, making eye contact with every person there. Elise, Valeria, Alcander, and Gaius met his gaze without hesitation. Maia was a little more thoughtful, but she made eye contact with him, too. Alix, Helen, Anna, Anshu, and Marcus seemed to need a little more thought than Maia, but they, too, soon turned their eyes to him. "Does anyone here want to just give up on Heaven's Eye for sending us on this chase?" Leon asked. "I'll not force anyone to participate if they don't want to, but if we go on this quest, then I want us all on board with it."

Slowly, Leon could see determination sinking into his retinue.

"I'm in," Anshu declared, surprising Leon somewhat with his decisiveness. "I've never met him, but I already hate the Director. I want nothing more than to find this pearl and throw it in his smug face. In the likely event that it doesn't exist, then I don't want to give up without at least confirming that fact."

"Same here," Gaius added. "Nothing good can come from giving up before we've even tried. If this is our quest, then we should at least give it a try."

Everyone else gave similar sentiments, leaving Leon grinning like an idiot. Seeing the Director's face when Leon walked into his office and threw down a tau pearl would be beyond satisfying. At the very least, it would prove that Leon wasn't going to ride into Heaven's Eye on Emilie's coattails, that he'd earned his place with his own skills. But that, of course, depended on the tau being real; and one of their pearls, recoverable.

"All right," Leon said when they were all finished. "Let's figure out a better game plan, then. Anna, Helen, you two have heard these myths about the tau, correct?"

Both ladies nodded.

"Share everything you know, no matter how seemingly pointless. If this thing exists, then we have to parse the truth from the fiction. Gaius, Anshu, I want you two to head down to the river and secure us a ship for a reasonable price. I don't know how long we'll need it, so make sure it's a long rental. Tau supposedly live on the coast of the great sea, so we'll need something robust enough to brave those waters."

"We'll get it done," Gaius said as he made eye contact with Anshu, the two men sharing a brief nod.

"Elise. Emilie is now the Chief of Acquisitions. I don't want to burden her with our stuff right now, especially since she's probably going to need several months to settle into her new position, but if it's not too much trouble..."

"You want me to see if there's been any information that came through Acquisitions regarding tau?" Elise asked with a sly smile.

Acquisitions included the bounties that Heaven's Eye ran. Leon was confident that if anyone had reports of tau sightings, it would be Heaven's Eye, and borrowing Emilie's authority could help them to narrow their search.

"Yes," Leon responded. "Don't press too hard, this is a quest we'll undertake ourselves. But if there're reports out there, I want to see them. Everyone else will be with me. I'd like to bury ourselves in whatever literature exists about tau, whether mythological or factual. If these things are as powerful as they've been implied to be, then we'll have to prepare as best as we can to find one."

"Let's get to it."

—

Finding information on the tau turned out to be quite easy, to Leon's general surprise. He'd thought they would've been a little more obscure, but it turned out that the creatures were something of folk icons for the people who lived around the central sea, and many stories had been written about them.

However, Leon could easily understand why Anna and Helen had been so dismissive of this quest after reading just a few of these stories: they were all generally inconsistent in regards to what the tau actually *were*. Most seemed to agree they were birds, but of what sort, Leon couldn't find more than two or three stories that agreed with each other. Some claimed they were no larger than a pigeon, while others claimed that they could wrap their talons around adult wyverns with ease. Some claimed them to be of human-level sapience, if not higher, but most stories depicted the tau as either little more than animals, or of such alien minds that their thoughts and intentions weren't understandable to mankind.

Not even their plumage were things that the stories could agree on, with some stating that they were pure white, others that they were as red as the sky at dusk, while others claiming that their feathers changed with their mood. He even found one story that was inconsistent with itself, changing the bird's plumage to fit with the trials and tribulations that the story's protagonist underwent, and doing so without any narrative explanation.

Even worse, the stories of the tau's powers were even less consistent. Some stories claimed them to be beings of almost godlike power, while others claimed that they were little more than average animals with access to wind and light magic. Those stories in the latter category Leon treated with a little less skepticism, given that they usually had other details in them that were more consistent with the Aeterna that Leon was familiar with—though none were outright believable, unfortunately. The one that claimed the tau was actually a race of mischievous shapeshifters Leon found particularly entertaining, though also particularly doubtful.

Everything that Helen and Anna wrote down was just as inconsistent with much of what Leon and the rest of the retinue had found. However, his interest was piqued slightly when he reached their 'power list', upon which Anna had written that tau were often ascribed the power to control the weather, summoning wind, rain, and lightning at their whim.

Leon suspected that some of these myths syncretized the mythical tau with the Thunderbird, but he didn't exactly have proof. Regardless, he and his retinue soon burned through the mythical references they could find of the tau, coming up with precious few good references that Leon might be able to rely upon in this hunt.

But there *were* a few references that he thought might be more credible.

The biggest one was a scientific journal of an explorer who'd helped to map the rocky coastline of the central sea, charting out hundreds of caves and extensive underground and underwater tunnel systems that ran through the coastline's many huge cliffs and broken, rocky shore. He claimed to have found the bones of a tau deep within caves near the Ilian Empire's border with the Sacred Golden Empire, and Leon found various other references in many other stories to the tau making their homes within caves. It wasn't much, but it was a start.

The second reference that Leon found reliable was that the tau were vegetarians. If he wanted to lure one out—assuming that was even possible given the intelligence some stories attributed them with—he couldn't use meat. It also meant that they were going to be more relegated to the northern coast of the central sea since his maps painted the southern and eastern coastlines to be more barren—though, he did note that the entire coastline seemed to be relatively barren, especially compared to the richer and more fertile interior of the Ilian and Sacred Golden Empires. Still, there would likely be more plentiful food north of the Scamander River delta, so that was where he'd concentrate his search.

Of course, there were other journals he and his retinue found that came to the same conclusion, and there was still no concrete evidence for tau presence, but he filed the information away, anyway. If the tau didn't exist, then it wouldn't matter, but if they did, then he had a place to start.

The final clue he found was more verifiable, but less immediately useful. The tau were so mythologized that there were multiple shrines dedicated to them in the eastern parts of the Ilian Empire. The Ilian Empire seemed to worship many gods, but they also venerated many local spirits. It seemed that the tau

were counted among these spirits, for there were quite a few shrines located around the Empire's eastern provinces. At the very least, even if the tau couldn't be found around the coastlines, Leon figured that there would be more people who lived around these shrines who might take stories of the tau more seriously—though he also thought that that might mean a lot more false sightings, so it was a bit of a mixed bag.

Several hours after starting their research, Elise returned to them to pitch in. Her mother had, as Leon had suspected, been too busy to help Elise directly, but not so much that she couldn't have one of her secretaries go digging for information. When Elise met up with them in the tower's massive library, she brought with her several reports of dubious quality claiming to have eyewitness accounts of tau sightings.

Leon was gratified to see that all four of these reports were in the area he'd already resolved to start searching first: the border between the Ilian Empire and the Sacred Golden Empire that reached the coast. Most of the coast, in contrast to the urban build-up along the Scamander River, was devoid of human settlements; the weather was terrible and the terrain itself made large-scale settlement undesirable. But there were still a few fishing villages and quaint resort towns to be found, along with salty sailors selling spurious sea stories to sightseers, which is what Heaven's Eye chalked most of these reports up to being.

Leon resolves to visit these towns and see what he could see.

By the time that night fell, everyone was exhausted, and not at all looking forward to what promised to be several more weeks of fruitless searching for a myth. Leon, however, slept quite soundly, and he figured he probably would've been able to do so even without the loving ministrations of his wife and lovers. They had a direction to go in, and that was enough to ease his mind for the night.

—

Leon stared down the docks at the ship that Gaius and Anshu had procured, his lips pursed in thought. He'd been surprised when they returned the previous day having secured a fairly cheap ship for the retinue to use, but pleasantly so. However, now, he was a little less sure.

The ship was a fairly small sloop, small enough that his family and retinue could crew it with ease. It was larger in the back, with only a single deck and a raised quarterdeck. The ship wasn't particularly magically advanced—probably why it was so cheap—but it had a single magic engine powerful enough to move the ship at a good clip. Good enough, Anshu promised, to reach the coastline in just a few days.

The rest of the sloop's enchantments ensured that it was robust enough to endure the fairly powerful weather events that constantly roiled across the central sea, and if the magic engine ever gave out—and given its age, Leon fully expected it to give out at some point—the ship was equipped with a backup mast which Anshu said he was familiar with.

Most surprisingly was that the ship was made entirely out of steel. Leon might've been impressed had the ship not been speckled with rust and various stains from the undoubtedly long life it had lived. Still, he found himself quietly marveling at the Ilian Empire's power if this was such a cheap ship, so common that it was allowed to degenerate into such a condition. In the Bull Kingdom, ships made of steel were

incredibly rare—so much so that the Legions still used wooden ships, though the wood they used was of the finest quality they could find.

This ship had no weapons to speak of, but Leon didn't mind. After some time spent thinking it over, and with the added endorsement of Anshu, who'd already given the ship a cursory inspection the day before, Leon decided to take the ship. All he needed it to do was get them down the river, to the villages along the rocky coast, and then back to Occulara. To that end, he paid the promised price, and he, his retinue, and his family climbed aboard.

Most unusual about his group was that Elise was joining them. She was completely uninterested in remaining behind, especially since this didn't seem to be a dangerous mission, and she claimed that she wasn't about to look for a villa and accompanying property all on her own, so they had to 'suffer her presence' for a while.

Leon, not considering her presence to be at all insufferable, was grateful for the extra company. He had to admit that he hadn't wanted to leave her behind, either.

So it was that the day after arriving in Occulara on a Heaven's Eye yacht of nearly unparalleled luxury, Leon, his family, and his retinue departed Occulara in a ship whose better days were likely decades in the past, just to hunt down a myth.

#### **Chapter 675: Investigating the Village**

Leon stood on the prow of his ship, letting the rain wash over him, his body filling with power in the light of distant lightning. He needed the energy, even if it wasn't the sort that was most useful right now.

The enthusiasm he had for his quest died out fairly quickly once he'd truly gotten started. His ship had moved quickly enough, the current helping to speed them along to the coast of the great central sea. The coast was just as rough and inhospitable as he'd imagined, with few human settlements anywhere to be found. But those that were around were small fishing hamlets and tiny ports for servicing passing ships.

It surprised him in the beginning, seeing these fishing hamlets. It was quite the sight, with all the power and influence of the Ilian Empire, to see such small and relatively simple settlements, oftentimes built out of timber and stone rather than metal or concrete. It reminded him of the Northwestern Kingdoms a little, especially of some of the same kinds of villages he'd passed through in the Bull Kingdom.

But the people were just as inhospitable as the land. They didn't want his party poking around their homes and in their business, even with Leon trying his best to mind himself. Their mere presence was enough to have people giving them dirty looks—especially Anshu and Maia, their darker skin tones marking them even more than the others as being foreign.

Fortunately, there weren't any violent troubles, and the small local branches of Heaven's Eye proved willing enough to help them in their hunt. The only problem was that the people who'd reported seeing the tau were either unwilling to speak with Leon or his people, weren't particularly reliable, or simply weren't around.



There were a few shrines to tau set up nearby, and Leon made sure to visit them as they passed through the villages. However, those little sojourns had proved just as fruitful as the rest of the trip up until then—which was to say, not very.

In the end, in the three previous villages that Leon had stopped at during his journey, he'd left all empty-handed.

Making matters 'worse' was the weather. Around the great central sea, the weather was always terrible—at least, in most people's opinions. The sky was nearly always overcast, the sea was choppy, the wind was strong and howling, and rain was frequent. Storms blasted the broken coastline constantly.

Leon found it to be perfect weather, but the rest of his retinue disagreed, spending most of their time in the shelter of the ship's quarterdeck, only coming outside when Anshu, who was the only human member of Leon's retinue who stayed outside with him on the regular so that he could see to the steering and maintenance of the ship, needed help sailing the ship—though Anshu was hardly enthusiastic about the weather, himself. Their attitude had worsened with the weather, and though Leon had no cause to doubt their commitment, he could tell that everyone wanted nothing more than to return to Occulara. They needed some stability, and he made a vow within as he stood on the prow that, upon their return, he wouldn't leave the city again until they all had homes to call their own.

The only one of them who didn't mind the rain was Anzu. The griffin frequently kept Leon company when he went out into the storms, but he'd mostly stayed either inside the quarterdeck sleeping, or flying about just over the ship. The griffin seemed thrilled to fly about at his leisure after the long time spent mostly cooped up in a Heaven's Eye yacht or carriage, and Leon was content to let him do so, for he didn't want a bored and stir-crazy griffin to add to his bored and stir-crazy party. He just hoped that this last village would have something promising for them to find, he didn't want this whole endeavor to have been completely pointless...

As he stood on the deck of his rented ship, reveling in the weak storm that played across the cliffs and rocks to his left, the last village came into view. It had been built in a natural harbor along an inlet of the sea, protected from the worst of the weather by a hill and cliff on its eastern side. It wasn't a large village, but it was more than big enough to have plenty of dock space for Leon's ship.

Anshu expertly steered the ship into the village, and Leon shook himself from his reverie to get his retinue to tie the thing down. After the harbor master—a second-tier mage more than a little aggrieved to have to come out and do his job in the rain—met Leon as he disembarked, Leon paid the harbor toll and was directed to the local Heaven's Eye branch.

Leon and his retinue then marched through the cobbled streets to the only stone building in the entire timber village. This was to be their last stop. If no more information on the tau turned up, then Leon could only resign himself to failing the Director's quest, and thus, likely failing to sign on with Heaven's Eye.

At this point, even with the power of the storm filling his limbs with power, he was frustrated enough that he couldn't say if failing this quest was a bad thing or not.

—

Once dry and comfortable and with feet on stable land, the mood among Leon's people improved greatly. Leon met with the local Heaven's Eye manager about the report of a tau sighting, and the fourth-tier man, nervous as all hells with so many higher-tiered mages in his building, scrambled to fetch all the information he could on the report, leaving Leon and the rest to get comfortable in the small lounge beside the building's atrium. Only Anshu hadn't accompanied them, as Leon had left him and to keep watch over the ship. Anzu had also accompanied them to the bank, but the locals had seen fit to give him a cell in their small stable. The griffin wasn't too happy about it, but Leon trusted that he'd be well-behaved.

And there they waited for more than an hour, relaxing in the heat of the Heaven's Eye bank.

It was a fairly sleepy village—at least, so it seemed with the storm outside. Not many people coming and going from the bank on business, leaving Leon and his people alone in the lounge. Still, even with that solitude, no one really spoke much. After a month on the ship with each other, Leon could sense that everyone probably wanted to get some time to themselves just as much as they wanted this damn quest to be over.

Finally, the Heaven's Eye manager returned with two people in tow. One was an older woman barely in the first-tier. She was fairly plump, with sun-beaten cheeks and dry, wispy hair. She was clearly accustomed to hard work outdoors. The second person Leon guessed was her daughter given their similar features. The daughter was thin and waif-like, with a nervous, but somewhat dreamy look in her eyes, as if her mind was still preoccupied with something a thousand miles away. She was completely mortal and couldn't have been more than fourteen or fifteen.

The manager waved Leon into a nearby conference room with the two he'd brought, and then left, though not before stating sternly that he would be right outside, just in case.

Leon was a little aggrieved, but he couldn't blame the man for his caution. The two women were clearly put a little more at ease knowing that he was still within earshot despite the privacy given, so Leon paid no more mind to it.

Joining him for his questions were just Alix and Elise. In his opinion, those two were probably the least intimidating of those who were with him, thanks to Elise's expertise in dealing with people, and Alix's natural exuberance. Hopefully, having them with him would help get the two to talk about their report.

Leon took a seat across the conference table from the two the manager had brought. They seemed ill at ease, though the mother more so than the daughter.

"Hello," he said as pleasantly as he could. "My name is Leon. This is my wife, Elise, and one of my friends, Alix."

Elise gracefully nodded as Leon introduced her, while Alix responded with a cheery wave and a quick, "Heya!"

The mother nodded, calmer by a shade or two. "Cora," she replied in a thick, trilling accent. She laid her hand on her daughter's shoulder and said, "Zoe."

Leon smiled, nodded, and then dispensed with all greetings and jumped right in.

"I, and my people, have come here after hearing a report from Heaven's Eye about a tau," he explained, and immediately he saw Cora give Zoe a harsh look, but it was gone in the blink of an eye. "We journeyed here to verify that report. I understand that one of you made it?"

"Mistaken, you are," Cora sternly responded. "Filed report, none did."

"I did," Zoe immediately contradicted her mother, her accented voice just as dreamy and distant as her gaze. "Found a tau, I did. Told many people."

"She did not," Cora declared, more as a reprimand to her daughter than to Leon and the others.

"Mistaken, she is. No tau here. Never been."

Leon arched an eyebrow, but it was Alix who responded.

Ignoring Cora, she asked Zoe, "What did it look like? Was it big? Did it do any magic?"

"Small, it was," Zoe responded despite her mother's hand tightening on her shoulder. "Flew right by me, it did. Landed on small stone, stared at me. White it was, like cloud. Eye like pearl, and looked at me, it did. Showed me the sky."

"Confused, my girl is," Cora growled. "Saw a gull, she did."

"Know what gull is, wasn't gull, it wasn't," Zoe responded, practically singing.

"Twas gull, it was," Cora protested.

"Wasn't," Zoe replied with the fluidity that told Leon either they had had this very argument multiple times, or there were quite a few arguments in their house.

Jumping into their exchange, Elise asked, "What makes you think it was a gull? Was it not Zoe who saw it?"

"Saw it, I didn't," Cora conceded, but her expression was still defiant and combative. "Tau don't exist, they don't. White gulls around, there are. Been gull, it must've. No tau around here, there aren't."

"Twas tau, it was!" Zoe insisted, though her tone remained as sing-song and calm as ever.

"What makes you think it was a tau, then?" Elise asked, turning her attention away from the upset mother.

"Twas tau, it was!" Zoe repeated. "Know gull, wasn't gull, it wasn't! Was tau! Showed me sky!"

"What do you mean, 'showed you sky'?" Elise patiently asked, smiling at Zoe to encourage her to share as much as possible.

For a moment, Zoe seemed unsure of how to explain what she'd seen, but with a few muttered words in a language that Leon didn't understand, he figured it was mostly just because she couldn't speak the common language well enough to explain properly.

"Flew by me, it did," she said again, this time a little slower and less sure of herself. "Looked in eye, I did. Saw sky, I did. Twas pearly."

"Do you remember where you saw it?" Alix interjected, asking after more practical information.

"Twas in woods, it was!" Zoe eagerly responded. "Can show you, I can!"

"She can't!" Cora immediately responded, shooting Zoe another reprimanding look. "Wait for father to return with fish, she must. Have work, we do."

"Can you read a map?" Alix inquired.

Zoe fervently nodded, a dreamy smile on her face.

With that, Leon quickly stepped out of the room and had the manager fetch them a map of the surrounding area. Leon returned to the conference room only a minute or two later, and gave the map to Zoe, who not only gave them the specific spot, she also highlighted the best route to reach it.

When Leon examined the map again, he noted that the sighting was about three miles north of the village outskirts, in a lightly wooded meadow on the western slope of a hill directly on the coast. The only way to approach this hill was from the west, as the northern, southern, and eastern sides of the hill were hundred-foot-tall sheer cliffs that plummeted straight into the sea.

"Thank you," Leon said to the mother-daughter pair. "I think that is all we need for the time being. If need be, would we be able to ask you two to come back and answer a few more questions?"

Cora frowned and took a moment to answer, but Zoe just said, "Will do! Will do!"

Cora's frown deepened, but she took an uneasy look at Leon, and then nodded her assent.

Leon thanked them again, and then let them go. Then, after asking the Heaven's Eye manager how accommodating he was willing to be, he called the rest of his family and retinue into the conference room.

After Leon quickly went over what they had asked and the answers they'd received, Elise added, "Cora seemed kind of cagey. She was *very* insistent that no tau lived here, and that tau didn't exist."

"Yeah, that was a little strange," Alix hesitantly agreed, "but it could've also just been a language issue. I think it's also possible that she was trying to protect her daughter from the strange people who called her into Heaven's Eye to ask her some questions."

"Always a possibility," Elise conceded, "but I couldn't help but think she might've been trying to hide something."

Marcus then spoke up. "There are a couple of things we might be able to do to verify these claims without trekking all the way out there, you know. Are there any maps of local cave systems or tau shrines?"

"Tau shrines, I doubt it," Gaius replied. "Most tau shrines are small and not marked on maps. It's only the big and famous ones that get cartographers interested, it seems."

Leon nodded in understanding. For the most part, he'd tasked Gaius with collecting information on local tau shrines when they made landfall in a village. He'd gone out to investigate quite a few in the past month, and none of the tau shrines they'd visited had contained more than a small bird relief and altar for offerings.

“See if you can find any additional maps on local caves,” Leon ordered Marcus, and tasked Alcander with going with him. To Gaius, he said, “Ask around for tau shrines. Have them marked on a map, if you can.” He then turned to Helen and Anna. “Figure out what kind of herbs grow in the surroundings. If tau are as magical as they’re claimed to be, then I’m sure they need magical food, too. Or at least are attracted to it. If there’s any possibility that we can find them by keeping an eye on potential food sources, then we should explore that possibility.”

His retainers nodded, and rose to fulfill his orders.

“What about us?” Alix asked, nodding to Elise, Valeria, and Maia.

“Let’s head to some local watering holes and see if we can dig up any more information on local tau, or if that fails—”

“—as it always has,” Alix said with a cheeky smile.

“—as it always has,” Leon repeated with a smile of his own, “but that shouldn’t dissuade us from trying. At the very least, we might be able to find someone who knows something. I don’t have much hope for that happening, but maybe we’ll be pleasantly surprised.”

—

Leon leaned back in the conference chair, mentally tired from talking to drunk fisherman and unfriendly bar keepers. He and his family had gone around to several bars and small local markets seeking anyone who knew anything about tau, even running into Gaius at one place, but few people were willing to speak to them about the birds. Not even when Leon flashed some silver did anyone loosen their tongues. One particularly unfriendly barkeep even threatened to throw Leon out of the bar if he didn’t stop ‘disturbing the customers’, who numbered a mere half dozen at best. Leon was momentarily entertained at the idea of the first-tier barkeep trying to follow through on that threat, but he wasn’t serious about it, and left in due order. He wasn’t trying to step on any toes, and there was no harm in leaving politely when asked.

His retainers were a little more successful in their endeavors. No one found anyone else who’d ever seen a tau—or at least, no one who was sober enough to take seriously—but they had acquired a reasonably accurate chart of *some* local cave systems. Only ‘some’, though, as the Heaven’s Eye manager was quick to point out, as the rocky coastline was absolutely riddled with caves, and no one had explored them all. Or, at least, no one had explored them all and seen fit to map them out. What they got was all there was.

Fortunately, Leon noticed several caves in the area around the meadow where the tau had been seen, and when Gaius came back with a map marked with locations of tau shrines, he found that there was one shrine near the meadow, as well. Finally, when Helen and Anna came back, they brought word that the grasslands further inland were replete with magical herbs, with that meadow in particular being a good place to find sweetroot, an herb that could relieve the symptoms of fatigue.

Leon’s heart sank when Helen also revealed that an otherwise harmless mushroom also grew in the vicinity that she knew induced mild euphoria and hallucinations in those who consumed it.

He was a little more subdued in his reaction, but Alix gave a loud, “Fuck!” when that information was revealed. When he glanced around the table, he found nearly everyone with similar looks of dismay on their faces. Even with their growing list of potential information, it still seemed that the most likely explanation for the tau sighting was that Zoe had simply been snacking on some mushrooms and thought she saw a tau.

Her statement that she’d ‘seen the sky’, and her general floaty attitude now made a little more sense to Leon.

Regardless, he ordered his retinue to get ready to head out. This was their last village, and if it was going to be as much of a waste of time as the other three, he was at least going to ensure that it wasn’t a waste because they gave up. They were going to finish this right, and they’d go home. Whether or not they had a tau pearl in hand hardly mattered at this point.

With some grumbling, his retinue fell in. He grabbed Anzu from the stables, and they headed out into the wilderness as the sun slowly sank in the sky. They only had a few hours of daylight left, but that, Leon estimated, would be more than enough time.

## **Chapter 676: Tau**

A waste of time. That was the prevailing feeling among Leon’s family and his retinue. Only Anzu seemed to be having a good time, having spent much of their short excursion running around in the grassy meadows, chasing rabbits and flying about. Everyone else quickly lost all motivation as their journey turned out to be for naught.

The closest place that Leon searched was the tau shrine, as that was on the south side of the meadow where Zoe had reported seeing the tau. As with all the other tau shrines that Leon had visited, the thing was quite small, being little more than an altar and a few artistic depictions of birds carved into the side of a short cliff. The altar was bare, the shrine was deserted, and there was nothing of interest to be found anywhere that Leon or Maia could sense.

The meadow was likewise devoid of anything interesting, with even the patches of magic-rich herbs seemingly untouched by roaming animals. Leon found that a little strange and worthy of consideration, but nothing came of it, for there was no sign of any tau presence in the meadow. They couldn’t even find any bird droppings.

Finally, they traveled to the nearby caves, but once again, found little of consequence. There was some slight excitement when Anna found some bird waste, but after some examination, she determined it to have been from a seagull—the creatures were all over the coastline, so Leon could easily see why Cora had been so insistent that what Zoe saw had been a seagull. After leaving the cave, Leon found himself feeling more and more convinced that Cora had been right.

All of this meant that as Leon’s party returned to the fishing village, it was with the knowledge that their entire journey from Occulara had been wasted chasing a myth. They had found no concrete sign that tau even existed, let alone where one might be found. With that, it essentially meant that the Director’s quest had been impossible right from the start, and that Leon might not be able to get into Heaven’s Eye.

The party found their way to one of the few village bars as they returned to the village. Like the rest of the Ilian Empire, while it was familiar enough in function, the bar itself was quite different from what they were used to. The building was made of stone, and while it didn't seem to be that well-maintained, the enchantments flowing through its walls ensured a comfortable atmosphere on the inside, an interior well-lit by magic lanterns, and an all-around cozy place to waste a few hours with drink.

Leon paid the bar owner a handful of silver to allow Anzu inside, and he and his family found a quiet corner in the otherwise sparsely populated bar to hole up in. The rest of Leon's retinue split off into their own cliques to commiserate with each other over all of the lost time.

Not in a particularly sociable mood, Leon found himself completely tuning out what everyone was talking about as he turned the problem over in his head.

*'Why would he send us on an impossible quest? It can't be impossible, can it? Or is it something else that he's after? Is he testing my commitment? My honesty? Does he want to see if I show up with a counterfeit pearl? What's the point of it all?'*

Without knowing more about the Director, Leon was unable to answer most of these questions, but at the least, he landed upon the idea that, yes, this had been an impossible task right from the start. The Director couldn't have imagined that Leon would succeed when he gave him the quest... even though he'd seemed quite genuine when sending him on the quest in the first place. Leon supposed the man was just that good of an actor.

With a heavy heart that knew Heaven's Eye was probably now out of his reach, Leon began to make his peace with the idea of spending the next few years essentially on his own—just him, his family, and his retinue. On the one hand, he was kind of relieved, knowing that their independence was a little more secured, but on the other hand, quite upset knowing that the resources of Heaven's Eye that he'd been hoping he could tap were now not at his disposal. Sure, Emilie might help them out once and a while, but Leon's intention was to achieve Apotheosis and rise to the Nexus with all of his people with him. Without the full support of Heaven's Eye or one of the Empires, that would be a significantly more difficult labor to accomplish.

As he quietly contemplated his options, a man walked into the bar and paused a moment at the entrance. Leon didn't immediately take much notice of him aside from the simple fact of his presence, but he was vaguely aware that aside from his party, the rest of the bar's dozen or so patrons had grown quiet upon his appearance. It wasn't until the man started walking in the direction of his table that Leon pulled himself out of his thoughts and took better stock of this man.

Immediately, he found himself mildly intrigued, for the man was utterly devoid of magic power—not itself a terribly interesting thing, but the man also appeared to be quite elderly. Ascending to the first-tier tier of magic involved breathing in air laced with magic power. Lungs would then eventually adapt to magic, allowing it to be absorbed into the blood stream, giving people access to magic power before they're able to generate it within their bodies. To ascend without just waiting around meant devoted breathing exercises, but even without them, it was common that even those who didn't devote themselves to magic would eventually reach the first-tier just by the simple act of years and years of breathing. That this man was still mortal was something that Leon found remarkable down in Imperial territory, especially since he estimated that the amount of ambient magic in the air was at least triple

what it was in the Bull Kingdom—a thing not of much consequence to a mage as strong as him, but he expected that having so much magic in the air meant that elderly Ilians were probably at least tier above seniors in the Bull Kingdom on average, even without dedicated magical training.

The man was dressed in fairly neutral browns and greens, looking for all the world like any other villager, but he moved with strength and purpose that belied his apparent age. His hair was long and pure white, his features strong enough that the wrinkles on his face did little to hide his good looks, and his body seemed strong and well-built from a laborious life. His eyes seemed black in the relatively dim light of the bar, but as he moved, Leon caught a few quick glimmers of a deep red at their edges.

“Hello, there,” he said in a smooth voice that stood in stark contrast with his older looks, and his words came with only the lightest of accents—he clearly had a much better grasp of the common language than Cora or Zoe. “Is this seat taken?” He gestured to the one empty seat at Leon’s table as he approached, looking first to Leon, then to Elise, Valeria, and Maia. Anzu perked his head up on the man’s arrival, but he just held out his hand and gave the griffin some light head pats, and Anzu chirped happily and laid back down.

Leon had been tempted to instinctively say no, but the man had managed to pique his interest first with his lack of aura, then with his confident approach, and finally with Anzu’s lack of concern.

Without a word, Leon gestured to the chair. “Please,” he said.

“Thank you,” the man replied with a smile as he sat down. “I’m under the impression that you lot are the people who are hunting the tau?”

“‘Hunting’ is a bit of a strong word,” Valeria whispered.

“We’re not here to kill it, assuming it’s even real,” Leon added. “We were just asked to find one of its pearls, if possible.”

“Is that all?” the man asked in mock surprise. “You know that the stories state that tau pearls are formed from its tears, right? How were you planning on taking one of those pearls? Torture?”

Leon scowled. “No,” he said with distaste evident in his tone. “I wanted to know if it was real before making more concrete plans, but *forcing* the tau to weep so we could take a pearl isn’t something that I’d be comfortable doing.”

The man smiled and seemed about to speak again, but Leon cut him off.

“What interest is it of yours, anyway, friend?”

The man just smiled a little wider. “I suppose you could say that I have a unique interest in these things. I’m this village’s spiritual leader. Through me, they not only commune with their gods, but with the spirits of the land, as well. The tau are some of the most important spirits in this part of the Empire, so when a group of strangers come waltzing in looking for one, it tends to raise my eyebrows.”

Elise replied, “None of the religious leaders in the other villages we visited seemed to have a problem with our search.”



“That’s quite worrying,” the priest replied. “They must not take their duties as seriously as I do. By the way, since you’re not the first people to show up at my village in the past few years looking for tau pearls, might you tell me who sent you? It seems that someone’s quite desperate to find one...”

Leon arched an eyebrow, his intrigue suddenly magnifying greatly. *‘Did the Director send others on this same quest?’* he wondered, briefly pondering the implications of that if it were true. It would probably mean that this wasn’t an impossible task, at least in the Director’s mind.

To the priest, he said noncommittally, “I’d rather not say who our patron is. I hope you can understand.”

The priest hummed in bemused agreement. “I’m not surprised; no one else has told me, either. But I think I can hazard a guess, especially now that all of you are here. After all, to command the allegiance of mages such as yourselves is no small feat...”

The priest gave Leon and Maia significant looks, and both of their guards were instantly raised. The priest gave off no magical aura, and yet he could tell they were high-level magical beings... That worried Leon.

With a conciliatory tone, the priest responded, “Please, I was only making an observation, I’m not intending anything hostile. But I would very much like to know who sent you here just in case they send anyone else. So, it’s not the Emperor Adam—he could easily have his agents swarming these parts for what he seeks. It’s not any of the other Great Powers, for sending in their people would only antagonize our Emperor. That leaves only the Director of Heaven’s Eye. He’s looking for a tau pearl, isn’t he?”

Leon gave the priest a long, wary look as he sat up in his chair, his magic power rushing through his body, ready for battle. Fortunately, it seemed the priest was serious in his statement that he meant no harm. Leon still didn’t respond to the question.

“Oh, that’s all right,” the priest said. “It’s only me thinking out loud. Anyway, I’m sure by now you know that you’ll find no tau here, right? I hope you find the rest of your time here to be enjoyable, and your journey home to be completely uneventful.”

With that, the priest rose from his seat and walked right out of the bar with so little ceremony that Leon couldn’t help but stare, unsure if what had just happened actually took place.

“That guy was strange,” Valeria said after a long, quiet pause, during which the other bar patrons began to speak again.

“Yeah,” Leon agreed as he cast a wary look around the bar. “He knows something...”

“He has to,” Elise agreed, speaking in a hushed tone. “Did you see how everyone else reacted when he walked in?”

“It’s like they didn’t even want to look at him,” Valeria replied.

Leon took a deep breath and made eye contact with his three lovers. Maia was being her usual silent self, but he could sense through their connection that she largely agreed with Elise and Valeria.

“I know we agreed to sail out tomorrow morning, but I think it might be best if we stayed just one more day. I’d like to talk to that man again after we’ve all had some time to rest, and maybe poke around the village a little more. Just in case.”

None of them were happy about it, but they all nodded their agreement.

Leon's party didn't stay much longer, and soon enough, everyone was hunkered down in their ship for the night. There wasn't much privacy to be had, but they made do by hanging large curtains to give the single-room interior of the quarterdeck the semblance of having some private space. It was at least better than whatever inn they might've found in this village—assuming there even was one.

The small ship windows were open, though, allowing in plenty of fresh air. They weren't nearly big enough for anyone to crawl through, and with so many high-level mages inside, no one was too worried about security. Still, Leon had set up some simple alarm enchantments to ensure that if anything *did* crawl through their windows, they'd be woken in an instant.

And so it was that Leon curled up with Elise and Maia, with Valeria and Anzu not too far away, his mind racing as his thoughts ran in circles trying to puzzle out just what in the hells the Director was doing, and why he seemed to need something that didn't exist. Eventually, though, he slipped into the land of dreams.

—

[Do it,] Nestor urged. [It's right there, at your disposal. You can't miss this opportunity, it's too valuable...]

Leon stared at the tau before him, the question of just how he'd gotten there far from his mind. His hand was extended his onyx bracelet upon his wrist. It wouldn't take much to use the bracelet on the tau, binding it forever to his service, just as Jormun had done to his krakens.

But at the thought of Jormun, Leon paused. He stared at the tau. It shivered in fright, unable to move from the net cast about it. It stared right back at him, its eyes bright with intelligence and awareness.

It wasn't just an animal, it knew what was going on. It was sapient.

"No..." Leon said out loud. He lowered his wrist. "I'll not bind it."

[You'll lose your pearl if you don't!] Nestor shouted. [You'll lose so much more! Bind it now!]

The tau blinked at Leon, now relaxing slightly as Leon lowered his arm. Its chirping had turned curious rather than panicked, though still with a touch of energetic anxiety.

Leon sighed and replied, "I'd rather lose it than force it like this. I'm not Jormun. I'm not you."

The tau relaxed completely, and stared at Leon as if pleased.

But then everything changed around him. Leon's mind went dark, and he found himself elsewhere entirely, and the question of what just happened far from his mind.

He sat upon a grand throne, all the universe at his feet.

Upon his brow was a majestic crown, made of gold and set with so many jewels that, when it caught the light, it glittered like the night sky.

His power was unmatched, his armies invincible, his wealth incalculable.

Everything that he'd ever wanted, he'd accomplished. His family was vast, with the children he'd had with Maia, Valeria, and Elise going on to have many children of their own. The Thunderbird Clan had been rebuilt.

Moreover, his mother was there, her face indistinct and her words unintelligible as she spoke with some of his courtiers.

To his right sat his most trusted advisor, his face obscured by light. All of his retinue sat by in places of honor, where they could advise him, as they'd been doing for centuries.

All the most important people in the universe were in his throne room and in his grand galleries, each of them gathered here to witness his final triumph, for brought before him in chains was Kamran, his body dark and malevolent, like a living shadow, his presence powerful even with his lack of physicality.

"I... regret... nothing..." Kamran croaked, his voice echoing throughout the throne room.

"Perhaps some kind of mercy would be best?" Gaius called out from his seat. "He fought and lost, and his powers are no more. What more punishment does he deserve?"

"He deserves the worst tortures imaginable," Leon's trusted advisor snarled, his voice booming like thunder, indistinct as anything human, but understandable all the same. "String him up and teach him the error of his ways. For daring to lay his hand on divinity, no punishment is too severe!"

Leon took in what the two advised, and imperiously glared down at Kamran. But he took neither to heart, and with nothing more than a tap of his finger on the armrest of his throne, Kamran's dark, shadowy figure dropped to the ground. There was no ceremony, no reading of last rites, no speeches. Kamran simply fell dead, his threat ended, able to bring no more death or chaos to his realm, and Leon could sit back in his throne, content in the knowledge that his revenge was complete, and that he could now reign in peace. His mother had been found, and his father and the rest of his Clan had been avenged. There was no reason to indulge in violence any further, no reason to extend this longer than it had to be. He just wanted it over in the most expedient way, without ceremony or celebration. He had no desire to inflict needless cruelties upon his enemies, not when they'd already been defeated. He just wanted them gone, so that he could be left in peace.

With his decision made, the court around him dissolved into darkness, and Leon found himself in the room his advisory council met, discussing matters of grave importance to his Empire.

"... and they rose up in rebellion!" one of his generals shouted.

"We should crush them entirely!" Marcus replied, his aura magnificent, his uniform resplendent.

"My Legion is ready to set out immediately!" Alcander roared, his suit of armor almost glowing in the light. "We'll bring them all to justice! Such sedition and rebellion must never be tolerated!"

Leon smiled at the outburst, knowing that his Champion was always ready to crush his enemies. But he held up his hand and quieted them.

"They have legitimate grievance," he said. "Let's see if we work this out, first. There's no need to slaughter them if they can't be talked down."

His most trusted advisor then spoke, his face still hidden by some light whose source Leon couldn't see, though Leon didn't think it strange. His voice still echoed in Leon's ears like thunder, but Leon didn't bat an eye.

"If one rises in rebellion, surely more will. Make an example of this one, and others will think twice."

"A bad precedent," Leon replied. "Put down one rebellion with fire, and all must be put down by fire. I am not my Ancestors, we will do our best to reintegrate these aggrieved peoples with our Empire. Besides, war is expensive, and if a single diplomat can accomplish the same thing an army can, then why shouldn't we try? Even if it fails, what have we lost?"

Leon's advisors continued to advocate he wipe the rebels from existence, but Leon had made up his mind. He wasn't going to immediately jump to slaughter and genocide when a few small cities rise in revolt. Such would always be on the table, but those were not the tools of first resort he wished to use. After his war with Kamran, he knew that he now knew the value of conserving his strength for real challenges.

Again, the scene shifted, and Leon found himself in the private apartments of his palace. Before him two of his sons were training under his supervision, and not too far away, his most trusted advisor stood in attendance, watching.

"... we are not the animals they say we are," Leon said

## **Chapter 677: Gambling With Pearls**

After the momentary shock of the tau's visit to the ship wore off, Leon sprang out of bed, pulling the pearls in his hand into his soul realm. He then set about waking everyone up as quickly as he could and getting the ship secured.

He didn't seriously think that the tau was a threat, given its power and the fact that it seemed to have done them no harm despite apparently having the opportunity to do so, but he needed to make sure. He'd let their security be quite lax on their sojourn along the coast, trusting in the security of the Ilian Empire, and this whole event freaked him out more than a little bit.

Once he was sure that his family and retinue were safe, however, he slowed down and let himself process what had just happened. The dreams he'd had with the priest from the village were only half-remembered, but what he did recall was vivid. Himself, practically a god, reigning at the top of the universe. Everyone and everything was at his beck and call, and he'd rebuilt the Thunderbird Clan.

That much he didn't pay much mind to, for the moment. Instead, he remembered his faceless mother, and the children he'd had with Elise, Maia, and Valeria. He couldn't remember their faces, either—assuming his dream had even conjured them in the first place. But he couldn't help but feel some type of loss, as if the tau had given him a taste of something incredible, only to snatch it away.

He and the rest of his party sat in the single-room quarterdeck, quiet and rather restless as Leon and his lovers alternatively stared at each other, or at nothing in particular. Given the tau's parting words, Leon could assume that he wasn't alone in having their dreams messed with, but for the time being, none of them wanted to say much until they had some true privacy. And that would likely have to wait until they reached Occulara.

So, pulling himself back to the present, Leon took out both pearls that the tau had given him.

"So, we have these, now..." he said nonchalantly. "A tau visited us in the night and gave them to me."

"Wait, what?" Gaius asked, speaking for everyone else. "We've been looking for one of these things for the past month, and one just... showed up and gave you what we were seeking?"

"That about sums it up, yes," Leon replied seriously. "I think it was a lot more sapient than we gave it credit for. A lot more powerful, too. I think that priest we spoke with a few hours ago *was* the tau, only in human form; it's an Ascended Beast."

"Oh..." Gaius replied, looking just a little bit overwhelmed. For that, Leon couldn't blame him. He had certainly been making his peace with the idea that this quest had been impossible and that they would return to Occulara in defeat, and he knew that the rest of his retinue had been feeling that way for a while, now, even if they weren't actively saying so.

"Then... that means that we'll be able to join Heaven's Eye?" Anna asked, her tone a mix of hopeful and apprehensive.

Leon frowned, knowing the choice that the tau had presented him with. "... It would seem so..."

A moment of silence passed, broken only when Alix let out a deep breath and declared, "Well, at least this trip wasn't a failure!"

It was hardly a joke, but most everyone else burst out laughing, letting out their pent-up frustrations as Leon sat holding both tau pearls for them all to see.

When they quieted down, Helen asked Leon, "What are you going to do with the other pearl? I mean, I'm assuming you're only going to give one of them to the Director..."

Leon could see the way her eyes seemed drawn to the glowing pearl, and he almost instinctively pulled it back into his soul realm. Both pearls that the tau had given him were tremendously powerful, but the one that glowed like a star was by far the more special. He guessed that the myths about the things having many mystical properties were true, if the things he could sense from the star-pearl weren't some kind of trick.

"The tau... recommended that I give this one to the Director," Leon said as he indicated the duller pearl. "I have to admit, the idea is tempting. But..."

"You're afraid it's some kind of trick?" Elise asked as she set a hand on his arm.

Leon nodded. "After all of this, I think that my initial impression of the Director is correct. He didn't send us out here on a hopeless quest. The real question, though, is *what* the quest actually *was*. Now, assuming that my senses weren't lying to me and that tau was real, and it was *really* an Ascended Beast, then that would probably mean that the Director knows about their existence and wanted one of their legendary pearls. The tau seemed to think that the Director wouldn't know the difference between these two pearls, though..."

Marcus asked, "But how would the tau know that? Unless it's familiar with the Director personally?"

Leon grimaced. "That's my fear. Whether or not the tau was real doesn't really matter, I suppose. The problem is that it gave me two pearls and told me to only give the weaker one to the Director. There seems to be a straightforward answer here: follow its recommendation and give the Director the lesser pearl. But let's say this is all some kind of elaborate test, and the 'tau' was fake and conjured by someone on the Director's payroll. Maybe what the Director actually wants to see is whether or not I give him the 'real' pearl."

"You think that if you show up with the lesser pearl, he'll know you aren't loyal, or something?" Alcander asked. "And that he'd consider this a failure and use it as an excuse to not bring you into Heaven's Eye?"

"Exactly," Leon answered.

Silence once more settled over the group, until Valeria whispered, "Would that be a bad thing, though? Not joining Heaven's Eye?"

Everyone looked to her, most with surprised expressions. However, Leon was a little more contemplative, and he seriously answered, "I suppose not. We have a plan for our own growth and for setting up means of financial support. We're not exactly going to starve, no matter what happens. But the loss of support from Heaven's Eye would seriously slow down my plans. I want that support, but it wouldn't be the end of the world if we don't get it."

"Then why not take the risk?" she asked. "Give the Director the lesser pearl. Neither's exactly fake, are they?"

"I don't think so," Leon said as he curled his fingers around the star-pearl, letting its magic slip past his skin and into his body. It was warm, calming, and powerful. He could do great things with it, if he wanted. He intended to spend the journey back to Occulara thoroughly examining it for any sign that it was fake, but for the moment, all of his senses were telling him that it was real.

"Then why not just give the Director the lesser pearl? If we can live without Heaven's Eye, then why not try for both the pearl and the guild?"

"Is the pearl worth the guild, though?" Marcus wondered. "If we lose the guild for that pearl, is that a good tradeoff?" The man stared at Leon almost accusingly, and Leon could read the unspoken question in his eyes. With Heaven's Eye, Leon would much more easily guarantee the futures of his retainers. In fact, they'd signed on with him partly because of his intention to join Heaven's Eye, with some of the guild's resources flowing through him to them. If he were to choose the pearl over those resources, then he could see how, in effect, it might mean he was choosing himself and the gains he could make with the pearl over the rest of his retinue.

"No matter what happens, Marcus, I'm going to stay true to my responsibilities," Leon seriously stated. "Having greater freedom might mean we'll be a little lean for the next few years, but it would also give us greater freedom to move around. Don't forget that there are other means of resource acquisition out here, too."

Marcus' accusatory look softened, and he leaned back in his seat. Leon had told his retinue about his Thunderbird lineage and what they might find down in the Empires, so it wasn't like they were banking entirely on Heaven's Eye.

"I feel comfortable leaving the decision up to you," Anshu intoned. From the way that Elise and Maia took Leon's arms, he could tell that they agreed.

"So do I," Valeria replied.

"I would prefer that you keep that bright pearl," Helen said, "but the decision is yours to make."

"Getting into Heaven's Eye is more important for me," Anna said. "I would hope that you do what you can to ensure that we're brought into their fold. But you're leading us, and I'll stay true to my contract and follow you whatever decision you make."

The green-haired woman's eyes narrowed, and Leon could feel a hint of killing intent in her aura. She had some kind of business with Heaven's Eye, that much he could feel, but for the moment, it was just another thing he'd have to bring up later.

"I agree with Anna," Marcus replied. "Your decision, just... keep us in mind."

Alcander didn't say anything more, but he nodded in agreement.

"I'm with you, no matter what!" Alix declared, and Leon smiled in appreciation. "Besides, fuck the Director, this whole quest he gave us was horseshit from the beginning!"

"I feel the same," Gaius whispered. "Give the Director the lesser pearl. It's what he wants, anyway, and we don't need to go above and beyond for someone who treats us like this."

Leon sighed, and pulled the pearls into his soul realm. It seemed that it was truly his decision to make, but it appeared that if it were a vote, his people would definitely fall more on one side than the other.

*'Being a leader means making the hard decisions,' Leon thought. 'Time to do so.'*

Leon took a deep breath, mulled the problem over in his head just a little bit longer, and then settled on a course of action. And then, with a grave tone, he announced it to his party.

—

Leon stood in the Director's office, once more staring at the man wreathed in shadow sitting behind the desk. With an almost exaggerated flourish to match the huge grin on his face, he pulled the duller pearl out of his soul realm.

The Director didn't immediately react, but Leon could feel his attention on the pearl in his hand.

After a long moment, the pearl rose out of his hand seemingly on its own accord and flew toward the Director. Leon was startled for a moment, but he made no moves to stop it. The Director held out his hand and caught the pearl and examined it much closer.

"Disappointing," he said, and Leon's heart dropped for a second. For just that brief moment, he thought that all of this had just been a test and that the Director was waiting to see if he'd return the star-pearl or not, but fortunately, the Director then murmured, "This one lacks the purest powers of the tau..."

Leon controlled his expression, letting his grin slowly drop in favor of something sterner and more severe. "I got you the pearl you asked for," he said, not flinching at all when the Director's attention fell back around him. "Are we going to talk business now, or are you going to jerk me around some more?"

The Director chuckled, and the pearl vanished in a flash of light. "Very well," he said. "You did exactly what I asked of you and procured a tau pearl for me. It's not entirely what I'd hoped for, but it's what I asked. So, let's talk."

Leon let a sliver of relief pass through his mind, and then got his head back into the game. Mostly, he was relieved that the Director didn't seem at all interested in the details of his quest, oddly enough. He'd thought that if the Director was so interested in the tau, or at least their pearls, then he would've grilled Leon on about his quest, but it seemed the result was all he cared about.

"What do you want, Leon Raime? What do you expect out of this arrangement?"

Leon didn't even need a moment to think. "I have some goals, so this arrangement won't be in perpetuity. I'll also need a fair amount of autonomy."

"Both come with costs," the Director pointed out. "Those who are less committed are compensated significantly less."

"I'm aware of that," Leon replied. "But I don't want you to doubt my commitment. I'm committed, at least for a few decades."

"I don't deal in such vague language; give me a number."

"Fifty years," Leon immediately responded.

"A fair amount of time. What are you hoping to accomplish in those fifty years?"

"A few personal things of mine," Leon explained. "I'm an enchanter, and I would like to expand my skills. I also want to learn the art of blacksmithing. If tutors could be provided for both, I would certainly be grateful."

The Director nodded slightly. "A thing easily accomplished. But I have to wonder just how much free time you think you'll have under my watch."

"How many problems need an eighth-tier mage to solve them?"

"I think the answer might surprise you, young man," the Director replied.

Leon shrugged. "Let's say that you hire me as one of your Hands. Or Eyes. Or whatever. What would you expect of me?"

"I would expect you to carry out my instructions to the best of your abilities," the Director replied. "You would answer to none but me. Not to any of the Emperors, not to any of their representatives. To me."

Leon smiled and nodded. "How about more specifics?"

The Director's face, still obscured by shadow, bent in an almost imperceptible way that made him look like he was smiling. "I would want you to move certain hazardous or otherwise sensitive material from one place to another. I would need you to represent me in places I cannot be. I would need you to protect Heaven's Eye's interests from those who would besmirch our reputation, even if those would come from within..."



"I can certainly do all of that," Leon said. He stood there, in front of the Director's desk, waiting for the man to speak again, and he had to wait a fair amount of time.

Several seconds after it had grown awkward, the Director finally said, "We can discuss the specifics later, but for now, I will tentatively take you on, in a provisional capacity. For the time being, see to your accommodations. I'll summon you back here in a weeks' time."

Understanding that to be a dismissal, Leon nodded and started making his way back to the office door. Just as he came within a few steps of it, though the Director called out from behind, "By the way, Leon Raime, do you remember a man named Talal?"

Leon turned back around and replied, "I do." He didn't elaborate, nor did it seem the Director even needed it.

"I understand that he was quite rude to you."

Leon shrugged. "Nothing I can't handle. Not like I haven't had people be rude to me before."

The Director said, "He did not uphold the standards I expect of those in his position. He has been demoted and reassigned." The Director then leaned forward, his face falling out of the darkness that wreathed it, revealing his handsome, if aged features. His face was still quite full despite his age, though there were lines around his mouth and in the corners of his eyes. His hair was entirely gray, cut aesthetically short. His eyes glimmered a bright yellow, looking almost as golden Leon's own. With a smile, the Director continued, "I've made him your personal assistant."

As if on cue, the Director's door opened of its own accord, and Leon saw standing several paces outside of it, Talal, though the Samarid looked remarkably different compared to the last time Leon had seen him. Instead of the doughy, oily man with the arrogant attitude, Talal seemed almost like a beaten dog. His dark skin was ashy, like he was severely dehydrated; his eyes were downcast; and all of the excess weight he'd carried back in Akhmim had been shed. He was still recognizable, but he was clearly a completely different man: meeker, more subservient, almost terrified.

"Leave most of the logistical problems to him; he'll ensure you stay in contact with my office, and he can help you find a home for your family and friends," the Director said. "He can help with much more, too. He'll be compensated by Heaven's Eye, so don't worry about that, either. Feel free to run him ragged, he could use the exercise."

The Director said no more, and with only one backward glance that confirmed the man had leaned back in his chair and let his face be obscured again, Leon took those last few steps and left the Director's office.

As the door closed behind him, Leon paused for just a moment to collect himself. Internally, he celebrated, the tau's star-pearl sitting comfortably in his soul realm, and his position in Heaven's Eye apparently secured. He'd need to wait a week to find out more, but for the moment, it seemed that his gamble had paid off.

But he didn't let his celebration reach his features, which he kept as stoic as he could. After Leon finished collecting himself, he turned his gaze to Talal. "Let's go, then," he ordered the Samarid, and without a word, Talal escorted him out of the Hexagon.

## Chapter 678: Settling Into Occulara

The ride down the magic lift out of the Hexagon was rather awkward. Neither Leon nor Talal had said a word to each other since Leon left the Director's office, and though the Samarid was now to be his personal assistant, he'd yet to so much as speak a single word to Leon.

To an extent, Leon thought he could understand—whatever the Director had done to the man must've been harsh, for Talal could barely bring himself to turn in Leon's direction, let alone look at him. Leon wasn't entirely sure how to break that ice, but as they left the Hexagon and started walking over to the adjacent tower where Leon, his family, and his retinue were staying, Leon figured out just what he needed to say to at least get them talking.

"So, you're to be my personal assistant, huh? What exactly does that mean?"

Talal appeared to flinch slightly when Leon began speaking, but he answered readily enough. "It means a lot, but the biggest and most important duties I'll be attending to are keeping track of your correspondence and managing your schedule. If you need anything taken care of, but it's not important enough for you to do yourself, I can arrange for it."

"What sort of things would fall into that category?"

"The delivery of common goods and the like. For the most part, I'll be your primary point of contact with Heaven's Eye, and if people want to get in contact with you, they'll typically go through me. That might change if you bring more people into your household, as they might require assistants of their own, and if you need me to, I can even arrange to have those assistants hired."

"Does that include anyone besides assistants?" Leon asked. "Say, if I need like a gardener or something, you can help with the hiring process?"

"Yes," Talal answered. "As your personal assistant, I'm to assist you in your personal dealings."

Leon nodded in understanding as they entered the tower and immediately made for the magic lifts in the back of the busy atrium. He could think of quite a few things that he'd need Talal's help for, and he was sure that Elise would be more than grateful for the help—not that she didn't already have some assistants, but an extra pair of hands to keep track of their affairs wouldn't be wasted, he was sure, especially a sixth-tier mage like Talal who had an official position within Heaven's Eye.

"Get ready, then," Leon said. "I think my family is going to be quite busy in the next week getting our affairs in order. We'll need all the help we can get."

Talal didn't blink, but neither did his generally tentative and fairly terrified demeanor change much. As the doors of the magic lift closed behind them, he merely murmured, "Understood."

—

After some short initial period of getting used to his new role, Talal did eventually settle into Leon's retinue fairly well. Elise was certainly grateful for his assistance, and within just a few days of their return to Occulara, he'd already taken their stated needs for a home and compiled a short list of properties for sale that roughly matched.

Leon was a little surprised at how quickly he worked, but he supposed that for a man that ran Heaven's Eye operations in a significant trade city like Akhmim, dealing with the personal business of Leon and his family was child's play. Still, he didn't get complacent, and made sure to keep an eye on Talal as much as he could. Elise was more attentive to such issues, though, and after she had a conversation with Talal, she concluded that he'd make for a fine assistant.

And so, Leon, his family, and his retinue spent a few more days going around to the various properties that Talal had picked out, sizing them up for their needs. Leon didn't think that his retinue was going to live with him all the time, but he at least wanted a place with enough guest rooms that they'd have a place to stay while they got their own accommodations in order.

Fortunately, while the cost of property in the Ilian Empire was much higher than it was in the Bull Kingdom, the places that Talal found were still well within Leon and Elise's price range.

The first place they visited was the smallest location. It was located about twenty miles south of the Scamander River, in a more suburban zone than the rural areas that Leon had been expecting. This limited the size of the property, which Leon wasn't thrilled about. The farms that Elise was planning on setting up didn't exactly need to be directly adjacent to their home, of course, but Leon wanted more room to spread his wings, both metaphorically and literally speaking. He also wanted a little more room for the safe testing of his enchantments, and having a larger property was a must for that alone.

The next few places they toured were similarly limited. The homes themselves were beautiful and perfect in nearly every way, but the simple fact that Leon wanted a lot of land made things a little more difficult.

But then, just as his hope for finding a place nearly died out, Talal took them to the final property, and Leon found it so perfect he almost ended the property search right then and there.

It was a villa about fifty miles to the south of Occulara's administrative limits—close enough for an easy commute, but far enough that the choking city centers were little more than a golden line in the distance. The property was large, came with a long wall around it that was both decorative and functional, and had half a dozen ancillary buildings on the property. It had fifteen guest bedrooms in its east wing, three bigger bedrooms in the west wing, and a huge master bedroom in the south wing. Every bedroom had its own large bathroom. There was both an indoor and outdoor pool, three separate courtyards with large gardens, several big training and meditation rooms, and a luxurious stable. There was room for Leon's enchanting workshop in one of the separate buildings, Helen's alchemy workshop in another, and plenty of storage space for the herbs Elise and Helen were planning on growing. All of this came with an adjacent lot of two hundred acres of arable land, a good size for the farms that Elise and Helen wanted.

In short, it was perfect, everything that Leon and Elise had asked for. Valeria and Maia similarly fell in love with the place as they were given a tour, and before the day was done, Leon and Elise bought the place. Just four days after returning to Occulara with the tau pearls, they were owners of a beautiful villa and more than two hundred acres of walled-off land.

It cost them about seventy million silvers, but as far as they were concerned, it was money well spent.

—

When Leon next met the Director, he was informed that his claim that there wasn't much for an eighth-tier mage was only partially correct. Jobs that he would be expected to do as an eighth-tier mage wouldn't come around that often, but when they did, he could expect to be away from Occulara for months at a time—similar to the Director's request for a tau pearl, which had cost Leon almost two months of time.

Fortunately, the Director didn't have anything he needed Leon to do right this moment, so after going over a lot of paperwork with Talal, Leon was eventually formally inducted as one of the Director's Hands. He wasn't required to make any grandiose oaths of allegiance, but he did have to sign a rather lengthy contract, with most of it devoted to enumerating the various political entities he was *not* allowed to do work for, along with the various political actions he was *not* allowed to perform. Fortunately, there wasn't any unusual or underhanded things hidden in the contract as far as he could tell, and he was specifically promised monetary compensation of ten million silvers per year, along with enchanting and blacksmithing instructors and other compensations to be determined by the Director as appropriate.

Nestor wasn't too happy about the enchanting instructor, but Leon reasoned that having another teacher could only benefit him, giving him a new perspective on the art. As far as he was concerned, Nestor was still his primary enchanting teacher, but there were things that even he couldn't or wouldn't teach him.

He received significantly less vitriol from his soul realm hitchhikers for his blacksmithing instructor, thankfully. As he already had a solid foundation for enchanting, he decided after leaving the Director's office to visit her, first.

So, when Leon and Talal left the Hexagon, they made their way through the huge number of Heaven's Eye buildings until they arrived at a golden tower about thirty stories tall. They made their way up to the fourteenth floor, which housed the smithery that Leon knew he was going to get very familiar with over the next few years.

His smithing instructor was already there in the large central workspace, along with several other apprentices. She saw him come in, and immediately hopped over, an enormous grin on her face.

"Hey there! How's it going?" she gushed with great enthusiasm.

Leon smiled and took a second to give her a quick once-over.

She was a fairly tall woman, without a shred of fat to be seen anywhere on her incredibly well-muscled body—which was practically put on display by her extremely revealing clothing, which had been cut in a way that made Leon think it was a more functional choice than anything.

She was sixth-tier, and while she looked young, Leon knew that she could be as old as he was, or half a dozen times his age just based on how she looked. Her eyes were, fittingly, an almost burning red, and her hair was a glossy black that had been tied back into a tight ponytail long enough for her to tuck into her belt—which she'd actually done.

"You Leon Raime?" she asked as she stopped in front of Leon, getting almost uncomfortably close as she leaned forward, her face contorted with curiosity.

"I am," Leon replied. "And you're—"

Before Leon could finish, she cut him off and introduced herself, "—I'm Xenia Sideras! But you can just call me Sid!"

"I'll be sure to remember that," Leon replied. "You can also just call me Leon."

"All right, Leon!" she warmly said. "You know what you're here for?"

"To learn blacksmithing?" Leon replied.

Sid put one hand on her hip, leaned back slightly, and then pointed with her other hand at Leon's nose. "To learn the *art* of blacksmithing!" she corrected. "And you're going to be learning at my side! I hope you're not going to think me too arrogant, but I am one of the best smiths that Heaven's Eye has!"

"That's good to hear," Leon honestly said. "I'd hate to think that I was getting cheated by being sent to someone subpar."

"Not here!" Sid declared. "Not a single person who learns under me can be considered 'subpar'! At least, not after I hammer them into shape!" She then flexed her impressive physique and mimed bending something in the air. "By the way! These'll be your fellow apprentices! This is Loukas, Atticus, and Elias!" She indicated the other three men in the room, all of them brawny and handsome. Loukas was blond and tall, Atticus was short and stocky, and Elias was lithe and well-toned. All three were bare-chested and wore only shorts that stopped before the knees, and all were covered in oil, ash, sweat, and other grit and grime from the forge. All three nodded to Leon as their names were listed off.

"Good to meet you," Leon said good-naturedly. "Seems like we'll be working together a lot in the coming days."

"Hopefully it'll be longer than that, but it's not guaranteed," Sid responded as her face turned serious. "I can be a pretty harsh teacher, and many of my disciples have quit within a matter of weeks after coming to me begging for me to impart my skills unto them."

"Well, I don't think I'll be doing that," Leon smilingly replied. "I'm here for the long haul, and so long as I'm learning, I'll take the rest in stride."

"Good," Sid said. "Now, I say that it's almost time to get started—no time like the present, right? But first, why don't you tell me what you hope to get out of my lessons?"

"Everything," Leon unhesitatingly responded. "I want to gain the skills that if I ever need *anything* forged, I can do it myself if need be. Tools, armor, weapons, bits and pieces so specialized that they don't even have names, you name it, I want to be able to make it with my own hands. Much of my desire to learn blacksmithing stems from my skills as an enchanter: I want to be able to control every step in the manufacturing process of the tools at my disposal. I don't want to try and enchant armor only to find that it was shoddily made. To guarantee the quality of whatever I make, I want to make it myself from raw materials to finished items."

Sid nodded in understanding, but a slight frown quickly passed over her face. "You're not the first enchanter to come to me looking for instruction. However, I tend to find them the flakiest among hopeful disciples. They tend to favor enchanting work over blacksmithing, preferring to pour over paper

and ink rather than spend their time doing tedious hammering and metal shaping, or learning to use earth magic to do so without needing hammers. Often, they find that they can't fit time for both art forms in their schedules, and when it comes to choosing between the two, smithing tends to lose out."

"I'm not going to flake," Leon promised.

Sid stared at him for a long moment, and then her frown vanished, replaced with what seemed to be her more natural bright smile. "Fantastic!" she gushed. She then turned to her other three disciples, ordered them to get back to work, and then practically dragged Leon further into her workshop. She was serious about getting started right away, but the first thing she decided to teach Leon was exactly what tools he was going to be using under her, and how to operate each one safely. She made sure to emphasize that he wouldn't so much as touch any of them until he could complete a written test repeating her safety instructions back to her, and if she ever caught him slacking off in his safety measures, she'd toss him out on his ass.

Leon, reading nothing but the utmost seriousness in that threat, vowed to never piss her off too much. She seemed quite happy and upbeat, but she clearly took her work immensely seriously.

During all of this Talal was left sitting in one of the seats by the magic lifts. Fortunately, the little tour that Sid gave Leon was quick, and he found himself back with his new personal assistant in just over an hour. Once there, they fixed their schedules to give Leon three smithing classes per week, and then departed.

Leon practically skipped into the lift, satisfied that he was going to be learning something brand new. He could barely wait to get started, but there was quite a bit of worry still in his mind. He could sympathize greatly with Sid's former disciples who'd chosen enchanting over smithing, for he knew what it was like to have a packed schedule. He needed to learn enchanting and smithing, he needed to look into the possible presence of the arsenal, and he needed to make sure that his war beasts were properly taken care of—he was told by Emilie's beastmasters that his Attican Snapper egg was going to hatch soon, and that wasn't something he could just foist off onto others, at least until the thing was a little older. On top of all of that was his continued lessons with the Thunderbird and Xaphan, the recovery of his soul realm, and seeing to the training of his retainers, not to mention his desire to not neglect his family.

He was elated that he was finally going to start learning the art of blacksmithing, but it was with a sinking heart that he realized sleep was going to be a rare luxury for a while, something to be indulged in only occasionally rather than a thing he got every day. As an eighth-tier mage, he could afford to not sleep, but that fact alone didn't make him happy.

Still, it was a sacrifice he was willing to make, for he needed to sharpen his skills, and there was no better time for it than while he couldn't grow his soul realm without fear of exacerbating his injury.

So, he and Talal returned to his new home. It was a fairly lengthy journey, with his home lying fifty miles outside of the city, but one made much easier now that Leon was an official member of Heaven's Eye and had the privilege of requisitioning Heaven's Eye transportation. He still felt that he could fly faster, but that wasn't an option, unfortunately.

By the time he returned home, he found Elise and Maia out in one of the gardens surrounding the back courtyards. It didn't take him more than a second to find them given the fact that even though it was heavily enchanted, his new home wasn't quite up to his standards of defense.

*'Just another thing to add to the list,'* Leon thought, making a mental note to see to expanding his home's defenses. He didn't want anyone to be able to spy on his family while they were on the estate, not just limiting that privacy to when they were inside the villa itself.

When Leon joined Elise and Maia, they greeted him warmly.

After a few hugs, Leon dismissed Talal to see to whatever else needed seeing to—the estate was large enough that it needed some people to help run it, not to mention Elise and Helen's plans to set up a farm needed staff, as well, most of which Talal was taking care of until Elise could hire more of her own people.

"This is a beautiful place," Elise said as Leon took a seat with his wife and river nymph lover. Maia didn't say much but she pressed herself into Leon's side, and he knew that she felt the same.

"A good place to spend quite a bit of time," Leon responded.

"Not just a bit of time," Elise replied with a bright smile. "This'll be home for years. Decades, probably. I think I'll enjoy living here."

"Plenty of city to explore," Leon whispered into her ear as he pulled her closer. "Lots of people to shower you with the attention you deserve..."

"I only *need* the attention of our family," Elise chided him, but Leon knew that she'd never be all that happy if they lived in what he found most comfortable. She was a city girl through and through and needed the comforts of civilization. He didn't judge her for it, but he was aware of it.

"What say we go further break in the bedroom?" he suggested. They'd done quite a job of that already, even just for the few days since they'd moved in, but even though Elise grabbed his thigh and turned toward him with an aroused fire burning in her emerald eyes, she shook her head.

"Valeria came to us earlier," she said as she made quick eye contact with Maia, who slightly backed off from where she'd been ready to pounce on Leon.

[She wants you for the night,] Maia added as she straightened out her loose-fitting shirt after being mere seconds away from tearing it right off and dragging Leon inside. [She thought it was about time you two finally got together, truly, and Elise and I agreed.]

Leon turned to stare at her in slight disbelief. He and Valeria had already gone pretty far, pleasing each other with hand and tongue on multiple occasions, exploring each other's bodies with abandon, but they'd yet to finally cross that final line. Leon had been content to wait for her to say she was ready, but if she was ready now, then he was more than willing to take that next step in their relationship.

"She said she'd wait for you in her room," Elise said with a knowing smile. "Go on, my lion. Go get her."

Leon only took enough time to wordlessly look at Elise and Maia one last time, silently asking them if this was truly all right. He didn't think this was all a trick given their usual attitudes, but he felt it was

almost too good to be true and needed that last confirmation. When they each nodded to him, he sprang to his feet and did his best not to sprint through the halls of the villa to Valeria's room.

Once he arrived outside her door, freshly painted in a deep blue, he paused for just a moment to collect himself. He wanted her to be comfortable, and he thought that if he seemed too overeager, it might make her reconsider. So, he took a deep breath, his hand outstretched and just about to knock. And then he took another, to quiet his own anxieties that were now starting to bubble up—this was a big step, and one that he didn't want to rush into. Once he finally both worked himself up and worked himself down, he extended his hand again, only for the door to open from the inside before he could even knock.

Valeria stood in the doorframe, a welcoming, if anxious, smile on her gorgeous face. "Come on in, Leon," she whispered, and she stood aside.

Leon stared at her, a smile spreading across his lips, and he took her invitation.

—

Leon and Valeria had seen each other naked plenty of times by now, but Leon didn't think he'd ever get used to it. He still marveled at Elise and Maia bodies even now, and Valeria was no different.

He sat on the edge of her bed, not a shred of clothing on him as he watched Valeria slide her thigh-high leggings down her legs, the two articles of clothing being the last to adorn her body. He was tempted to leap to his feet, grab her, and toss her down on the bed before the leggings were off, but he restrained himself. There was still a bit of hesitancy in her movements, a nervousness that slowed her movements and caused her to look away after staring at him for too long.

But then, her leggings were in a crumpled pile at her feet, and she slowly stepped out of them to stand before Leon, as naked as he was.

Leon devoured her with his eyes, trying to let her know just how beautiful he thought she was without stating it outright. But 'beautiful' wasn't quite strong enough to describe what he saw.

Valeria was beautiful in a way that defied his description. Her piercing sapphire eyes; her platinum blond hair that fell about her shoulders in long waves; her muscled arms, built by swinging around huge glaives; her full breasts, easily a match for Elise's and Maia's; her taut, toned stomach; her wide hips, flaring beautifully; her tight ass, built from constant physical exercise; her long, shapely legs.

From the way her eyes seemed to roam him, it appeared that she was checking him out just as he was her. He hoped she liked what she saw, and with every hesitant step forward she took, he was more and more convinced that she did.

By the time she reached him, her anxiety hadn't disappeared, but it was mostly buried beneath a loving smile. She met his gaze, her stunning blue eyes glittering with arousal in the soft light of her bedroom.

"This is it," she whispered.

"It is," Leon replied as he let his hands rise and take her by the waist. He pulled her down into his lap, but then paused. "I love you, Valeria," he said, returning her gaze with just as much ferocity as she stared at him.



"I love you, too, Leon," she responded.

And then their lips met, and parted, allowing their tongues to twist and tangle together. Their hands roamed each other without restraint, finding the erogenous zones that they'd discovered over the past few months, ramping each other up more and more with every squeeze and loving caress.

Leon tossed Valeria to the side, eliciting a quick gasp of surprise. But then he was right there, bringing his lips down to her breasts and his hand between her legs, lavishing her with attention that had her gasping for more. Soon enough, he made to move his face lower, only to be stopped when Valeria grabbed his head.

"No," she whispered, causing his heart to stop for just a moment. But she continued, pulling him back up to her face. "I'm ready enough," she said. "Take me."

Leon needed no further encouragement. He positioned himself at the entrance of her soaked womanhood, and slowly pushed forward, his forehead pressed against hers, each staring at each other unblinkingly as they came together as one.

It took him a moment of slow thrusting, but when he bottomed out within her, he paused again, and whispered a second time, "I love you."

"I love you, too," she whispered back again, and together the two started to move faster and faster. They moved with greater and greater vigor as Valeria became more and more used to the sensations, until they were going at each other like starving animals who'd chanced upon a discarded feast.

Again and again they brought each other to the height of pleasure. Again and again they went back for more, until finally, after many hours, they finished and passed out in Valeria's bed, happy beyond belief that they'd finally made love.

Both were looking forward to many more nights like this one, and Leon fell asleep with a wide smile on his face. Valeria was wrapped in his arms, her head resting on his chest. Elise and Maia were only a few rooms away. The four of them were finally a family, with a home to call their own in the Ilian Empire, plans for their future, and a viable path forward.

He couldn't wait for their future together to begin.

## **Chapter 679: Concerns of the Mighty**

Anastasios sighed as he stared at himself in the mirror. He was dressed incredibly well, with resplendent robes dyed deep crimson and a sash across one shoulder and down to his waist colored in bright royal purple. His clothing was trimmed with gold and embroidered with vines and many-colored flowers. Around his head rested a diadem—not the sort that his grandson wore as he sat upon the throne of Ilion, but one that was paradoxically both simpler and far more majestic, for it was little more than a simple band of gold, but enchanted to almost resemble a circlet of solid light. It was etched with fine flowing, organic patterns, which gave just a little bit of texture to the light it emitted.

It was a fantastic ensemble, but he could hardly stand it. The situation called for such finery, however, and the simple sandals he wore beneath his robes rather than the gorgeous boots lined with fox fur that the Imperial stylists had laid out for him was the sole rebellion he could conscientiously take. He would've much preferred to be clad in just a tunic—he'd gotten his fill of finery when he was still the

Emperor, but now that he was old and largely retired from public life, he found that he had a taste for simpler things.

Still, when meeting with his counterparts to the north, east, and south, there were certain ceremonies that couldn't be ignored—at least, not by him. It was rare that he ever envied the stark and spartan Sentinels to the east, but in the moments before one of these gatherings began, he always found himself mildly jealous of the Keeper. The man had never seemed to be happy with the powers and responsibilities granted to him, but he at least never had to worry about silk or silkgrass, robes or togas, and which piece of jewelry out of a gigantic pile of gold to wear.

Anastasios straightened out his sash, took one last look at himself in the mirror, sighed one last time, and then walked out of his apartments where several dozen men and women awaited him. Without a word, they followed him through the palace of Ilion, passing out of his relatively private wing of the palace, through several other buildings, and finally arrived at their destination: a large building, and the first couple of floors weren't all that special to behold, being little more than a large stone box—it was as beautiful as the rest of the palace, but didn't stand out too much. Its top floor, however, was another story.

The building's top floor had the appearance of a temple, with a series of columns running along its outer edge and not a single wall in sight. The columns held up a magnificent pyramidal roof, decorated with gold and rubies, and with a golden idol of Sen, Messenger of the Gods, acting as the pyramid's cap.

There was only a single piece of furniture in this open room: a throne of polished, glowing silver that sat in the center of a large circle carved into the marble floor. Three more circles, without thrones, were spread out in a circle in front of the throne.

Anastasios made his way up to this room, his escorts stopping just below. He was the only person allowed up to this last floor, and he breathed a sigh of relief as he left his escorts behind. He quickly sat down in the throne, slouched a little bit, and collected his thoughts. This was to be quite possibly the most consequential meeting in a thousand years, and it was all because of a single boy who no one had thought would arrive for decades more. He wished he could keep Leon's arrival secret, but there was no way the others didn't already know of the boy's arrival a year ago, so there was no use in denying it. He hadn't exactly been quiet, either, being named one of the Hands of the Director of Heaven's Eye.

Anastasios could already feel a headache coming on, but he forced himself to ignore it.

A pulse of magic spread throughout the room, and the rest of the palace, easily visible between the room's columns, faded away, as if the room had been completely enveloped by a cloud, fluffy and white, but completely opaque. The enchantments within the room had activated, all-but separating this room from the rest of Aeterna. The conversation he was to have with his counterparts couldn't in any practical way be made any more secure or private.

Knowing that the meeting was about to begin, Anastasios sat up a little straighter and took on an imperious air. The other three circles began to glow, and resolving themselves in light, three more thrones appeared within, each one of similar size to his own, though not all of the same grandiosity.

To the north—on his left—appeared what looked like a wide, squat tree. It artfully twisted around into a beautiful seat, its leaves glowing with all the colors of the rainbow, casting its occupant in a myriad of

different lights. The gray-haired woman who sat upon this throne was adorned in a bright green silkgrass dress, cut low in front. It was long, stretching down to her ankles, but slit on both sides all the way to her hips. It lacked sleeves, with the woman's arms instead covered in golden arm bands studded with emeralds, while about her neck was affixed a torc of gold, a single huge emerald that glowed with magical light resting against her neck.

Anastasios smiled when the Grand Druid appeared. He'd always found her to be beautiful, and while her age was growing more and more visible with every year that passed, she was still quite radiant to his eyes. She gave him a respectful nod as she appeared, her deep red eyes sparkling like the finest of rubies. He returned a smile to her, but she remained otherwise cold and aloof—quite different to how he knew her to be in the flesh, but as was the case with him and his clothing, there were certain expectations of those in their positions in situations like these, and she had to play the part.

To the south—Anastasios' right—appeared the most unpredictable member of their august group: the Sunlit Emperor himself. He was young, only a few centuries old—a veritable magical savant to have reached this level when he did. Anastasios supposed that his mother, the previous monarch of the Sunlit Empire, spared no expenses in making sure her son was ready to take over before she died—something he supposed he ought to start thinking about, now that he was getting up there in years. It had only been a century or so since she'd died, leaving Anastasios as the eldest of their group.

The Sunlit Emperor still possessed all the looks of his youth, with smooth, hairless cheeks, somewhat long golden-brown hair that seemed somehow messy, yet without a single hair out of place, as if the messy look was intentional. He wore glistening silver armor, so gilded and overdesigned that there was no possible way it was practical in battle unless it was so heavily enchanted that it was practically solid magic—which, Anastasios had to concede, was quite possibly the case. It featured massive shoulder pauldrons larger than the Emperor's entire head, and a comically oversized codpiece, which the Emperor seemed trying to emphasize further with how he sat upon his throne. The throne itself was obscene; it was made of solid gold but had been carved into the shape of half a dozen nude women making a seat out of their bodies, rendered in lifelike detail. Absolutely everything was shown, with the golden statues posed provocatively, some of their legs partially spread, and with garnets glowing a bright, eye-catching pink in place of nipples. When the Emperor appeared in the projection, he was absent-mindedly palming one of these statues' golden breasts and didn't stop even after it became irrefutably clear that he knew he could be seen.

Finally, to the west—directly across from Anastasios—came perhaps the most fearsome member of their group, though he hardly appeared as such on first glance. He was a bald man, dressed in what Anastasios could only describe as a brown burlap sack. It fitted him poorly, as if made by the most novice of tailors, though given how big and heavily muscled he was, Anastasios supposed it would take the greatest tailor a hundred days to make something that fit him just right.

This man, the Keeper of the Sentinels, appeared seated upon a simple stone stool that looked to have been roughly carved out of a single boulder. By all appearances, he seemed to be a man of little means and few material concerns, emphasized by the fact that he sat leaned over, his elbows propped up on his knees, his chin in his hands, and his eyes closed in thought, but Anastasios knew that such a supposition was the furthest thing from the truth. He was terrifically strong, and with his earth magic, could've fashioned himself a much grander throne than the one he sat upon with little more than a thought if he so chose.

But he didn't, and he barely even twitched to acknowledge that his projection had activated, beginning their meeting.

"It's good to see you all in health," Anastasios intoned, his deep voice carried by magic to each of his counterparts in their own respective Empires, in their own respective ceremonial long-range communication chambers.

"How about you cut the formal shit and get on with more arousing matters?" the Sunlit Emperor carelessly drawled, and Anastasios glanced at him just in time to catch the tail end of an eyeroll. The Sunlit Emperor slouched down even further into his obscene throne, threw one of his legs over the shoulder of one of the golden statues, and dismissively said, "The niceties can get fucked. Let's just get our business over and done with, yeah? I've got other things in need of fucking, and I'd rather not waste my time with the lot of you. Or, *some* of you, at least..." The Sunlit Emperor punctuated his statement with a lascivious wink sent to the Grand Druid, which she did *not* return. In fact, while she remained otherwise stoic and indifferent, Anastasios could see the slight tightening of her posture, the subtle flexing in her upper arms that told him exactly how much she wanted to tear the Sunlit Emperor apart.

Anastasios shrugged and responded, "Very well, kid, we can skip the usual updates—I'm sure we're all well aware of just how each other's Empires are doing, anyway. As well as I'm sure you are all aware that Leon Raime came south last year."

The Grand Druid gave a look of muted surprise, but it wasn't great enough for Anastasios to think she hadn't already known this before the meeting—she was more surprised that he was bringing it up like this, he supposed.

"Good," the Sunlit Emperor declared with a smile. "Such a man shouldn't be locked away in the savage north, not after all the progress he's made in these past six years. I mean, eighth-tier at the age of twenty-two? Impressive, I say, and deserving of far more than exile with savages."

"Worrisome, more like," The Grand Druid shot back as she glared at the Sunlit Emperor. Her gaze softened slightly as she glanced toward Anastasios, though, and she continued, "What are we to make of this boy, this descendent of our oldest enemy, taking up residence in your Empire?"

"Nothing," Anastasios replied. "He's not with us. He's with Heaven's Eye in Occulara. He hasn't left that city in months, though, not since the Director decided to take him on."

The Keeper finally spoke, growling in a deep baritone yet not opening his eyes, "If the Director is choosing to shelter this child, stained as he is by the sins of his forefathers, then Heaven's Eye is without virtue and lacks memory. All born of that blood must be purged."

"You seem quite eager," Anastasios quipped. "Are you in such a hurry to go against the command of the one above us?"

The Keeper finally opened his eyes, though only a crack. Instead of revealing his pupils, bright white light streamed forth, as if his eye sockets held a pair of stars instead of eyeballs. He said nothing, as Anastasios knew he would. It had only been a few years since the Grave Warden had formally revealed himself to them, before vanishing back to his island again, but the power he displayed to them had made it abundantly clear that they served at his pleasure, not the other way around. If he wanted them to do something, there was only one choice if they wanted their Empires to remain safe. The Keeper

might be tempted to go against those threats on principle, but so long as Leon Raime stayed out of Sentinel land, Anastasios doubted his eastern counterpart would take any proactive action.

"That boy should come south," the Sunlit Emperor said in the short pause that followed Anastasios' remark. "He would do well among those who would appreciate the power he wields."

"Trying to poach a young talented boy?" the Grand Druid drily asked.

"Trying to nurture a young talented boy," the Sunlit Emperor shot back. "Trying to save him from being used as a pawn by the two of you."

"I'm sure you are," the Grand Druid replied. Her expression hardened for a moment as she turned toward Anastasios. "Leon Raime must not be allowed to go south. If he should come into contact with the Sky Devils—"

"The Sky Devils are contained!" the Sunlit Emperor shouted indignantly. "There is no chance at all that he'd even see one of those creatures, let alone speak with one."

Anastasios held up his hand, silently asking for peace between them before they started going at each other's throats. "The Sky Devils have been quiet lately, haven't they?" he asked.

"They have," the Sunlit Emperor said.

"That's both good and worrying to hear," Anastasios responded. "They've never been quiet for long. The only times I can recall when they've halted their raids was when they were preparing for something big. An assault on the Shield, or a long journey through the wild waters south of their Hell to get around our patrols and assault some of the weaker protectorates. We should take all precautions that we can."

"I agree," the Grand Druid added. "I'll speak with my daughter. She can move our fleets to the Sword. Even a single dread ship slipping past our lines cannot be tolerated."

"I'll have my grandson step up patrols in the Straits of Keraunos, too," Anastasios said. Both then turned their gazes toward the Sunlit Emperor. Their fleets were small, having little access to the sea. Any proper containment would have to have the cooperation of the Sunlit Empire, as while Argos was at least nominally under joint control of all four of their Empires, it was the Sunlit Empire in practice that held it, and their fleets were the larger than the other three's combined.

"Very well," the Sunlit Emperor said.

"What timing this is," the Keeper then said, drawing the attention of the other three. "First, the scion of our oppressors returns, and now worrying signs from the Sky Devil's Hell. I sense peace may soon be shattered..."

"No need for all that doom and gloom, old man," the Sunlit Emperor rebuked. "The Sky Devils have remained trapped in their Hell for, what? Sixty thousand years? More?"

"They lacked a Prince of the blood," the Keeper explained patiently. "Their structure makes coordination difficult. They fight each other almost as much as they fight us. If they're able to unify behind someone like Leon Raime, then they'll own the Argonaut Sea. Given what I've learned of this boy, it wouldn't be that difficult, either: he seems to channel the power in his blood far better than any of his predecessors. He is a monster and should be treated as such."

"He is not a monster," Anastasios protested. "I actually found him rather subdued and humble."

The Sunlit Emperor audibly scoffed. "Don't fucking pretend to be concerned about him, you just want his blood to see if it can activate some of those little bits and pieces of salvage that you *most certainly don't have* will respond well to it."

Anastasios, still smiling, glared at the Sunlit Emperor, but the younger man wasn't done.

"And I'm sure," he continued as he turned his gaze toward the Grand Druid, "that you've only got his best interests at heart. You don't want to try and breed his blood into your line, I'm sure. You don't want to exploit his blood for whatever things you've hidden up in your forests, *I'm sure.*"

The Grand Druid glared at the Sunlit Emperor again. "We're not all selfish cretins," she spat. "But leave it to those who are to only see the world through that lens."

"That *is* the world," the Sunlit Emperor declared. "We're all trying to fuck everyone else, why deny it? And Leon Raime may well just be the thing that can set any of us up to dominate the plane in more than just name. Perhaps even achieve Apotheosis with the knowledge he might be able to unlock. So don't fucking try and come to me and say that you've only got his best interests at heart. Get the fuck out of here with that shit."

"We're getting a little off-topic," Anastasios growled. "I informed you of Leon Raime's arrival. He's proven he isn't a threat."

"He's proven the opposite," the Keeper disagreed. "He's proven that he's a monster, and if we don't take steps to deal with him, then he'll devour us all, and our plane will descend back into tyranny."

"Let's not get carried away, here," Anastasios protested. He took a deep breath and stared directly at the Keeper. "What would it take to soothe your nerves over this boy?"

The Keeper was silent for a long moment, eventually stating, "In truth, nothing, for no peace can ever be achieved so long as anyone of that bloodline yet breathes. He will forever remain an enemy, no matter how modest and moderate you believe him to be. Above all, he must stay away from the Argonaut Sea at all costs. Keep the Sky Devils confined and keep them away from the one who carries the blood that they can unite behind. Without him, the Sky Devils are nothing more than a nuisance."

"Spoken like a *celibate* who hasn't been to the Argonaut Sea in a while," the Sunlit Emperor snarled. "Maybe you should make a visit. Let some other fuckers spill blood in those waters other than my sailors, for once. See for yourself how the Sky Devils are doing."

"I've seen more than enough already," the Keeper replied, even toned, and Anastasios shuddered.

Eight hundred years ago, when he and the Keeper were both only a few centuries old, their predecessors had organized a huge raid upon the Sky Devil's Hell, intending to end their threat once and for all. They assembled their fleets at the Sword, an island west of their Hell that the Empires had taken over many millennia ago to keep an eye on the Sky Devils and to stage any invasions or defensive actions from. The might of all four Empires then broke through their misty veil and crashed down upon the western shores of the Sky Devil's Hell, thousands of ships in all. It was quite possibly the greatest act of unity the Empires had shown since the actions of the Brilliant Eleven.

It was also the greatest disaster in Imperial history. Their invasion force was met with bad weather as they landed—which seemed natural, until the Sky Devils fell from the storm clouds and wreaked havoc within the Imperial Fleets. They were fought off, and the Imperial armies landed on the Hell itself, but they only managed to seize a few coastal cities before the Sky Devils fought them to a standstill and threw them back off the island. Anastasios, even all these years later, could still remember the bodies piled high, the stench of death, and the howling war cries of the Sky Devils as they gleefully threw themselves upon Imperial Lances, and proved themselves greater than even those fearsome weapons.

More than a million Imperial soldiers died in that invasion, and more than two thousand ships were lost. The remainder of the force, Anastasios and the Keeper included, had to limp home with barely

## **Chapter 680: Troubles Across the Sea**

Jaguar of the West. That was what they called him back in Stormhollow. As he gazed out at the broken ships, listening to the death rattles of dying sailors, he felt like it was a title he deserved, however it might be taken. It didn't make him particularly happy, but it was what it was.

It was hard to deny that he certainly looked the part, and he often dressed to match as a way to be recognized on sight even by people who'd never seen him before. He was tall and broad shouldered, with golden skin and pale yellow eyes. His skin was far from clear, with moles and spots all over his body, along with large birth marks. None of this distracted from his relatively good looks, and neither did it concern the Jaguar too much—in fact, he was rather proud of his spots, as they appeared in all members of his Tribe when their Inherited Bloodline was awakened. The more spots, his Tribe often said, the stronger the individual was going to become, and the Jaguar of the West was quite well-spotted.

He still wore his armor even though the battle he'd just fought had concluded almost an hour ago. It was a heavily designed ensemble, with large spotted cats decorating his breastplate, and spots on the rest of his plate armor. Beneath his plate, he wore gambeson made of enchanted jaguar hide, and his helmet had been fashioned to resemble the head of one of the spotted cats, too, complete with small round metal 'ears' on top. To complete the look, his gauntlets had been enchanted and engineered to sprout claws when he balled his fists, which he used as his primary weapon of choice—at least, when his lightning magic was insufficient.

He hadn't had to use his magic or his fists in this battle, however. It hadn't been necessary, their foe hadn't been particularly strong. Merely an Imperial scout fleet from the Sword, nothing he hadn't seen a hundred times before in his centuries guarding the western shores of Kataigida, the island the barbarians called the 'Sky Devil's Hell'. What concerned him, however, was that it was the third scout fleet he'd destroyed in the past week alone.

*'They're sniffing around our waters,'* he thought to himself as his yellow eyes narrowed and he stared out over the misty waters. *'They know we're up to something, but are they aware of exactly what?'*

The target of his gaze was the great island to the northwest. The island's original name was lost to history, but these days, it was known by both his people and the Barbarian Empires as 'The Sword'. It was an appropriate name, for it was the sword pointed at his people's neck, a constant threat and reminder that they were no longer the masters of Aeterna. The island was covered in various naval

bases and resupply points, and thousands of Imperial ships patrolled its waters, always on the lookout for raiding parties sent out from Kataigida.

Fortunately, even with all the might of the Barbarian Empires, they couldn't easily penetrate the shroud of magic that had been laid upon Kataigida. A ring of thick mist surrounded the island about a mile from shore, almost like the clouds had descended upon the seas to hide Kataigida from view. But it wasn't anything so natural, it was due to magic woven by the ancestors of the Ten Tribes that prevented magic senses from penetrating within without preventing them from getting out, and contained many illusions and strange wind patterns that could confuse and throw off-course all but the best navigators. With extremely few exceptions, only Imperial ships were advanced enough to sail through the misty veil, but given the fact that they couldn't hide from the forces of the Ten Tribes even within the mist, they rarely sent anything more than fast scouts over the water. Usually, these scouts weren't in much danger, doing little more than sailing past Kataigida's misty shroud, seeing what they could see, and then immediately turning around. However, the Ten Tribes had recently begun an extreme expansion of their navies and air forces, which allowed the Jaguar to ensure the safety of the western shore better than he ever had before.

They'd come a long way since the last time the Imperials had invaded. The barbarians had been driven off back then, but only at great cost, and the subsequent punitive campaign the Tribes had launched ended in disaster. Ever since, there hadn't been much will within the Tribal Council to build large fleets for anything other than defense. But that changed five years ago, when the Council finally, after more than half a millennium, elected a new Thunderer, and the man elected greatly prioritized military affairs.

The Jaguar was grateful for the extra support, but when he heard that the new Thunderer was planning on a new campaign, one designed to hopefully seize control of the Sword, he was struck with great apprehension. The Sword was heavily fortified, and their build-up of arms couldn't go unnoticed, even with the misty shroud in place. At the very least, the arks stolen by the barbarians so long ago would see their constructions before they could be run off by the Tribes' own air forces, and they'd notice the less frequent raids launched as the Ten Tribes built their forces up for something much larger.

These scout ships appearing more and more frequently was a sign that their actions had been noticed, and the Jaguar wasn't happy about that.

His ship drew close to one of the barbarian ships still afloat, and the close-range cannons on the top deck prepared themselves. They were fairly small weapons with a barrel only about ten feet long, and a base small enough for three average-sized men to encircle with linked arms. The base was built to spin, allowing the weapons to be aimed with ease. As the cannons were lowered to target the ship, the innumerable runes inscribed upon their black steel barrels began glowing with red light, and the steel then started to glow red with heat.

The Jaguar gave the signal when they were in range, and white fire erupted from the cannons. The barbarian ships were sturdy, made of either steel or heavily enchanted wood, but even that wasn't sufficient to protect them from his ship's white flames. Metal liquified so quickly that only the enchantments prevented it from exploding. The water around the ship wasn't so lucky, and the ship was lost in an immense explosion of steam as the white fire swept over it. The Jaguar's ship was protected from the steam with magic, but the sounds of the Imperial crew that had survived until now still passed through, their screams piercing through the Jaguar's eardrums like nails.



With a scowl, he turned away for a moment. He didn't like this part of his job, but it was necessary. Prisoners were taken in the days of yore, but they were more trouble than their worth to keep, and the Tribal Council had ruled many centuries ago to end that policy. There were to be no prisoners. The barbarians would find nothing but death if they dared stray too close to Kataigida, treated in the same way that they had treated the ancestors of the Ten Tribes.

Someone nearby shouted out his name, and when he turned to look toward them, he saw one of his adjutants pointing into the sky. The Jaguar looked up in the indicated direction, and he saw something that caused his scowl to grow even deeper.

*'Inquisitors,'* he thought to himself, his mood dropping in tandem with their descent.

They were riding pegasi, winged horses blessed with great command of air magic. Such intelligent beasts weren't typically happy to submit themselves to humans, but the onyx bracelets on the wrists of every Inquisitor ensured their obedience. These ones weren't as large as those typically used for Kataigida's air forces, but their smaller size made them much faster than other war breeds.

It had been several hours since the Jaguar had sent word back to Stormhollow of this third scout force, so he supposed that orders were sent to Raimondas, the great city on the western coast, to send out a force of Inquisitors to see what was going on.

The Jaguar had dealt with Inquisitors before. They were established only three years ago when the new Thunderer felt the need to bolster the Ten Tribes' information gathering network, and several intelligence units were merged to form the Inquisitors. Unlike those other intelligence units, though, the Inquisitors didn't serve the Ten Tribes, but rather the Thunderer himself, and that infuriated many of the tribal elders. Dozens of the many Clans that made up the Tribes had already lodged complaints against the hubris and arrogance of the Inquisitors, the Jaguar's own Clan among them. Nothing had yet come of those complaints, but the Jaguar knew that if something wasn't done about them soon, it would enflame tensions between the Ten Tribes, and disunity wasn't something they could afford on the eve of an invasion of the Sword.

Fortunately, in this case, he saw a familiar face leading the pack of Inquisitors: an extremely serious woman with severe features named Elina. The Jaguar hated dealing with Inquisitors, but if he had to deal with any of them, he would've picked Elina hands down. She had the same respect for traditional tribal authority as other Inquisitors—which was to say none at all—but she took her job of seeking out information to protect Kataigida as a whole incredibly seriously. The Jaguar might not like her lack of respect, but he could at least trust that she wasn't scheming against him or his fleet.

The dozen or so Inquisitors landed upon the deck of the Jaguar's flagship, scattering some of his crew with the force of their landing. A few members of his crew shouted at them, but it took little more than a glare from the eighth-tier Elina for the complaints to die down. The other Inquisitors began to bark orders and questions at the Jaguar's crew, but as the Jaguar strode toward them, quietly suppressing his urge to start ripping the Inquisitors limb from bloody limb, he let his killing intent spill forth and, backed by his ninth-tier aura, silenced the Inquisitors.

"Elina," the Jaguar growled as he met the lead Inquisitor. She was the only one of her group that he spared from the weight of his cold wrath. "Keep your lackeys in line. If you have any questions, they are to be directed toward me, and me *alone*."

“Understood, Lord Jaguar,” the Inquisitor replied, her tone chilly and unwelcoming, though the Jaguar had no impression that she was being deceitful. “I’ve come on urgent business,” the Inquisitor continued, moving right on into business instead of wasting time with pleasantries.

“What does the Thunderer require?” the Jaguar inquired.

Elina smiled and turned her eyes toward the wrecked Imperial scout fleet. “Many things,” she answered. “But first, we have to get all of that cleaned up...”

—

The Jaguar stared at what was on the table in front of him, his most trusted adjutants and Elina the only others in the meeting room within his ship who were accompanying him.

“You were sent here for this?” he asked incredulously of Elina.

“In part, yes,” she replied as she inspected the belt, gloves, boots, and helmet on the table. It all appeared to be from a single suit, but they’d pried the pieces off of several different Imperial corpses. “These suits have been popping up all over these past few years. They’re supposed to help their wearers fly with ease. Supposedly, even a second-tier mage wearing a completed suit can fly a couple of miles without much problem...”

The Jaguar’s heart sank. Typically, it took a mage until they were in the eighth-tier to grow powerful enough to be able to fly under their own power, leaving nearly all other mages to rely on expensive magical beasts or other, much less efficient flight artifacts—something that a second-tier mage could use was startling in its efficiency, and presented a clear danger if the barbarians had acquired such magical technology.

As a result, most air forces were composed of flight-capable war beasts, with nearly all other air forces reserved for arks, and arks and swarms of war beasts were easily seen and tracked. At least, until now. If the barbarians were making enough of these suits, then control of the sky would swing hard in the direction of the barbarians.

“How common are these suits?” the Jaguar asked, his deep tone deadly serious.

“Common enough to warrant the attention of an Inquisitor,” Elina replied.

The Jaguar sighed. “It’s a grave problem, to be sure, but I find the idea that it requires your attention to be kind of ludicrous.”

Elina stared back at him, and then a sly smile spread across her face. “Good instincts,” she said. “You’re right, these aren’t the only reason I’m here, though documenting what I can about these new air tactics is of great importance.”

“Understandable,” the Jaguar responded.

“I’m more interested in taking a tour of the western coast,” Elina said as she stepped back from the table. “Lord Thunder is making some revisions to our current plans. The invasion of the Sword is being expanded greatly.”

“Expanded? By how much?” The Jaguar wasn’t entirely surprised to hear this, but he couldn’t help but wonder just how many resources the Thunderer was planning on pouring into this endeavor and how much time this expansion would cost them. Already, their preparations were making the barbarians increasingly nervous, and if they waited too much longer to consolidate their forces, then the barbarians would strike first.

“Doubled,” Elina said, and the Jaguar almost reeled. The greatest fleet in a generation, enough force to give the Ten Tribes confidence in taking on the Sword—*that* was being doubled?

“And what... pray tell, is all of this force for?” the Jaguar hesitantly asked as countless scenarios shot through his mind. “More importantly, who will command these fleets?”

“Admirals appointed by the Thunderer,” Elina easily replied.

The Jaguar’s face settled into an increasingly frequent scowl. *‘More power in his hands,’* he thought.

Elina continued, “We’re no longer planning on just attacking the Sword. Since the barbarians have been stirred up a little by our building of new ships and war arks, we’re going to sweep them all out of this corner of the plane while we can. We’ll strike at the Sword and the Shield at the same time. While the barbarians are distracted, a raiding party will head north and sack Argos.”

“And who will lead that foray across the sea?” the Jaguar asked, but he felt like he already knew the answer.

Elina didn’t verbally respond, but she smiled at him in a way that confirmed what he already knew.

“... I’ll pass on that honor,” the Jaguar said. “The invasion of the Sword is where I belong, and that’s where I’ll lead my fellow clansmen and tribesmen.”

“The Sword will have more than enough of our people heading there,” Elina shot back. “You’re not needed there. The Thunderer wants you at Argos—”

“I DO NOT ANSWER TO THE THUNDERER!” the Jaguar roared. His golden skin flushed blood-red and dark yellow lightning flashed across his body for a moment. A moment later, though, he felt slightly ashamed for letting his emotions get out of his control like that. He took a deep breath to steady himself and then inspected the damage.

His outburst, and accompanying spike in his aura, had fractured the table and sent the pieces of the flight suit scattering. More importantly, it had driven his adjutants to their knees and pushed Elina back several feet. Everyone looked a little sick, but none had passed out, thankfully.

Measuring his tone a little more, the Jaguar said a little more politically, “The Thunderer does not *command* the Tribes, and we will not bow down to him simply because he demands it. He was elected by the Tribes, his power is derived from them, not the other way around.”

“That aside,” Elina replied, her voice a little shaky as she straightened herself out and tried to pretend that the Jaguar’s outburst hadn’t affected her, “the fact remains that Argos will be the most vulnerable it’s ever been once our assault is launched. The seizure of the Titanstone mines in the Shield, the conquest of the Sword, and the destruction of Argos. Can you deny that any of those things will be an

incredible coup? The commanders of each of these fronts will be commended by all within the Ten Tribes. Can you really say that storming Argos will be any less glorious than storming the Sword?"

The Jaguar gave Elina a long, hard look, but the Inquisitor weathered his glare admirably. He couldn't deny that razing Argos would be a high point of his career, but he'd spent essentially his entire life defending Kataigida's western coast from the barbarian fleets launched from the Sword. He wanted to destroy that island, not Argos. What was more, while Argos would certainly be 'at its most vulnerable', that didn't mean that it *was* vulnerable. Argos was one of the most heavily defended cities on the plane, and if the Jaguar were to lead his fleet there, then he'd leave countless of his clansmen and tribesmen dead. It could weaken his Tribe immeasurably—which, he supposed, could very well be the Thunderer's plan. Taking the Sword was going to be incredibly dangerous, too, but it was much closer to Kataigida. They'd have greater support from the other Tribes and their fleets.

"Lord Thunder has indicated that he'd be fine if you'd rather take on the Sword," Elina continued, her tone turning a little more conciliatory. "He believes your talents make you uniquely suited for the raid, but if your heart is set on the Sword, then the Sword is where you and your fleets will strike. He wants this plan to succeed, for *all* Kataigida, not just for those of his Tribe. Please try to understand that."

The Jaguar's scowl deepened. "I'll take it under advisement. I must consult with my Tribe's elders before I make my decision."

"Lord Thunder will wait for your decision," Elina stated. "By the winged grace, we'll succeed in this endeavor. For all of Kataigida."

Recognizing the traditional blessings of her tribe, the Jaguar's expression softened. Whatever the Thunderer's plan was, Elina was clearly in this for all the Ten Tribes. She believed that this was the best way, and that they were going to succeed—that much the Jaguar could read in her expression. He didn't appreciate his Tribe's authority being undermined, but in the face of that earnestness, he couldn't help but calm himself down.

"With bloody fangs, our enemies will tremble," he replied, using traditional words of his own Tribe.

Elina left his ship not long after, taking the rest of his Inquisitors with her. The Jaguar was left contemplating the problem ahead of him. He felt it likely that his elders would order him to go to Argos instead of the Sword, if only as a show of good faith with the Thunderer. He had to prepare himself and his fleet for that raid, or else his ships would be smashed upon the great sea walls of that damned city.

Or worse, he supposed. He thought of the flight suit and wondered just what else the Barbarian Empires might have been cooking up in these last few centuries.

And then he smiled. He didn't relish killing the defenseless but testing himself against the full might of the barbarians was a thing he had to admit that, on a personal level, he was looking forward to.