

Storm King 681

Chapter 681: Ten Years

Leon submerged the glowing piece of metal in the quenching oil, letting it rapidly cool with a loud hiss to keep its hardness. Aiding him in this endeavor were ice runes inscribed upon the metal barrel containing the oil. It had taken him some time to get it working properly, but the enchantments he'd designed gave him fine control over the temperature of his oil. They were based upon other designs he'd seen used in Sid's workshop, but he'd managed to create a new enchantment scheme even better than what she had.

Quickly extracting the long sword blade that he'd just quenched, he brought it close to his face for a quick inspection, and after judging it adequate, he took some time to polish and sand it to a glowing sheen and fine edge, and then he summoned his fire magic. At his level, after all of his studies with Xaphan, it was trivial for him to give his freshly-forged blade the perfect heat treatment. The center of the double-edged straight sword was heated more than the edges, not going so far as to start liquifying the metal, but just enough to give it the properties that Leon wanted.

When he was finished with the heat treatment, the blade was a gorgeous panoply of color, the differential heat dying the steel a dark blue, almost purple, in the center groove on both sides, while the sharp edges lightened to a brighter gold. The blade would be springy and tough, but the edges would be hard and resistant to breakage. Adding to its beauty was the rippling pattern that covered the blade from Leon's working of the metal. He could've purchased perfectly forged steel himself, of course, but Sid had taught him to forge his steel himself, and given that he had wanted to learn the art of blacksmithing to have control over the entire creative process of whatever he wanted to make, he couldn't have agreed more with her instructions.

Besides, if he bought the usual kind of mass-produced steel that earth mages who worked as smelters made, then he'd miss out on the rippling effect that covered this new blade. The extra work was justified by that alone, in his mind.

Once his new blade finished cooling, he then assembled it with the other pieces he'd prepared. A wooden handle of polished oak that had been carved with a feather-like pattern, a curving steel guard that resembled spread wings, and an ivory eagle head pommel were all affixed to his blade, but his work wasn't yet complete.

Once the sword was assembled, Leon reached for a small stack of a dozen sheets of inscribing paper on a nearby table and started carefully applying the paper to the blade. The paper flashed with arcane light, inscribing their patterns onto the blade, strengthening it, giving it additional properties. When Leon finally finished with the last sheet of paper, the enchantment was complete, and he was able to sit back and admire his newest creation.

It had taken him more than a month to make this sword, counting the planning and design phases. In the end, he was left with a beautiful straight sword with a four-foot-long multi-colored blade of rippling steel, and a foot-long handle. It was light enough that a mortal could use it and faintly inscribed with countless runes that were nearly imperceptible until magic was channeled into them, when they'd glow with magical light. With his enchantments, the blade was practically indestructible, could horribly burn

what it touched, could triple its length with projected light magic, and could erect a shield of light to protect its wielder.

It didn't hold a candle to the Adamant blade of his Ancestors, but Leon was immensely proud of what he'd made. It had been a commission passed Sid's way by Heaven's Eye, and she'd in turn passed it off to him. There hadn't been any restrictive parameters involved with the weapon, allowing him complete freedom to design and forge it as he pleased. He leaned back in his chair in his workshop, just staring at the weapon, a smile on his bearded face.

He'd been working in here for a long time, long enough that he'd barely even realized just how fuzzy his face had become. He wasn't as diligent about shaving as he used to be, for a few years ago he'd realized that he could finally grow a proper beard. Valeria and Maia seemed to like it, but Elise was a little less enthusiastic, so while Leon occasionally let it grow out, he rarely let it go for longer than a couple weeks.

After his brief reverie was over, he sheathed the freshly-forged sword in a glittering leather sheath made from something that had blue scales, wrapped it up in cloth padding, and then gently placed it in a box. He pulled the box into his soul realm, and then rose from his seat. With a quick glance at the clock, he realized that he'd finished only just in time, and he hurried through his expansive workshop, past his blacksmithing tools and equipment, through the areas he'd devoted to his enchanting work, and then into the workshop's atrium.

His workshop was locked down with his best wards, only unlocking when either he or the members of his family were entering or exiting, but he'd still built up a habit of ensuring the place was completely locked whenever he was leaving. After he'd shared the designs for his fourth generation flight suit with Heaven's Eye, he'd drawn quite a bit of scrutiny from the Ilian enchanter's guild, and while he didn't seriously think anyone would dare to try and rob someone in his position—that of a Hand of the Director—he wasn't going to trust in the title alone.

He didn't regret the sharing of his flight suit design, even though it necessitated greater security around his villa. Heaven's Eye couldn't produce the suits fast enough, and he got a hefty cut from every suit sold. He shared a few other of his designs with Heaven's Eye, letting them handle the production and distribution while he simply let the silver pile up. Thanks not only to his own position, but to Emilie being the Chief of Acquisitions, Leon was able to leverage his enchanting knowledge to amass great wealth in the years since his arrival in Occulara.

When Leon emerged from his workshop, he took a moment to look around. His villa had changed quite a bit since it had been purchased ten years ago. The general layout was the same, but the façade had been completely redone in a style more reminiscent of the Bull Kingdom, while the grounds had been renovated into unrecognizability. Gardens and huge plots of land grew magical herbs of all kinds, though not usually in great numbers. Elise and Helen were more interested in trying to grow more exotic herbs, figuring out their uses, and trying to make them more economical to grow. The herbs that they'd brought to the Central Empires had only been the tip of the iceberg; in the past ten years, Elise and Helen had contributed just as much, if not more, to the coffers of Leon's family than his enchanting work had, with their work in alchemy and herbology.

As he walked outside, he projected his magic senses, feeling for just a moment the wards he'd set around his home pressing in on him, resonating with his magic and confirming his identity before

allowing his magic to proceed. He saw Elise sitting in the back courtyard, the sun catching in her radiant red hair and causing it to glitter. She was dressed all in red today and was keeping an eye on the gardeners tending to the villa's land. They employed about twenty workers to see to the gardens that stretched over their two hundred acres, including all of the team leaders who were now surrounding her, listening to her instructions and observing as she marked several locations on a map of their estate.

Maia was also nearby, but she was meditating in a more private garden. Valeria was training in one of the villa's smaller training rooms. Helen was busy in her alchemy lab. The rest of Leon's retinue wasn't present, as their training for the day had concluded several hours ago. They had all made great progress in the past decade, and Leon couldn't have been prouder of them.

Anshu and Valeria had both ascended to the sixth-tier, while Gaius, Marcus, Alcander, and Alix had all reached the fifth, as had Elise. Helen hadn't increased her magical power all that much, but her alchemical skills had grown as much as the others' magical skills had. Anna, meanwhile, hadn't managed to ascend to the seventh-tier, but she'd still grown in strength.

With a quick wisp of intent, Leon's magic suffused his being like the shadows that fall with the setting of the sun; his element-less magic shifted into darkness magic, and Leon reached out with his magic senses, touching the minds of Maia and Valeria. He whispered into their minds, asking them to join him with Elise.

They were both closer and arrived at the back courtyard before he did. Elise had already given the garden supervisors a break when the other two showed up, and she smiled radiantly as Leon appeared. Maia and Valeria, too, shone like suns unto themselves. Maia was more expressive than she'd ever been, a smile gracing her bronze features as she strode confidently over to Leon and pressed her lips against his. Valeria was a little more circumspect, though she played with her silver hair, braided as it was and slung over her shoulder to rest against her chest.

"Husband," Elise whispered in greeting. "Did you *finally* finish it?"

"I did," Leon replied as he swept Maia off her feet and carried her over to Elise's table. Elise glanced back and gestured to one of her assistants waiting in the wings, and the young woman darted forward, clearing the table of the maps and documents that she'd been pouring over with the gardening team leaders.

"Then let's see this thing that's kept you from our beds for weeks," she said with a sly smile.

Leon, without missing a beat, put Maia down in one of the nearby chairs, and then with a theatrical flourish, retrieved the box with the freshly-forged sword from his soul realm. Valeria opened it and uncovered the blade, drawing it from its scabbard.

"Wow," the silver-haired woman whispered as the sun caught the multi-colored blade. "I'm not usually one for swords, but this is quite beautiful..."

"It really is," Elise gasped as she saw the weapon for the first time. "I'm almost tempted to ask you to make one for me."

"That option is always available to you," Leon reminded her, as he'd done many times in the past decade. Elise had taken to training with his retinue, including brushing up her skills with various styles of

weaponry. However, she lacked talent—or so she often claimed. She wasn't one that needed weapons in her daily life, so she'd always refused Leon's offer to make her something sharp and dangerous, though that didn't stop each other from teasing the other about it when the situation allowed for it.

"Do you know who this is for?" Elise inquired. "I have to admit to being extremely curious about who is so important that you've dedicated so much of your time to making this thing."

"I have no idea," Leon replied.

[None?] Maia silently asked.

"Not a clue," Leon confirmed. "The commission was passed to me, and I wasn't too interested in pressing for details. I suppose I'll find out when turning the blade in, if anyone cares enough to let me know. I don't care enough to pry, though."

As Valeria gave the weapon a few test swings, the runes that covered the blade lightning up as her magic flowed through the blade, Elise rose from her seat and stalked up to Leon, a hungry look in her eyes.

"You should really be more curious," she husked as she pulled him closer and pressed her lips against his. She pulled back just as quickly and continued, "Is there anything more you have to do today other than turning that in?"

"No," Leon said, relishing the word.

"Then we ought to do something, just the four of us."

"Sounds like fun," Valeria replied as she slid the sword back into its sheath.

[Did you have something in mind?] Maia inquired.

"No, but..." Elise trailed off, a frown passing over her lips for a moment as she turned back to Leon. "I hate to say it, but it occurs to me now that I'm thinking about it: Talal was looking for you earlier, but I told him that you were busy and didn't want to be disturbed. Perhaps you ought to go and see what it was he wanted with you before we make any plans?"

Leon sighed and drew the sword back into his soul realm. "I suppose I should. I'll get back to you three as soon as I can. Thanks for your patience this past month; no matter what, I don't think I'm going to be taking on any more long-term projects like this for a while. At least, not for anyone else."

Elise nodded in gratitude, Valeria gave him a quick hug, and Maia smiled at him. With that, Leon projected his magic senses again and began scouring his home for his personal assistant.

He found Talal in the man's office, quietly pouring over a map of Occulara, and Leon's heart skipped a beat in excitement, despite this not being the first time he'd seen the dusky-skinned Samarid doing something similar. He hurried to Talal's office, knocked on the door, and then entered without waiting for a reply.

"You were looking for me?" he asked as Talal turned around to see who was entering his office.

The man looked so different compared to how he'd been ten years ago that Leon sometimes had to marvel at his transformation. His body had filled out with muscle thanks to Leon's insistence on his joining the rest of the retinue for training, and he'd adopted the clothing style of the Ilian Empire. Gone were the oils and perfumes that he'd worn when he was Heaven's Eye's manager in Akhmim, gone were the flowing white robes of his native Samarid Kingdom. Instead, he dressed in deep reds, his clothes tightly tailored to show off the body he'd earned from training. He was a handsome man now that he'd finished losing his excess weight, filled out a bit, and gotten rid of his haughty attitude.

His and Leon's professional relationship had started off quite awkward after the Director transferred him into Leon's service, but in the years since, Talal had calmed down and relaxed significantly. Leon hadn't been intent on holding any grudges, and after Talal had proven his capabilities as an administrator, Leon had fully welcomed him into his retinue, which no doubt greatly helped the man to settle into his new role. At this point, he managed Leon's personal affairs, but when he and his family were still getting settled into the city and had yet to hire other people to staff their household, Talal had managed essentially everything about Leon's life other than his finances, which Elise still kept a close eye on.

Without so much as a blink of surprise, the sixth-tier Samarid replied, "I was looking for you; I found another site."

Leon smiled and approached the map Talal had been pouring over, which had more than a dozen points marked and crossed out all over Occulara. In between his other responsibilities, Leon had tasked Talal with looking into old ruins within the city. It had been ten years and he'd yet to see hide or hair of his Clan's arsenal, but he hadn't stopped looking.

He kept Talal looking for any sign of Thunderbird Clan ruins, and he hadn't come back empty-handed. In the ten years he'd been in the city, Leon had visited a dozen different sites that held some promise, though only seven had truly been built during the time of his Clan. Of those seven, none were related to the arsenal. Most were little more than buried chambers discovered when someone was renovating their home, or when a building was demolished to make way for new construction. With Leon's status as a Hand of the Director, it was simple to gain access to these sites and poke around a bit. Unfortunately, none of these investigations had turned up anything of note.

Still, Leon was undeterred.

"It's over here," Talal said as he indicated an area in the suburbs north of the Scamander River.

"Apparently, a villa has been unoccupied for about twenty years, its owners unable to sell it. Neighbors claim the place is haunted, and after the owners decided to cut their losses and demolish the place, the workers they hired to knock it down claim they saw a ghost and refuse to work anymore."

"But they found ruins there?" Leon asked, seeking confirmation.

"They did," Talal replied. "Apparently, it was what convinced them that the ghost was real. Parts of the villa's basement fell out during their preparations to demolish the villa, and one of the workers fell in. I couldn't get anyone to give concrete details about what exactly they found down there, but if anything, I think that lends more credence that this is a more significant find."

“Hopefully it’s more significant than just some ghost stories,” Leon said only half-jokingly. With Nestor and the Thunderbird, he interacted with the dead quite frequently, so he didn’t immediately dismiss the ‘ghost’ as not being real in some sense, but he doubted it was truly a ghost. “I need to drop off this blade, and then we’re going to go and check this place out.”

“Got it,” Talal replied. “Do you need me to arrange transport, or will you take care of that yourself?”

“I don’t need any carriages to take me into the city,” Leon responded with a sly smile.

“Then I suppose I’ll meet you there,” Talal stated as he indicated the marked point on the map. “The owners are quite desperate to see this issue resolved, and the interest of an eighth-tier mage has them both anxious and excited beyond measure. I’ll need to make sure they’re ready to show you around.”

Leon nodded as his eyes turned back toward that point. He wondered just what he might find there, if the site was inspiring stories of ghosts. At the very least, none of the other points had come with such stories, which made sense given that there had been nothing to find at them aside from some broken stones.

He couldn’t wait to see it.

Chapter 682: Sunlight

As with the rest of the Ilian Empire, flight in public spaces was illegal. Leon couldn’t transform into his avian form and fly around as he pleased, he couldn’t ride Anzu places unless Anzu remained on the ground, and he couldn’t really use a flight suit when he was off private property.

At least, he *technically* couldn’t.

In the years since he’d arrived in the Ilian Empire, however, he’d learned that the law was more nuanced than simply outlawing all flight. Arks were allowed, though given that the only users of arks were Imperial governments and Heaven’s Eye, that exception hardly mattered. More relevant were wheelless carriages, for they technically flew, even if only a few feet off the ground. There were various laws and regulations that governed their capabilities, preventing them from exceeding certain limits, but simply put, Leon discovered that so long as he flew no higher than six feet off the ground, then flight was technically allowed.

As he strode out of his villa, he sent a quick mental command to Anzu to meet him out front. The griffin bounded out of his stable a moment later, the building now practically palatial to match the rest of the villa instead of being the relatively simple building that it had been. Anzu was growing more and more intelligent, and he needed more than just a relatively bare room, now.

The griffin came to a stop at the gate, beating Leon there by a matter of seconds. Leon paused a moment to run his fingers through the griffin’s white feathers, and Anzu bent down to nuzzle his beak in Leon’s hair. His bright red eyes sparkled with intelligence, if not sapience, and his aura radiated the strength equivalent of a sixth-tier mage.

Anzu wasn’t wearing his saddle, and neither did Leon intend to put one on. Instead, Anzu was just going to be his ‘escort’, of sorts.

“Let’s head into the city, I’ve some business with Sid,” Leon said to his griffin. Anzu chirped and flapped his wings a few times, and the two walked out of the gate, which closed behind them, ensuring that Leon’s villa remained sealed and protected.

Once out on the country road, Leon stopped for a moment and summoned his magic power. However, instead of changing his mana to one of the magical elements, he kept it element-less. What he was about to do would work better that way; not even using wind mana would work better, for the ambient magic power around Leon was more than just wind.

He reached out with his magic senses, though instead of using them to see and hear great distances, he instead used them to survey his immediate surroundings, feeling around and analyzing the magic around him. Then, he seized control of all the magic in his near vicinity and brought it all in closer to him. He felt it settle around him like a glove, or perhaps a harness. With all of it wrapped around him like a glove, he gently lifted himself up, and his body started to rise off the ground. He ascended several feet into the air, and then stopped, hovering in the air seemingly without any support at all.

He’d seen this sort of thing several times in his life before—perhaps most notably during his lessons with the Thunderbird where she taught him how to control the local weather by seizing control of the ambient magic power—but it wasn’t really until the party he attended in the palace of Ilion that he really got an idea of what he could do with element-less magic power. During that party, he’d seen Lord Protector Anastasios freeze a man while he was just about to lethally strike a Forest Watcher. The man had been frozen mid-swing as if the Lord Protector had actually flash-frozen him. However, instead of doing anything so flashy, the Lord Protector had simply used his element-less magic power to seize control of the ambient magic power, and used the projected and conquered power like another limb, wrapping it around the man and exerting physical force upon him, putting him completely under the Lord Protector’s control.

Leon’s mind had been preoccupied with other things at the time, so he hadn’t quite realized the significance of what he’d seen, but after some time to stop and relax after reaching Occulara and being taken on as a Hand of the Director, he’d frequently found himself reflecting on the events of that day. One thing that had struck him about six months after the purchase of his villa was just how *physical* the Lord Protector’s display of magic power had been, and Leon couldn’t help but wonder just what else such a technique might be capable of. It took him more than a year of practice to get it down right, but he began to realize that his element-less magic was hardly as useless as he’d always assumed; using it in this way basically gave him telekinesis. There were some limits to what he could do with it—for instance, doing what the Lord Protector had done to the sparring man was essentially impossible unless the person on the wrong end of the technique was *significantly* weaker than Leon was, at least on the order of two or three entire tiers.

But even with that limitation, the utility of the technique was still immense. One of the biggest perks was that since the technique used element-less magic power, he could still use it even when he called upon elemental power—to use elemental magic, he had to change his element-less magic power into an elemental form to produce the desired magical effect. Such a thing was impossible to do so with more than one magical element at a time; it was impossible to use to use multiple magical elements at once without the aid of magical items. However, this process always left some mana element-less within his body, and he *could* use that element-less magic power in his blood at the same time as elemental power, greatly increasing his combat potential with the discovery of this technique.

Even after almost eight years of using the technique, though, Leon was still getting used to it—it was like learning to use a new limb, but without the benefit of flesh and nerve to give him tangible feedback. He could fly and manipulate large objects in fairly simple ways, but he still lacked the fine control over the technique that he greatly desired. However, the fact that he could fly without transforming made the entire enterprise worth it, even if he never improved further—though he still intended on improving, the technique was simply too useful to leave at such simple telekinesis.

It didn't take much more than a thought for Leon to start flying down the road, still low enough to the ground that he wasn't violating any laws or regulations of the Empire. Anzu ran just behind him, and soon enough, the two had reached significant speeds. They lived about fifty miles south of the Scamander River, but Leon and Anzu reached their destination only a few blocks away from the river in only an hour—and that was after having to slow down once they got into the denser and much more traffic-heavy city. Even though he was just flying around, he didn't have much trouble dealing with all of the horseless carriages, because even if people were annoyed that they had to drive behind just little old him, they still had to make way for Anzu.

Not that he thought anyone would be imbecilic enough to actually yell at him when he so obviously powerful, but he'd found that putting someone in a metal horseless carriage had a tendency to turn otherwise normal, well-adjusted people angry, reckless, and stupid.

Upon arrival, Leon made straight for Sid's workshop, leaving Anzu in a nearby stable—horseless carriages were the norm in Occulara, but there were still a few places around that catered to more eccentric mages who wanted other, more living means of transportation. His blacksmithing instructor was waiting for him as soon as he stepped out of the magic lift, almost tackling him her greeting was so enthusiastic.

"Leon!" she shouted as she practically appeared in front of him, nearly knocking him over. "Is it done?!"

Leon suppressed a grin and nodded.

"Show it! Show it!" she chanted as she took his arm and started pulling him towards a nearby table.

Leon's ability to suppress his smile began to falter. Sid had always been this enthusiastic about her work, and she had nearly limitless energy. The passion she had for her work had kept Leon going during those moments when his progress stalled, or he ran into creative roadblocks.

It had cropped up in his enchanting work, but it was his growing skill in blacksmithing that had really thrown his perfectionism into stark relief. This wasn't merely drawing a bunch of runes on a piece of paper, with little cost aside from time invested into his work. He could make a mistake drawing a rune, and while he'd be annoyed, it was hardly the end of the world. Blacksmithing was a far more expensive art form, both in terms of time and material costs. There were periods during his studies that he was unable to really get started on any projects for fear of making a mistake and having to start over, but Sid's encouragement had helped him through those times, ensuring that he kept soldiering on.

Leon, after being dragged over to the table, brought out the blade he'd finished only a couple hours ago, and let Sid look it over.

"Very nice, very nice," Sid whispered as she took the blade in hand and began to experimentally swing it around. "Fantastic balance, very durable... These enchantments etched into the steel, are they of your creation?"

"They are," Leon confirmed.

"Thought so," Sid replied. "This couldn't have been the work of normal Heaven's Eye enchanters, they have a tendency to reuse glyphs that they've already confirmed work. They can make some fantastic enchantments pretty damned quick if they want to, but their commissions are never as perfect as they could be with all the cobbling together of enchantments from different pre-designed glyphs."

Leon just shrugged. He'd examined some of Heaven's Eye's work in the past, but not nearly enough to really get an idea for any patterns. For the most part, Nestor, Xaphan, and the Thunderbird were instructors enough for him. For the first year he spent in Occulara, he had gone to a few lessons with several different enchanting instructors, but all of them were either too demanding of Leon's already limited time or were simply not good enough to teach him. As a result, while getting an enchantment instructor was one of the conditions Leon had given the Director for his employment, he'd eventually dropped that particular request. Heaven's Eye had some truly skilled and talented enchanters, but they were rank amateurs compared to Nestor, anyway.

"There are still some areas you need to improve in, though," Sid continued as she held the blade up to the light and channeled some of her magic into it. "A few tiny spots where the steel wasn't mixed well enough, and the folding pattern is still a little random. The coloring from heat tempering is also a little dull and stark, and there's not a lot of blending between the blue and the gold. A lot of this can easily be solved once you *finally* start—"

"—Start getting a handle on earth magic, yes, yes, you've said that many times," Leon interrupted with playful exasperation, having heard Sid advocate for learning earth magic on enough occasions to be rather tired of it. "I'm working on it, I'm working on it. Believe me, I'd *love* to manipulate metal with nothing but my own magic power, but there're only so many hours in the day, you know? I have too much on my plate as it is."

"Do what you will, but you know my opinion," she nonchalantly replied as she gave the sword another complete once-over, her eyes glittering with excitement.

She handed the blade back to Leon, her expression practically glowing even with her criticism.

"For what few imperfections I can see, that blade will still serve its wielder well, regardless! I can tell it's quite powerful and will last a while, I'm sure the commissioner will be well pleased!"

Leon smiled unabashedly, not even trying to restrain it. He took pride in his work, he couldn't help it.

Sid asked, "Did you name the weapon?"

Leon fought the urge to snort. "By the Ancestors, no. Naming weapons is tacky and only invites ridicule and embarrassment. What if I named this weapon 'Victory', or something like that? Just asking for an ironic curse."

"Don't let superstition get the better of you, Raime," Sid said as she slipped into more lecturing tones. "A name can give a weapon a good sense of purpose and intent, and that *can* have measurable impact

on the magic it might channel. Besides, having a name in mind when you start can even help you to focus on what you want the weapon to do. Solidify its purpose in your mind, and you'll find that the design will come to you more easily."

"That sounds a little like superstition to me," Leon replied. "Who measures the impact of intent on creating weapons? I knew what I wanted to make without giving it a name, and I think it's turned out quite well. Besides, is it on the smith to name the weapon, or is it on the wielder? Whose intent matters more? What if I named this sword 'Blood Drinker' or something similarly gruesome, and the person who commissioned the sword instead wants to name it 'Protector' or something? Leave it to the commissioner to name the sword, they're the one using it."

Sid sighed. "As a blacksmith, I think it's a better philosophy to design with the commissioner's intent in mind, and then name accordingly."

"The commissioner didn't exactly give me much to work with," Leon pointed out. "The instructions I was given amounted to 'make a sword'. What can I glean from that?"

With the smug look of having Leon prove her point, Sid replied, "In that case, the smith's intent is all that matters! Why don't you give the sword a name right now? It's finished, so it's only a formality, but why not?"

She gave a hard smile, and Leon realized that she probably wasn't going to let this go. He knew her well enough at this point to be familiar with her stubbornness. She was tougher than the steel she worked when she set her mind to something.

With some reluctance, Leon glanced at the blade in his hand. With its gold edge and focus on fire and light enchantments, he immediately thought of a name, though he *really* didn't want to give one to the sword. It didn't much fit the eagle theme he'd given the hilt, but if it got Sid off his back, then so be it.

"Sunlight," he said.

Sid smiled. "A good name. Gentle, but strong and bright. Perfect for the commissioner."

"Speaking of," Leon replied as he sheathed the blade and started wrapping it back up, "who *is* the commissioner? All I know is that they're from the Sacred Golden Empire."

"And that's all you're going to know," Sid cheekily replied. "This was a part of the agreement, the commissioner didn't want their identity to be known to the smiths working on any of the weapons they were commissioning."

"If they were commissioning multiple weapons, then why the need for secrecy?" Leon asked, though he didn't actually mind too much if he didn't know who exactly was getting Sunlight.

"It's just the way they wanted it," Sid explained with a dismissive frown and helpless shrug. "Something about only using the best of the commissions and not wanting people to get upset if they ever see the commissioner, and they're not using their weapon. Or so it was explained to me, anyway, the real reason is not for me to guess at."

"So they're that powerful, then?" Leon said as he shot Sid a quick grin.

"I'm not saying any more!" Sid insisted. "Now, it's not a day for your instruction, so you'd better get on out of here, kid! I'm sure someone like you has much better uses for his time and wasting away in a dreary workshop with little old me!"

"Time with you is never wasted!" Leon waxed with great aplomb.

"Sure, sure," Sid dismissively replied, though a smile had still bloomed on her face.

"But I have to ask... Aren't you forgetting something?" Leon continued as he rubbed his index and middle fingers against his thumb. "I didn't do all that work out of the kindness of my heart, you know, and I went to some expense getting the materials needed to finish this piece..."

"Of course, of course," Sid replied, and she conjured several huge ingots of a dark, smoky gray metal on the table—special, magically treated iron perfect for his purpose. Leon eagerly grabbed them and pulled them into his soul realm. He'd gone too long without armor, and now he was finally starting to have enough faith in his skills to give creating a new suit for himself a serious try.

Leon walked back to the lift with a huge smile on his face. He'd had some fun with the exchange, and he had some new materials to play with, but his purpose was finished; the blade had been dropped off and would now be delivered to the commissioner, and he'd received his payment. It was time to focus on the next task at hand: the 'haunted' house that Talal had found.

Leon fetched Anzu from the stable, and the two of them took off for the location that Talal had given Leon. It was on the north side of the Scamander River, so Leon and his griffin had to cross one of the city's gigantic bridges. In his experience, a bridge was an extremely important strategic object, and much of the defensive value of a bridge was lost if whatever it spanned had too many points of crossing.

However, the Scamander was replete with bridges—just another subtle reminder of Ilion's power. They were so unconcerned with invasion or armed conflict in their heartlands that they'd built enormous bridges all along the river that huge armies could use to cross with ease. These bridges were tall, but highly magically advanced, with only the ends of the bridge being made of actual physical matter. The entire central half of just about every single bridge was made of magical light, which could be shut off to allow ships to pass through, assuming the ships couldn't just go under the massive constructs.

Leon had gotten fairly familiar with most of the Ilian Empire's infrastructure, by now. As the Director had indicated, he wasn't called on that often to fulfill his requests. In fact, over the past ten years, Leon had only spent an average of two months out of the year away from his home and family, usually running some errand or fetching some highly valuable material for the Director's personal use.

His favorite job to this point was about five years after he arrived in Occulara, when the eggs of the wyverns that roosted in the mountains just east of the Indra Raj started to hatch. The

Scorched Fields between these mountains and the many Pegasi States were often incinerated when the new wyvern parents left their aeries to hunt for food for their young. Wyverns had a five-year-long reproductive cycle, so this usually happened twice per decade, leading to regular enough fiery devastation to give the Scorched Fields their name.

When this happened, warriors from all over the plane were usually called in to help contain the wyverns and stop them from doing too much damage, and Leon had been one of those warriors during the last

hatching. His proudest moment during that hunt had been when he knocked a seventh-tier wyvern out of the sky with a single bolt of lightning, striking it in the head and killing it instantly.

The time for another hatching was coming soon, probably in the next few months, and he fully expected to be called up again to head down there, and he was looking forward to it. It would do him and his retinue some good to get out of Occulara, they didn't do that enough as it was. There was only so much he could do to keep them motivated when they s

Chapter 683: Katerina's Villa

The supposedly haunted villa was a fairly large place, and one that was in a very desirable part of the Empire—in suburbs extremely close to the wealthy farming estates between the Scamander and Serenity rivers. The entire estate was smaller than Leon's home, but the villa itself was about as large as his, only without the ancillary buildings that Leon's villa had. It looked a little different from Leon's villa, though, primarily built of green marble, black granite, and highlighted with pink quartz. There were only two courtyards, one in the center of the villa and one out in front.

As Leon glided in just above the street, he scanned the building as best as he could. As with almost all buildings within the Empire, it had been warded against magic senses, and as was common with more expensive villas, was surrounded by an eight-foot-tall decorative wall. There weren't many other enchantments that Leon could sense within its stone, aside from what he'd learned were fairly standard structural enchantments to ensure that the villa was extremely durable.

However, even with those structural enchantments, as he approached, Leon noted that the villa seemed a little rundown. It seemed that the owners were trying to fix that since the front courtyard was filled with various construction materials, but he couldn't see anyone there actually working. Only Talal and a middle-aged third-tier woman were there, quietly chatting.

Leon dropped to the ground as he walked through the gate, Anzu just behind him. The griffin seemed curious about the construction materials lying around, but he stayed with Leon as he approached his personal assistant and who he presumed was the villa's owner.

"Leon!" Talal called out, raising his hand in greeting.

Leon nodded in return. "This is the 'haunted' house?" he asked.

"That's what my workers keep saying," the woman explained as she walked forward to meet Leon partway, her face breaking out in a wide, welcoming smile. "I am Katerina, it's such a pleasure to meet one a mage of your caliber!"

"Ah, uh, thank you," Leon said, a little taken aback, but not quite surprised. In his interactions with people who knew who he was, it was hardly uncommon for them to act exceedingly polite and almost servile, as if they were trying to suck up to him a bit. "I'm Leon, it's nice to meet you."

"An absolute delight!" Katerina gushed as she shamelessly took Leon's arm and steered him toward the villa's front entrance, whose door had been removed and was leaning against the wall right next to the frame. "It's an honor to have you come out and help me and my husband deal with this small issue, though I have to admit I'm a little embarrassed. This shouldn't normally be something that a man as powerful as you should have to deal with..."

"It's no problem at all, I assure you," Leon said a little stiffly. He didn't enjoy this woman holding his arm, but he didn't mind it so much that he'd ask her to stop. "I'm quite interested in learning about older civilizations that existed here before the Empire, and when I learned that there was a villa built above ghost-infested ruins, why I just had to come out here and see it for myself!"

"Something to thank the ghosts for, then," Katerina replied. "I hope it's not too imprudent to say that, Leon. These damn lazy workers have been rotating in and out, constantly complaining about ghosts and the like, and I've had very little to thank this situation for over the past couple years. But bringing you to my home is an honor truly worth all the hassle! Please, consider me your servant for the time being; if there's anything at all I can do for you, don't hesitate to say so!"

Her grip on his arm tightened for a moment, but Leon made the conscious decision to not dig into her offer for any other implications.

"How about we get started with this place, then?" Leon asked. "Tell me about your villa."

Katerina escorted Leon inside, closely followed by Talal. Anzu, meanwhile, laid down just outside the door to wait for Leon to return.

"My husband and I bought this place some twenty years ago," Katerina explained. "We lived here for about fifteen years, until we had to move for work. Never, in all that time, were we harassed by any ghosts, apparitions, or any other unnatural phenomena such as that. We've always made plenty of sacrifices to the gods, and participated regularly in the monthly fengari festivals. Our household shrines were well-cared for.

"But after we realized that our move was going to be permanent, we put this villa up for sale, but every time someone made an offer, *something* has happened to kill the deal. Unfortunately, it's been long enough that our home needed some maintenance, but the workers we brought in have left it in a sorry state, as you can see."

Leon glanced around at the villa's atrium. It was, indeed, in a sorry state, with most of the marble flooring torn up, revealing the bare foundation stones beneath. The granite columns were covered in dirt and dust, and the walls appeared only half-painted, with everything to his right painted a vivid red, while everything to his left a similar shade, but duller and clearly older.

Leon replied, "All villas look like this when they're being renovated. Sections of mine have been in similar states pretty much ever since I bought it. There always seems to be more work that can be done."

Katerina laughed. "True. And things seemed fairly straightforward with our villa. Our contracted workers were making good time, but apparently, they were seeing things for a while before the supervisor brought it to our attention. Motion in the corner of their eyes, missing materials, quiet, unintelligible voices, that sort of thing. Turnover for our workers started to drastically rise about six months ago, but it wasn't until just a couple weeks ago that things took a more serious turn.

"While working on the basement, one of our workers fell through the floor and into an underground chamber. While down there, he swears that he saw ghosts. None of our workers have returned since, leaving our renovations only half finished."

"That's unfortunate. This place is beautiful even as it is, but I can tell it would be so much more if all of these renovations could be complete."

"Thank you," Katerina replied.

"Do you mind showing me the chamber your worker fell into?" Leon asked.

"Of course, this way," the woman replied.

As they walked through the large villa, Leon asked, "You said that there were missing materials, yes? Do you know what happened to them?"

"Initially, we thought it was just some of the workers stealing some of the materials, but in light of everything that's happened since, I can't say for certain."

"Do you know what went missing?"

"Copper and silver, mostly," Katerina replied. "We needed the conductors to help renovate this villa's enchantment scheme, but much of the material went missing."

Leon nodded, understanding that a fairly large amount of silver was needed for robust enchantments. The enchantments themselves didn't so much need the materials, as they could be inscribed upon just about anything that could conduct magic power, but silver—and, to a lesser extent, copper—was one of the best magical conductors around, and adding silver to the enchantment scheme could greatly increase the amount of magic power that an enchantment could be fed.

For the enchantments that Leon had put into his villa, he'd invested at least a million silvers into such upgrades, ensuring that his wards were much more potent than they'd been in his home back in the Bull Kingdom.

Upon reaching the basement, Leon asked Katerina, "Is there anything else that you can tell me about this ghost problem? Even the smallest of details could be important..."

"Nothing immediately comes to mind," Katerina replied. "I wasn't that hands-on with the work being done here, and unfortunately, none of the workers who could give you a better picture of what was going on here were willing to return, no matter how much money I offered."

"A shame," Leon said as they reached the bottom of the stairs and found themselves in a fairly large underground space. The basement was much smaller than the entire footprint of the villa, and based on how it was built, Leon figured it was little more than a wine cellar. There were four vaulted alcoves to the right and left, and bigger arches in the ceiling to help hold up the stone villa above. As with the rest of the villa, the basement was entirely empty with all of the building materials having likely been moved outside, though the second-to-last alcove on the right side had been roped off. Leon could understand why, because the entire floor of the entire alcove, which was big enough to have held at least a dozen barrels of wine if need be, had collapsed into a dark, lightless pit.

"I'm going to take a quick look around, if that's all right," Leon said as he disentangled himself from Katerina. She seemed reluctant to let him go, but she didn't resist as he pulled away.

"Of course," she whispered. "If you need anything at all, please let me know."

“Will do, thank you,” Leon replied, and he strode over to the edge of the pit and looked down.

It wasn’t that deep, only about two stories. However, Leon’s eyes widened as he realized that he’d finally found something worth his time.

The chamber at the bottom of the pit wasn’t made of stone or any such common building material, but familiar glossy gray metal. The chamber wasn’t domed, but it had a wider floor than it did ceiling, with the walls sloping inward as they rose. The bottom corners had a thin gap between the walls and the floor, and Leon knew from experience with such architecture that it eh facility this chamber was a part of was powered, then the gaps would’ve been filled with white fire.

For the first time in all of his searching through old ruins in Occulara, Leon had found architecture that strongly resembled that of the Thunderbird Clan’s other major facilities, such as Xaphan’s prison and Nestor’s lab.

As he thought about Nestor, Leon cast his consciousness into his soul realm. Things down there hadn’t changed much in the past ten years, but he had removed the golem statue that he’d been using as a silent threat against the dead man. However, he had heavily expanded the tables around Nestor’s ruby, allowing Leon to have more materials at his disposal when learning from the dead man. He’d also moved one of the bronze golems from his replacement archives so that Nestor could have an assistant to help him with his own studies. He’d yet to break his own enchantments that were locking the journal Leon had taken from Jormun’s transformation cave, but Leon wasn’t exactly holding out much hope for him to change that anytime soon. Regardless, he’d still built up some amount of trust with the man to allow him the golem assistant.

[Well, dead man,] Leon said, [I think I’ve finally found something worth a damn.]

[Mm? That would be a nice change of pace,] Nestor replied. [I’ve grown rather tired of being disturbed for meaningless finds like residential halls, empty hospitals, or *sewage treatment plants*.]

Leon could hear the shudder in Nestor’s voice when he brought up the last ruin that Leon had gone to explore, and Leon couldn’t blame him.

[I thought we all agreed never to mention that place again?] Leon murmured as he choked down the bile that started to rise in his throat.

The crackling voice of Xaphan responded from within his pavilion. [I don’t remember anything of the sort, and besides, sewage is an apt topic when speaking with your resident ghost.]

[As it is when speaking with a demon so pathetic that he lost his title,] Nestor retorted.

Leon felt Xaphan’s anger spike for just a moment, and he shouted, [Enough! Let’s not get into this right now!] He spoke with strength, and the two who were about to bicker quieted down.

[Xaphan, don’t you have mist to absorb?] Leon asked. He’d made a modification to Xaphan’s pavilion several years ago, finally fulfilling the demon’s desire to have an enchantment that would help him absorb the Mists of Chaos beyond the edges of Leon’s soul realm. He’d used a similar enchantment long ago, when Leon was still living in Ariminium in the Bull Kingdom to rise from fifth-tier equivalent to eighth-tier equivalent power, and Leon had promised to build him a more permanent version of that enchantment. The Thunderbird had advised against it, citing its danger, but Leon and Nestor eventually

developed something that would work for the demon. It was still far too dangerous for Leon to use, especially with his still-recovering soul realm, but Xaphan had been steadily using it for the past few years. It wasn't nearly as powerful as the original enchantment he'd used, so he was still at the human equivalent of the eighth-tier, but he was still gaining in power.

[Yeah, yeah, yeah,] the demon grumbled. [If you run into something dangerous down there, always remember that you can throw that ruby at them. Might distract them long enough for you to escape. Even if it doesn't, you'd still at least be rid of this shitstain.]

Ignoring the comment and cutting Nestor off before he could respond, Leon said, [Dead man, have you any insights to share with this other ghost? You know, since you're one yourself?]

Nestor sighed long and deep. [What's down there is definitely of import, that much is certain. I can't say what it is without you going down there, though.]

Leon nodded. He'd gone over this with Nestor many times in the past decade. Occulara was so different now as opposed to what it had been during Nestor's time, that he didn't have even the biggest landmarks to orient himself. Even the Scamander River ran a different course, further complicating his and Leon's attempts to figure out what might of the arsenal might be left. About the only thing that was certain was that Occulara as a whole hadn't moved, otherwise Leon wouldn't have found anything at all in his search for the arsenal.

[There is something else, though,] Nestor said. [That woman said that silver and copper went missing?]

[Yes,] Leon confirmed.

[Hmm, that's certainly something to note. Those metals would be good for a great many things, not just as conductors for magic power.]

Leon turned back to Katerina and quickly asked her what other materials were around that weren't stolen. After having most of the materials listed off, Leon thanked her and returned to his inspection of the underground chamber. Unfortunately, it didn't help Nestor too much in figuring out what exactly a ghost might want with those metals, or even rule out the possibility that all of that metal had simply been embezzled.

[Would you think there's anything dangerous down there?] Leon asked.

[Doubtful,] Nestor replied. [Passive defenses, maybe, but something underground for so long... This place is clearly without much power, otherwise anyone who lived in this primitive dwelling would know what it was they lived atop of.]

[Your lab, Xaphan's prison, the Cradle, and the Teira archives all still had power,] Leon pointed out. [All were potentially dangerous.]

[If you're not going to risk it, then don't,] Nestor retorted. [I require no justification.]

Xaphan then added, shouting from his pavilion, [But we'll be right here, watching you the entire time!]

Leon rolled his eyes. Turning back to Katerina and Talal where they were waiting by the foot of the stairs, he said, "I'm going to head down there and check the place out. If I'm not out in... let's give it three hours, then maybe think about raising some alarms."

"I don't think that's the best idea, wouldn't it be better to organize a larger expedition for something like this?" Talal asked, showing a surprising amount of concern.

"I'm not going to organize a large expedition only for this to turn out to be a dead end," Leon replied. "Just a quick look around to try and get a feel for the scale of what's been found. I'm not going to take any real risks, just jump down there and see what I can see."

Talal looked like he wanted to argue the point a little more, but he seemed to think better of it and just nodded. This wasn't the first time Leon had done this when they'd found a ruin, and nothing had ever happened before.

So, without further ado, Leon turned back to the pit and jumped down into the chamber. Twenty feet later, he landed upon the small pile of stony rubble on the floor. When he glanced back up, he paused. The ceiling was largely the same as the walls and the floor, being made of the same glossy gray metal that so many other important Thunderbird Clan facilities were. However, this place was clearly in much worse condition, with long cracks in the metal spider-webbing around the ceiling, with the largest crack being right where the pit had opened. It was easy to see why the floor of the cellar had collapsed if this was the state of the chamber, but what surprised Leon was that he could see signs of more recent construction from this side of the hole. Stone had been magicked to fill some of these cracks, and though it had clearly weakened with time, Leon guessed that *someone* had probably been down here before. It was possible that this pit had opened before, and that it had been fixed by an earth mage at some point. However, that didn't stop the pit from opening again, clearly.

"Hey Talal!" Leon called out. A moment later, Talal's bronze features could be seen at the edge of the pit above. "Once we head out of here, see if you can dig up the history of this place! It looks like someone else has been down here before, but not recently! Focus on any records of renovation!"

"I'll make a note of it," Talal said.

A moment later, Katerina appeared at the top of the pit, too. "You probably won't find much, this villa is fairly new," she stated. "It was built only about a hundred years ago."

"What was here before?" Talal asked.

Talal sighed in dejection, and when Leon threw him a questioning look, he explained, "When a building is leveled, most of the time, a lot of its unimportant documents are disposed of, as well. Ilian records stretch back tens of thousands of years, and there just isn't room to store absolutely everything."

Leon muttered, "Damn. Well, see what you can find anyway, even if it's just a record of who owned this land before Katerina and her husband."

Talal nodded again, and Leon turned his attention back to the chamber he found himself in.

There were four doors that led out of the chamber, but two of them could easily be ruled out as ways to go, for they were broken and ajar, revealing that the chambers or halls that they connected to had collapsed. That left only two for him to choose from.

Using his magic senses, which thankfully weren't blocked by any wards down here, Leon inspected both doors. Both were trapezoidal and without any ornamental flair that might've indicated their purpose. They lacked control runes for opening them, but Leon could see scratches on the edges of the doors

where he guessed they'd been forced open at some point. The door to his right had more scratches than the door to his left, so he figured that he'd start there, first.

Leon strode over to the door, retrieved some tools from his soul realm, and forced the door open. It moved slowly, resisting him greatly, but he still managed to slide it into the wall, giving him access to the dark corridor beyond.

"Now," Leon muttered aloud, a smile spreading across his face at the prospect of exploring such a mysterious abandoned facility, "Let's see what we can find..."

Chapter 684: Embezzlement, Theft, Treason

Leon made his way over to the door that had more scratches upon it. The edges of the trapezoidal door made it seem like whoever had tried to force it open didn't realize it slid into the wall, and instead had tried to pry it free from its frame. The gray metal door had clearly resisted quite well, for it didn't seem bent at all from the many attempts that had scratched it up. Likewise, when Leon examined it a little closer, he saw some burn marks and other scratches that indicated more magical means were used to try and force the door open.

Still, however, the door remained there, seemingly none the worse for wear, aside from a few scratches upon its face.

[Dirty primitives,] Nestor haughtily said as his magic senses left Leon's soul realm and examined the door. [The Clan's metallurgical technology would ensure that these doors remained sealed, no matter how much force they brought to bear upon it.]

[Looks like they tried to force this one open a lot more than the other one,] Leon observed as he cast a quick look back, otherwise ignoring Nestor's arrogant observation. [Definitely some attempts to get it open with magic over there, though. Could their magical attacks have been absorbed by the door's enchantments and used to power them, allowing them to use the controls to get them open?]

[A possibility,] Nestor conceded. [Most secured locations wouldn't use such means as they represent a security risk. However, depending on what exactly this place was, then there could very well have been such back-up measures applied, allowing the doors to be operated even if the power were to fail.]

Leon smiled and placed his hand against the scratched door and summoned his magic power. He tried to channel some of it through his hand and into his metal, but his magic power stubbornly refused to get through the surface. He couldn't sense any magic power actively flowing through the metal, either.

[Is this some kind of specialized anti-magic substance?] he wondered 'aloud' to Nestor.

[There may be some resistance—just as some materials, like gold, silver, and copper, will conduct magic power, some will insulate from it. Using insulating materials was fairly common for safety, if for nothing else. Plus, it would help our enchantments be that much more magically efficient, preventing bleed-off of the magic power flowing through the conductors. As for any 'specialized' substances, well you're not likely to find anything like that outside of a few very secure places, at least on this plane. Our Clan's old capital and the like.]

Leon nodded and pulled his hand back. He walked over to the other door, reasoning that if it had less scratches, it was probably easier to open.

And indeed it was, for he'd barely put his hand against the metal before a tiny bolt of silver-blue lightning erupted from his skin like static, entering the metal and causing it to slide into the wall, revealing a long, dark corridor beyond.

As soon as the door opened, Leon dropped into a defensive stance, his body sparkling with silver-blue lightning. However, there was little else aside from darkness waiting beyond the threshold—darkness, and several more doors on either side of the corridor.

The corridor matched the Thunderbird architecture he'd come to find familiar, being trapezoidal in shape, though the entire place was still devoid of magic power, leaving the walls bare and the usual white fire lighting absent. It was also quite wide, as if built to accommodate a lot of traffic.

With a great deal of caution, Leon began to advance down the corridor, his footsteps loudly echoing in the empty hallway.

He found reason to double his caution when he reached the alcoves with the first set of doors. The door to his left had fallen to the ground, revealing nothing but dirt and rock behind it, but the door to his right was still intact. More concerning, though, was that crumpled to the side of the door was a skeleton, long rotted away to bone and bits of torn and desiccated cloth. However, it was only half a corpse, for everything below the waist appeared lost behind the door, as if someone had been chopped in half by the door when it last closed.

Leon scowled and approached, his magic senses projected as he watched out for anything at all that might jump out at him from the darkness.

He bent down in front of the skeleton, noting that the area around the door was quite dusty.

[Looks like this guy's been down here a long time,] Leon thought, sharing it with Nestor. [I wonder how long it's been; not like there seems to be much in the way of carrion down here.]

[This facility was likely not airtight, and plenty has caved in,] Nestor pointed out. [There could very well be places that allow scavengers access.]

Leon hummed in acknowledgment. He couldn't discern much from a skeleton with nothing but scraps for clothing, but his eyes drifted a bit, and he noticed something rather distressing in the dust in front of the door.

Footprints, and other evidence of foot traffic. Quite a bit of it, too.

Leon shot back to his feet and looked around again, but again, he saw nothing. After a moment of looking around, he confirmed that the door was dead and not even his magic power could open it. So, he turned around and began to hesitantly walk further down the corridor. Now that he was keyed in for what to notice, he could see quite a few footprints on the dusty ground. Some appeared human sized, but others appeared quite a bit bigger. In some of the deeper layers of dust, he could also see long marks of something large and flat being dragged along the ground.

The next set of doors were both dead, but there was quite a bit more dust this deep into the corridor. If Leon had to guess, all of the dust was most likely from when some other rooms and corridors collapsed. Regardless of how the dust got there, Leon could see quite a few tracks in it now that it was thicker.

Proceeding onto the last set of doors before the end of the corridor, Leon found that one of the door was open, but revealing nothing but dirt and rock. The other door, thankfully, was marginally less dead than the others, allowing him to open it with a bit of applied magic power. It slid painfully into the wall, screeching bloody murder as it did. Even then, it didn't even fully open, but Leon was able to look past it and see what was within.

Inside, he saw a fairly large room filled with counters and various metal arms on tracks dangling from the ceiling. With just a single look, Nestor cried out, [Ah! I know what this place is, now! It's a golem manufactory! A small one, most likely, but that's what this room was for!]

[It built golems?] Leon asked.

[Yes,] Nestor confirmed. [The need for automated workers was high, but since it takes a mage who's achieved Apotheosis to make proper golems powered by wisps, they can be surprisingly rare despite their utility. Still, our Clan had manufacturies set up wherever we found ourselves, liberating us from the need for physical labor. Though, I'm unsure if this place was actually one of ours and not a vassal Clan's. Given its size, now that I think about it, it's probably not ours.]

Leon frowned, and he remembered the missing silver and copper. [Could some of the golems still be active?] he asked. [Could they be the 'ghosts' that the workers above saw? Maybe they stole the silver and copper, acting on old instructions to move supplies for manufacturing?]

[An interesting theory, and not one that I can confirm or deny based on what we've seen so far,] Nestor replied.

Leon nodded again and after poking around in the room a bit, finding nothing, he walked back out into the corridor and turned to face the final door, directly opposite from the door he'd come in from.

He approached, and as with the door opening into the corridor, this one opened with barely more than a touch and a spark of power, revealing a large, circular magic lift. There were magic lights around the lift's edge, barely enough to let a mortal see in the dark—emergency lights, Leon knew. He took a deep breath and got on the lift.

The lights flickered, but a single control rune appeared on the wall. With a quick touch, Leon caused the lift to start to slowly descend. The lift only went down one floor—the factory seemingly only being two stories tall when it was above ground—and the door that appeared before him was already open, revealing another long, dark corridor.

Leon had done little more than take a single step out into the corridor before a weak, quiet voice came echoing down the hall.

"Have you... finally come... to end my torment?"

Leon froze, his blade appearing in his hand with a flash of light.

"All others... who've come... were killed..." the voice whispered. "Please... end this..."

The voice whispered no more, and when Leon hesitantly called out, "End what?" he received no response.

[Nestor, what in the hells was that?] he demanded.

[Sometimes, condemned criminals were used to power necessary infrastructure,] Nestor said nonchalantly. [You ought to be fairly familiar with the specifics.]

Xaphan crackled with antipathy as he said, [I certainly am.]

Leon scowled. [So, someone's still down here, being used as a magic power generator?]

[That's my guess,] Nestor replied.

With some distaste, Leon began to walk down the corridor. As he did, he heard the sound of approaching footsteps, so he froze, summoned his lightning, and assumed an aggressive posture.

One of the doors to his right opened, and three large golems came trooping out, much larger and burlier than the ones Leon had seen in the archives below Teira that now resided in his soul realm, and much closer to the golems used by Nestor in his lab. They weren't armored, but they definitely looked strong, if rather dilapidated. One even limped, and all were made of green, oxidized bronze, showing just how little maintenance they'd received in the millennia since the Thunderbird Clan had ruled here.

The three golems made a salute, seemingly ignoring Leon's aggressive stance.

[Ah. Don't expect much from these things, Leon. They're little more than labor golems. They were designed to move heavy things from one place to another.]

Leon relaxed a little bit, but not completely. "Can any of you understand me?" he called out to the bronze figures. "Raise your hands!"

None of the golems responded verbally, but all three raised their hands into the air.

"That's something, at least," Leon murmured. Addressing them again, he ordered, "Show me the power room!"

His hope that they could understand him seemed to pay off, as they began marching in unison further down the corridor, stopping at the next door on the left, halfway down the hallway. Leon followed, and when he poked his head into the alcove, the door slowly slid partway open, just enough to allow him to get into the room beyond without squeezing.

What awaited beyond was a fairly familiar sight—he'd seen something similar in Nestor's lab. It was a fairly large chamber, and directly across from the door was a panel with a dozen crystals about the size of his hands put together dotting the wall in a four-by-three grid. All but one were completely opaque, like cloudy white glass. The last one glowed a faint red, dull and barely visible even in the dark, showing just how little magic power remained within.

To the right and left were six large platforms, upon which were corpses held aloft by huge organic-seeming roots dangling from the ceiling. Five of these platforms were inhabited by corpses, their bones tangled up in the roots, though a few of their smaller bones, such as fingers, toes, and jaw mandibles had fallen to the floor of their platform. Two of these corpses were fresh enough to still have some skin and hair attached, though they were still extraordinarily desiccated.

The last platform, however, held a man still barely clinging to life. He struggled to look up as Leon walked in, his body thin and frail, his head covered in thin gray hair. He appeared to be little more than skin and bones from what little Leon could see, and his aura was barely more than first-tier—though, if

Leon knew anything about the roots that impaled his body, it was that they were extremely damaging to the body's magic foundation. Justin and Xaphan both had been so physically damaged that they'd lost nearly all of their power.

In the past ten years, Justin had managed to climb back to the third-tier, but it had been quite the struggle, and he was still weak enough at that level that he rarely left the small villa that Leon and Valeria had purchased for him—Leon knowing just how frequently the man left thanks to the fact that he employed all of Justin's servants, and liked to keep tabs on him, just in case.

Leon froze when he realized the man in the roots was moving, but after a moment, he realized the man wasn't a threat at all, and he began to walk forward.

"Who are you?" Leon called out as he slowly walked across the room, as alert as he could be for any possible threats that might jump out at him. The memories he had of the last time he'd been in a facility like this were still fresh in his mind, and anything that thought they could try and invade his body was going to be met with the tempest that swirled just beneath his skin.

The man seemed to struggle to breathe, but he eventually gasped, "Prisoner..."

[Look to his platform,] Nestor said. [In a place like this, his crime would've been inscribed—assuming he's old enough to have been from my time.]

Leon did so, and he saw, carved in an old, but still readable runic script, the sentence, 'embezzler, thief, traitor – condemned to death by exmagication in service of the Storm King'.

Leon's expression darkened, and he paused in his approach. "This for you? Serious crimes you're accused of," he observed.

The man offered no words, he barely seemed able to keep his head aloft. He didn't even try and argue that he wasn't the accused, tacitly admitting that the inscribed words were for him.

"Who were these other people?" Leon asked aloud, noting that there were no crimes inscribed beneath them.

"Explorers..." the condemned man whispered. "Thirty years... maybe more... ago... two came here... captured... brought here... and others... many years... before..."

[This place built golems,] Nestor reminded Leon. [To trespass here would've been a serious crime, for these places were the backbone of our Clan's labor force. Without other instructions, the golems were likely ordered to place any trespassers within the roots to keep this place operational.]

[Get some use out of them if they were criminals?] Leon asked. [Not just let them languish in a prison somewhere if their bodies could be used?]

[That was the thought, yes,] Nestor confirmed.

Leon sighed and turned his attention back to the man barely breathing in the roots.

Embezzlement. Theft. Treason. Serious things, but he wondered just how deserved this fate was, and how high up this man had been to still be alive here eighty-thousand years later. However, a moment later, he focused on the roots and saw quite a bit of light magic flowing through them, probably keeping

the man alive. It seemed that most of his drained power was being cycled back into his body to keep him alive, if in this physically deteriorated state.

Leon glanced at the other platforms and their corpses. They hadn't lasted nearly as long, but he soon put that thought out of his mind. It seems they were only guilty of trespassing—and even that charge was shaky given the fall of his Clan and their lack of sovereign rights over this land. Their laws no longer held sway here.

He then briefly glanced out the door and noted that the three labor golems were still waiting patiently by the door. He supposed that they were responding to his blood, and that was why they were being so deferential rather than trying to hook him up to one of these things right now.

"Harsh..." he whispered.

[Necessary,] Nestor countered. [Crime and subversion are deterred by strong punishments. Given this man's charges, he was likely a government official, and was caught stealing from the Clan.]

"Please..." the man whispered as Leon apparently went silent from his perspective. "End me..."

Leon blinked in surprise. "You don't want me to free you?"

The man said no more, just giving Leon one of the most pitiable looks he'd ever seen before his head sagged down, the man losing the strength to even keep holding it up.

[This man has been condemned to death, do not free him,] Nestor urged. [He hasn't served his penance. Releasing him would be a mistake. He's sentenced to die here.]

Leon could hear the scorn and derision in Nestor's words, and he could understand.

"What did you do to get entangled here?" Leon asked the man.

"Freed slaves..." the man responded with labored breaths. "Helped... to escape..."

[That doesn't sound like treason to me,] Leon pointed out to Nestor as he glanced back down at the inscribed crimes.

[That might depend on when it took place,] Nestor replied. [If it happened after my father's death and during our Clan's fall, then he aided the enemy and weakened our cause. For that, he deserves what he's suffered.]

"Please..." the man whispered. "Death..."

[Leave him,] Nestor said. [These are the consequences of his actions. This is his punishment.]

Leon closed his eyes for a moment, and when he opened them, a knife appeared in his hand. The man's eyes darted to the knife for a moment, but then returned to Leon's face. His look of anguish faded slightly as Leon approached.

Slowly, Leon lifted the blade to the man's neck, and he waited a moment to hear anything he might say. A protestation, a plea for mercy, anything.

But the man remained quiet. Instead of pleading to be released from the roots, he seemed to sag even further, pressing his neck down onto Leon's knife.

With a sigh, Leon drew the knife across his neck. It didn't seem like there was anything else he could do. Even if he freed the man, he doubted he'd live long enough to even reach the surface, even with Leon's healing spells.

Besides, the man had asked for death, and Leon didn't want to even think about how he might deal with eighty-thousand years spent languishing in this dark hole. If the man wanted the release of death, then that was what Leon decided to bring him.

As the man's lifeblood ran down his neck and onto the roots, it flashed bright red as the magic power it contained was expended. Leon felt it coalesce about ten feet to his right, and when he spun to confront what was going on, he saw the man standing there, a wide smile on his face.

"Thank you," the man said. "I'm in your debt. I only wish I could pay you back, somehow."

Leon quietly relaxed, recognizing this as the man's magic body. It wasn't often that a mage would let their magic body leave their soul realm—the things were incredibly fragile, and having it be destroyed would be devastating. Pain, extreme loss of power, mental degradation, soul realm damage, and more could all result from such a loss.

As the man continued to bleed, his magic body smiled again, and then dissipated, the magic power that had been used to project it now dissolving into the environment's ambient magic. The man had finally died, and without anything to tie it to something—like Nestor's ruby—his magic body unraveled and became part of the magic in the environment.

And Leon was left with much to think about, most pressingly how exactly he was going to explain all of this to Katerina and Talal.

Chapter 685: A New Vision

"Wow..." Katerina murmured. "I had no idea such a place was below my home this whole time..."

"Indeed," Leon whispered as he studied the golem head he'd laid upon the table. "A crime that I had to destroy such an old and advanced golem, but it couldn't be helped. I just wish that the rest of the facility had been intact, it could've been a treasure trove of information and magical technology."

Katerina commiserated with Leon, the knowledge of such a find on her property having been destroyed causing her no small amount of grief.

Talal, however, stared at Leon, and Leon guessed the man knew he was lying—or at least, not telling the whole truth. He'd been with Leon ten years, now, and Leon was sure that the man was familiar enough with his quirks to recognize that much. He was also familiar enough with Leon to not contradict him in front of Katerina.

Leon resisted the urge to smile. After dealing with the ancient prisoner, he'd burned the corpse to ash and set about destroying the bottom floor of the golem manufactory. There wasn't much there, anyway, since most of the other rooms had already been destroyed when they'd caved in. In the room the labor golems came from, though he found not only several boxes full of copper and silver in various forms, but

broken golem parts and another human skeleton. He couldn't do much for a pile of dusty bones, and the parts were mostly just shattered pieces of bronze that were of no use to anyone, but he quickly grabbed the copper and silver, understanding that they were probably the stolen supplies that Katerina had told him about. He also grabbed all of the broken golem pieces, useless though they may be.

The three labor golems, however, were *not* useless. But he didn't need all of them, and he still needed some kind of story to tell Katerina, so on the spot, he'd torn the head of the damaged, limping golem clean off, trusting that his blood would keep the other two from reacting. He was right, and the other two didn't so much as twitch. Leon then pulled the other two golems, plus most of the remains of the third into his soul realm and went back to work wrecking the bottom floor of the facility, ensuring that he left nothing behind that someone could use against him.

Fortunately, this was easy to do now that the facility was completely out of power after the prisoner had been executed. Leon had to jump up the magic lift in order to reach the second floor, but a few small explosion spells had the lift shaft caved in, the enchantments that were supposed to keep it running now utterly failed.

When he reached the surface again, he told Talal and Katerina about the golem he'd encountered down below, and how it had been hostile and that the explosions they'd heard had come from their brief but intense fight. He reasoned that this golem had been the 'ghost' that her workers had been seeing, and in that, he didn't think he was incorrect. He figured the supplies he'd found were probably stolen by the golems still trying to fulfill their functions after all this time, stockpiling materials that were brought to the manufactory.

But that still left the question of just what in the hells had been going on with Katerina's workers. The floor of her cellar had only collapsed a few weeks ago, but they'd apparently been hearing voices and seeing things for months.

Leon had no real answers. Perhaps the workers were just superstitious or lazy. However, he thought it was more likely that the prisoner had noticed the construction work and had been trying to reach out with his magic body, hoping for someone to realize he was there and to do something to help him. Unfortunately, that man was now dead, and Leon had no way to verify that theory.

Regardless, it seemed like his work here was done. He'd destroyed everything that was worth destroying down there, the manufactory reduced to an open hallway with a few broken doors leading to caved-in rooms. Even if someone went down to investigate and find anything worthwhile, Leon doubted they'd find anything that could upset the balance of power, especially with what the Empires had already taken from his clan. He and Talal left Katerina with the instruction to contact them immediately if anything more turned up, but Leon didn't think that likely.

So, when he and Talal left the villa, he was content with his gains and certain that nothing dangerous had been left behind. His mind was already excitedly turning to the tests he would put his two new labor golems through once he returned home.

However, even as he left the villa and began flying back home, Anzu on his heels and Talal taking a more conventional horseless carriage, his racing mind turned to other concerns—namely, the prisoner. Embezzlement, theft, and treason, the former two charges justifying the latter one. The freeing of slaves

had earned that man a sentence of eighty-thousandish years as a magic power generator, barely clinging to life.

‘Excessive’ was the first word that came to Leon’s mind, though it was mitigated somewhat by the fact that he couldn’t imagine anyone would’ve thought the prisoner was going to be down there for so long. On the other hand, the sentence was to remain there until death. The manufactory was also quite small, with what seemed to be only a single room devoted to golem manufacturing. There were other rooms, of course, but that didn’t change the fact that the place was quite small.

Despite its size, it had multiple prisoners acting as magic power generators, as evidenced by the other skeletons in that room.

[Nestor,] Leon said into his soul realm as he flew down the street toward the nearest bridge that would take him back south of the Scamander River, [I have a wonder.]

[Wonder away,] Nestor replied. [I’m here for such things, am I not?]

Leon nodded and frowned lightly. [How widespread was the use of humans as generators for magic power? Or other living things? Xaphan was used as one, you used Justin Isynos and an ice demon as one, along with other beings... And now we find that that small golem factory had a room like that. How standard was this practice?]

[It was fairly common,] Nestor explained with neither hesitation nor shame. [Bigger facilities had them as a matter of course, as we couldn’t afford to have them run out of power. Smaller facilities were given such capabilities on a case-by-case basis. The manufacture of golems was a critical industry, and so it makes sense to me why such a facility, despite its size, would have a magic power generator like that.]

Leon nodded again, but he didn’t stop frowning. [How many places like that existed in your time? How many on this plane alone? Can you say?]

Nestor went silent for a long moment. [I can’t,] he admitted. [The number would’ve been in the thousands. We weren’t in the habit of giving up resources, no matter how common they might be. In this case, magic power isn’t exactly hard to store—or at least, it wasn’t for us. But our power needs were tremendous, and every little bit counted. So, why would we pass by the opportunity to off-load some of that power responsibility onto those who were destined for death, anyway? Or for those who had offended us?]

Leon grunted and bitterly smiled. [That ‘those who had offended us’ kind of makes my point, I think. I can understand, though I don’t agree with, the idea of using those on death row like that. They’re resources, why waste them?]

[Exactly,] Nestor said.

[However, it comes down to a thought that humans are resources, and nothing more, doesn’t it? So how long did it take for it to go from only those on death row, to simply those who had offended you? Was there ever even a separation, or did you just start doing both as soon as you had the capability? Everyone was fair game to use as resources right from the beginning?]

[Is that judgment I hear?] Nestor growled. [You don’t know a thing about how to wield real power, boy. Power provides for the Clan. Power ensures the Clan’s survival and prosperity. Power keeps the jackals

at bay, prevents them from taking what's ours. To shun a source of power for moral or philosophical reasons will only end in your defeat. Judge us all you want, but we built a Kingdom that lasted since the beginning of this era! Since the Age of the Primal Gods and Devils we've thrived! You have no idea how to handle power! How to keep the power you've attained! How to prevent the greedy shits beneath and around you from taking what you've fought and bled and killed for! All you know how to do is ride on our coattails, take your power for granted, and screw around with your little retinue playing as a Lord! You have no place to judge us!]

[It took less than a single universal cycle for the Clan to fall,] Leon countered, ignoring Nestor's tone. It sounded like the man was venting quite a few frustrations that had built up over the years, but Leon wasn't going to just let him go on like that without pushing back. [I'm all that's left. Not even a hundred thousand years, not even a single cycle of the Nexus, and our universe-spanning Clan has been reduced to a single boy in the Divine Graveyard. How much does that say about our Clan's ability to hold onto power? Jason Keraunos died, and the Clan fell apart. It sounds to me like instead of keeping the jackals at bay, they were instead invited in and allowed to share in our spoils. Or can you say that's not what happened with... what was his name? Pindar? Without Jason around to hold his leash, he immediately began slaughtering our vassals and trying to seize power.]

He could practically hear Nestor grinding his nonexistent teeth, but the dead man wasn't done.

[A single case study,] he protested through clenched teeth. [We survived many upheavals in the past, and we've always come out on top.]

[And how many of those upheavals came from our own vassals?] Leon wondered. [How many times were the blades of those beneath us pointed in our direction? How many rebellions did the Clan have to suppress? Enough to fill our magic power generators to bursting, I'd wager.]

Nestor didn't reply, but Leon guessed he'd struck the nail on the head.

[Look, Nestor,] Leon continued, [I'm trying not to judge. Really, I'm not. But everything you've told me of the Clan has painted a picture of a house of cards. A very, very impressive house of cards, but still just as fragile. It has taken nothing less than a few great men and women of every generation to keep the peace, to keep our Clan afloat and guide them through tough times. But then, when tough times came—tough times of our own making, I'd remind you, for the Grave Warden did not seek us out—and all our great men and women were dead, the Clan immediately collapsed. All of our power was gone, and now, eighty-thousand years later, I'm all that's left.]

[Fear kept our vassals in line more than anything else, or at least, that's the impression I've gotten. Fear of what we would do to those who defied us. Fear of our reputation for victory. But we were also hated. And when Jason Keraunos was killed, we were no longer feared. Only hated. And we were torn apart by our enemies from within and without.]

[You can't know all of that,] Nestor whispered angrily.

[No, I can't,] Leon admitted. [However, it rings fairly true on Aeterna, from what I've seen, and I would bet an impressive sum that the same will ring true when we reach Kypros, Minos, and Tiryns. When we finally reach the old roots of our Clan and can see the remains for ourselves.]

[How about you just make your point,] Nestor demanded.

[Fear wasn't enough to maintain our power,] Leon said. [We weren't loved, either, not with our habit of treating those beneath us as commodities. Slaves, and magic power generators, and I don't even know what else. I'm sure far more people were joyous at our Clan's downfall than who mourned.]

[And how would you solve that?] Nestor asked, his tone one of almost mocking disdain. [You, a boy of thirty-one, who's never held a real title before, who's never been truly in a place to make these decisions before? How would you like to fix this 'problem' for the Clan you wish to build? Replace fear with love? Love doesn't motivate people quite like fear, and it doesn't keep them in line...]

[If that's the term you want to go with, sure, I'll use it too. I think you're selling 'love' a bit short,] Leon replied, [but even still, no, that's not what I'm saying. What I'm saying is that I want both fear and love in equal measure. I would agree that love doesn't hold the same motivational power as fear, but love can keep us secure by not making us enemies and winning us friends. It's a tool that we shouldn't throw away, thinking it beneath us, or that it's only for the naïve.]

[So, what, you're just going to ask our enemies for all of our power back? You're going to rebuild the Clan with love? Going to try and fuck them really good so that they'll do what you want them to do, just like your silver wench?]

[Again, *no*,] Leon said with rapidly growing fury, the only thing keeping him from diving into his soul realm to roast Nestor for the crack about Valeria being the fact that he was flying through the streets of Occulara and he didn't want to stop. [To rebuild the Clan, I'll need to conquer. But I can't rule with the same kind of iron fist that our Clan did—I can't be hated as we were. I want us to last for millions of years more without having to rely upon the appearance of great men or women. And that means not taking slaves, not treating people like they're nothing more than resources. Fear and love in equal measure. Mutual respect, but without shying away from violence if the need calls for it.]

Nestor didn't immediately respond, but after a few moments, he smugly shot back, [An easy thing to say now, when you're in no position to do anything. We'll see how long that philosophy lasts when you finally get some real power. *If* you finally get some real power.]

Leon frowned again. [I suppose we will...]

—

"These things are incredible," Valeria exclaimed excitedly as she and Leon inspected the labor golems that he'd brought back.

"That they are," Leon responded with a healthy dose of awe in his tone.

In front of them on one of Leon's tables was the remains of the bronze golem he'd destroyed to fabricate his story to Katerina. The other two golems were beside it with some of their plating removed, exposing their internal workings for Leon and Valeria to study.

And neither of them could even really tell what they were looking at. Bands of silver beneath the bronze plates, glowing crystals, copper and iron components of so many different configurations that Leon could hardly even comprehend them. The golems were as much mechanical as they were magical.

The most important of these components, however, was buried in each golem's chest, behind additional heavily enchanted bronze plating that Leon wasn't willing to try and remove. Behind that plating lay a

crystal construct within which dwelled the wisp powering the golem—an autonomous construct of post-Apotheosis magic power. Living creatures from a certain perspective, but not self-aware, and bound completely to the control enchantments wrought into each golem frame.

They had the potential to grow into true living creatures, as the stone giants in the north showed, but this was apparently such a fluke that it wasn't out of humane concern that Leon refused to screw with the wisp containers, but more practical worries that he might break something he wasn't yet able to fix. He and Valeria were studying the golems, but he still wanted them intact.

Unfortunately, they were only able to spend a couple of hours studying the golems before a light appeared by the door of Leon's workshop with a loud, continuous chime.

Valeria smiled as Leon sighed. "Sounds like someone's looking for you," she said playfully, bumping his hip with hers.

"Could be looking for you, you never know," Leon countered.

"Want to bet on it?" she inquired with a devious look in her sapphire eyes.

"Uuh, no, I think I'll pass on that," Leon replied with a bitter smile.

"Damn, I could've used a backrub or something..."

"No need for that to be a bet," Leon whispered, running his hands along her shoulders, reluctantly stopping as the insistent chiming of his workshop's doorbell continued.

Valeria giggled as Leon sighed, pulled away from her, and headed back out into his workshop's atrium, giving her a look of promise that they were going to finish what they'd just started later.

Waiting for him in the atrium was Talal, along with a messenger from Heaven's Eye. The Director had requested Leon come to his office the following morning for a new assignment. Leon was certain he knew what that assignment would be, and he met it with a mix of excitement and dejection—the former because of just what it was, and the latter because it would mean he'd have to leave Occulara for several months just when he'd found some intriguing things to study.

When he went back into his workshop, Valeria seemed to pick up on his conflicting moods.

"The Director?" she asked.

Leon nodded.

"Let me guess, he's sending you to join the wyvern hunts?"

Leon tilted his head. "He's giving me a new assignment tomorrow, but that's my assumption."

Valeria grinned wickedly, and her eyes flitted over to the corner of his workshop where a large contraption was covered by a thin sheet to keep the dust off it—a project that Leon had been working on before picking up the contract to forge Sunlight.

"Sounds like a good opportunity to put that thing through some real-life testing," she pointed out with obvious anticipation.

Leon grimaced. "I'd like to put it through *any* testing at all before dragging it out to a real-life scenario, especially one that's likely to be rather chaotic, like a wyvern hunt."

"What say we finish this up, then?" Valeria suggested. "Maybe we should bring in someone else to help with the note-taking, it's kind of slowing me down..."

Leon grinned, and with a wave of his hand and a flash of magical light, he summoned the Librarian, the golem that was 'in charge' of the golems that had maintained his family's archives in Teira.

"Ask and you shall receive," Leon said.

Together, and with some input from Nestor, Leon and Valeria, with the note-taking assistance of the Librarian, dove back into studying the labor golems, both understanding that this was probably going to be the last time they'd have so much time to devote to this task before it came time to leave for the southeast.

Chapter 686: Designing Armor

"Ah, Leon Raime!" the Director said in greeting as Leon walked into his office. "Please, come in! Come in!"

Leon smiled as he took a few more steps into the starkly lit office. The Director, as always, was sitting behind his desk, his body almost completely obscured by the shadows cast by the light shining in from the giant windows behind him. However, the Director wasn't alone in his office, Penelope was there as well. Leon, after seeing her, had to fight the urge to scowl and pause, barely managing to continue onward with a fairly stoic expression despite this unpleasant surprise.

He hadn't had much to do with Penelope over the past ten years. As far as he was aware, the woman was off doing her own thing, or performing the duties expected of her as one of her father's Hands. In the course of performing his own duties, Leon had rarely run into her, and on those few occasions where he did, they hadn't said more than a sentence or two to each other in passing. It seemed to Leon that Penelope was not happy that her father had decided to bring Leon into Heaven's Eye, and that sentiment was made all the clearer when the woman blatantly frowned upon his entrance.

As Leon approached his desk, the Director said, "I've heard that you recently completed quite the masterful piece of weaponry, young man."

"I wouldn't call it masterful, myself," Leon humbly replied. He was about to continue, but Penelope had to interject, first.

"I'm sure few others would call it masterful, too," she hissed.

Leon's eyes narrowed in a tight glare, but he wore a light smile as he turned to her and growled, "Seems your father just did, or are you saying you know better?"

"In this case, I'm sure I do," Penelope shot back as her aura began to spike in intensity.

However, before Leon could fire off another verbal riposte, all the magic in the room suddenly froze, and both Leon and Penelope's auras were forced back into their bodies by the weight of the Director's magic.

“That’s enough of that,” the Director whispered, though his tone brokered no argument. “The two of you need to learn to get along, and you’ll need to do so quickly, because you’re both going off on a mission together.”

Penelope, heedless of her father’s stated desire to get along with Leon, loudly snorted and turned away from Leon.

Leon, however, compartmentalized his antipathy and focused on the task at hand. He wasn’t happy that this was going to be a joint venture, but the faster he was able to get it done, the less time he’d have to spend in Penelope’s company.

“What’s the job?” he asked. “Are we joining the wyvern hunts again?”

Despite the past couple of minutes, his tone and demeanor brightened considerably over the course of his question. If there was one thing that could improve his mood in this situation, it was being tasked with hunting giant monsters.

“An accurate guess,” the Director replied, his shadowy faced bending just slightly to appear as if he were smiling behind his dark curtain. “Things are going to be a little different this year, I’m afraid. There are going to be considerably fewer Imperials joining the hunts.”

“Why’s that?” Leon asked, though a quick glance at Penelope showed his surprise to be exclusive to him.

“Figures someone like you wouldn’t be keeping track of current events,” Penelope muttered.

“Penelope...” the Director said in warning, his tone dropping slightly in pitch.

Penelope held up a finger to her smiling lips, showing that she’d be quiet, though she hardly seemed at all remorseful for her outburst.

“Leon, have you heard about the recent build-up of arms around Argos?” the Director asked.

“I’ve heard some whispers about it, sure,” Leon replied. “I’ve certainly gotten quite a few boosts to my income; my flight suits have been selling faster than they can be manufactured.”

“They’re quite well-made suits,” the Director stated appreciatively. “Better than all other mass-produced flight gear on the market, it’s no surprise that they’re popular. But it shouldn’t come as any surprise that most of those suits are ending up in the south, with the Imperial Fleets.”

“I suppose not...” Leon said. He attempted to keep his tone light and carefree, but he knew that if there was a build-up of armed forces in the Argonaut Sea, then it meant that there was going to be conflict with the Sky Devils in the near future, and he wasn’t yet sure how he felt about that. Given that the Sky Devils were in all likelihood the last remnant of his Clan on this plane, he’d been hoping to find some way to get down there and see what was up with them in the next few decades. Renewed war was going to make that difficult, without a doubt.

On the other hand, if any of what he’d heard about the Sky Devils was true, then he wasn’t sure if he even wanted to meet with them. They sounded like monsters, and they weren’t exactly related to him by blood—the Sky Devils were probably descended from his Clan’s vassals, and if there were any direct descendants of his Clan among them, then they no longer carried the Thunderbird’s power.

Still, for all his apprehensiveness, he was still incredibly curious about them, he just hadn't been able to figure out any way that he might be able to investigate them without having to sift through a mountain of Imperial propaganda. Their island in the southeast was practically impossible to gain access to, unfortunately, so that left his hands rather tied.

"Well," the Director continued, pulling Leon out his brief musings, "there have been signs that the Sky Devils are preparing some kind of assault on the settlements around the Argonaut Sea, perhaps even against the Sword itself. So, most of the forces that the Sunlit Empire and the Sentinels might've sent to aid in the culling of the wyvern population are instead being sent south to shore up Argos' defenses."

"What about Ilion and Evergold?" Leon asked, referring to the capitals of the Ilian and Sacred Golden Empires.

"Ilion is still sending a delegation," the Director replied, "but it's going to be smaller than usual. A few hundred of their finest hunters, but none of their usual military presence."

Leon lightly scowled. The presence of Ilian arks had ensured that the previous hunt five years ago had gone off with little collateral damage to the surrounding regions—and that was quite the feat, given the sheer power that the wyverns possessed. By Leon's estimation, the creatures probably had enough raw power to rival a human mage at least a tier above them, if not more. Their bodies were huge, and they produced an incredible amount of mana within themselves—a bigger body meant more blood, which meant more mana, which in turn meant more magic power immediately at their disposal. After the previous hunt, Leon could understand why the Scorched Fields were so depopulated; the wyverns burned so much of that region that no human settlements could exist for long, and why it took Imperial power to keep the beasts in check. If such force wasn't used to combat the monsters, then the entire southwest would be reduced to a smoldering ruin every five years.

"And Evergold?" Leon asked.

"They're the only ones sending their usual full-force delegation," the Director explained. "More than that, actually, as one of the Imperial Princesses is joining the hunt this year."

"Oh?" Leon said in surprise. "That's surprising. I have to admit I'm not too familiar with their ruling family, though."

"Talal can get you a briefing," the Director said with a dismissive wave of his hand. "For now, concentrate on getting yourself ready. As an Imperial Princess will be in attendance, we'll have to show up with full colors, so no letting my Hands travel on their own; you'll be taking an ark to the Scorched Fields, and you'll be leaving next month."

'A month, hm?' Leon thought to himself as a smile bloomed across his face. *'That should be enough time...'*

—

"It won't be easy, what you're intending," the Thunderbird intoned as she stared down at Leon's sketches, though Leon wasn't in the least bit deterred. If anything, the wide smile on his Ancestor's bronze face only encouraged him to continue in this current vein.

"A man ought to be ambitious," Xaphan responded as his fiery form took a few steps forward, his burning yellow eyes taking in the designs on Leon's table. "Are you going to bitch out on this, Leon? Cry like a whipped dog if this doesn't work out?"

"Hardly," Leon replied, his smile unwavering.

"What are you going to do, then, when this doesn't work as you intend it to?"

Leon stood a little straighter, meeting the demon's challenging gaze. "I'm going to figure out how I screwed it up and fix it for the next attempt."

"Good," Xaphan crackled.

"As well you should," the Thunderbird added. "You've progressed mightily in these past few years. I would expect nothing less than for you to reach for the heavens, even in matters like these."

"I can't imagine doing anything but," Leon replied. "My previous suit of armor lasted me a good long while, and served me well in many conflicts."

"That armor wasn't fit for one contracted to me to even shit in!" Xaphan loudly declared. "That it was torn apart like wet paper doesn't surprise me. Do better with this set."

Leon's smile took on a slightly more bitter look, and his eyes drifted toward the vault in his soul realm. Within rested the remains of his Magmic Steel armor in a place of honor. He didn't appreciate Xaphan disparaging it like he just did, but he couldn't deny that by his current standards, that armor was quite mediocre.

The Thunderbird was waiting with the proper response to Xaphan, though, letting Leon take the high road. Leon remained quiet, but Xaphan shrieked in pain as the Thunderbird's mighty aura crashed down upon him, planting his face in the dirt just in front of his pavilion.

Acting as if nothing had happened, the Thunderbird stepped closer to Leon, a matronly smile on her face. "Leon," she whispered, "I'll be with you the whole time. There's no need to fear this process."

Leon nodded. "Thank you," he replied. "I'll admit that the prospect does frighten me a little—Adamant is so far beyond me that I can barely even comprehend what making an entire suit of armor out of it might be like..."

"It doesn't surprise... that you can't!" Xaphan called out from where the Thunderbird was still physically suppressing him, utterly heedless of his current predicament. "Small imagination!"

"And I suppose the great and mighty *Lord of Flame*—or whatever you are now—has a better idea?" Leon shouted back.

"Use fire!" Xaphan responded. "Fire is the greatest and mightiest of all the elements! None can compare!"

Xaphan continued like that for a while longer, but Leon quickly tuned him out, leaving him to rant to himself as Leon and the Thunderbird turned back to Leon's designs.

"I like the integration of gemstones," the Thunderbird said as she indicated the slots in the gauntlets and the one within his breastplate. "This one seems to be hidden, though?"

Leon glanced over and saw that she was tapping the spot in his breastplate.

"Hmm, connected to light and a bit of wind magic, is it? Does it have something to do with that pearl you had me look at a while back?"

"It does," Leon replied as his eyes strayed over to the tau pearl sitting on a table next to his notes. After acquiring it, he'd spent a considerable amount of time probing it with his magic, trying to divine its secrets. It was clearly tremendously powerful, but finding out just what exactly it could do proved challenging enough that he'd enlisted the help of his soul realm residents.

Xaphan had been characteristically unhelpful—unsurprising given the lack of fire magic involved with the pearl.

Nestor and the Thunderbird, however, had a few more insights to share. The tau wasn't a creature either were familiar with, unfortunately, but in their examinations of the pearl, they found that it was rather similar to a wisp created by a post-Apotheosis mage. It generated magic power by itself and stored it like a magical battery. It was an almost completely lossless storage, too, with the pearl's emanations being the tiniest fraction of the power contained within it. What that power could be used for was a little trickier to realize given that the power was so well contained that even letting out a tiny amount of it was terribly difficult.

However, after ten years of study, Leon felt like he'd finally found a way to channel some of the pearl's power. Even better, according to his preliminary tests, even if he ran all of the enchantments he had in mind for the pearl, it would still barely even register given the pearl's essentially limitless magic potential. The thing generated magic power faster than he could drain it.

The pearl was incredibly potent, and it had given him great insight into the mysteries of light magic, a subject that he'd left rather neglected in his previous studies—not as neglected as his darkness or earth magic skills, but neglected, nonetheless. Now, after ten years, he'd progressed in his magical studies enough to attempt to use the pearl in his armor's designs. With it, he hoped that he could create an autonomous healing system to not only keep himself going, but also heal anyone he touched. He wasn't sure how efficacious it would be, or if it would even work, but he was confident in the design. Likewise, he'd designed his armor to be able to project a shield of light to surround himself with, and when powered by the tau pearl, Leon was calculating that it would be incredibly strong.

All of this required serious magical engineering to accomplish, and Leon was proud to say that he hadn't needed Nestor's help with much. The darkness enchantment placed upon his helmet to help protect against mental attacks was a little more complicated and the dead man had helped with some of that design, but everything else was a product of Leon's studies alone. Nestor, Xaphan, and the Thunderbird had only checked his work, not helped him come up with any of it.

He was especially proud of his gauntlets. They incorporated several different simple enchantments to help channel certain powers through his hands. There were then a couple of slots placed higher up where specially enchanted gemstones would be placed, giving him the ability to swap out certain enchantments on the fly using nothing more than his natural ability to store things with his soul realm.

This modular approach did leave him fairly limited with the rest of his gauntlet enchantments, being able to project power, concentrate it, and stabilize it, but he'd put in extra work on designing the stones themselves. They'd be doing a lot of the heavy lifting he'd need from them with the weapons and other enchantments he wanted for his armor to include.

Still, with this modular design and the inclusion of the tau pearl taking great amounts of work, it was the darkness runes he'd needed Nestor's help with that he was most nervous about. Over the past ten years, he'd managed to finally figure out Xaphan's communication technique. The key had been learning how to generate darkness magic and using it to essentially 'touch' another being's mind and transfer his thoughts and intentions to them, which they would interpret as speech.

In his studies, though, he'd come to a newfound fearful respect of darkness magic. His abilities to shield his mind from interference had been greatly expanded, but he'd also learned of the great potential that darkness magic had to mess with someone else's mind. Unfortunately, all of the artifacts that he'd been able to find that claimed to defend against darkness magic were not even close to matching his personal standard—though, given that his lightning magic had a natural ability to purge darkness magic from his mind, he supposed his standards were simply too high. After all, he figured that if darkness magic was more of a threat on Aeterna, then there would be a greater market for dealing with that threat.

As it was, Leon never wanted to experience what he had in the Serpentine Isles again. Practically from the moment he'd arrived in that island chain, his mind had become the plaything of the Primal God sealed below, making him see and hear things that weren't there and impairing his judgment. Flushing his mind with the Thunderbird's lightning had only been a temporary measure, too, with his mind falling back under the Primal God's sway distressing quickly.

Hopefully, these new darkness enchantments he'd designed for his helmet would go a long way towards augmenting his ability to defend his mind. He didn't think they'd get much testing in the upcoming hunt, but he'd figure something out, and once he had better data for how his enchantments fared under pressure, he'd create similar artifacts for all of his family and retinue.

Other than all of that, he included in his armor's enchantment scheme many of the same strengthening and empowering enchantments he had in his old armor. His already prodigious eighth-tier strength and power would be increased while wearing his new armor, and the armor itself would be greatly strengthened—enough, he hoped, to not be torn apart quite as his old suit of Magmic Steel had been.

He wasn't intending to use Magmic Steel for this new suit. That substance was fantastic for fire enchantments, but it didn't hold other elemental enchantments quite as easily; he needed something else.

And that was why he needed the Thunderbird with him for the forging process. With his new skill in blacksmithing, she'd given him more insight into the specifics of how Adamant was forged—the hardest and most magical substance in the universe. The process was exceedingly complex, but boiled down to its core, it was essentially infusing his mana with molten metal, letting his power and the metal mix until they were one. In that way, there would be little philosophical difference between his body and his armor, with his magic power naturally flowing through both. He'd be able to channel his magic through his armor with such ease that it might as well be his skin, and the material would strengthen over time as it took on more and more of his power. Much like his family's sword, his armor might even form its

own will, though he figured that much of what made his family's blade special was the fact that it had once held a Universe Fragment.

He had little doubt that forging actual Adamant was essentially impossible for him at the moment. He needed much greater power and skill than he had right now, but that didn't mean infusing at least some of his power into the steel he intended to use was impossible. With the Thunderbird guidance, he knew that he had a good shot at making this work.

"I'm here, right with you," the Thunderbird said supportively, bringing Leon out of his brief reverie. He gave her an appreciative smile in return, his heart thumping in his throat.

He was nervous, there was no disguising that. So many new enchantments and new techniques. He had an entire month to work with, but as he stared at his designs and took in the scope of what he was intending to create, he thought that maybe a month wasn't nearly long enough. He could easily see his natural tendency to refine his designs and iterate on them before even finishing was going to lengthen this process, and he'd need every spare second he had.

And so, with that thought in his head, Leon returned to the physical world, where his body had been laying in a chaise lounge in his workshop for just such occasions. With the Thunderbird's encouragement in his ear and Valeria still studying the golems not far away giving him some much-needed moral support, Leon got to work.

Chapter 687: Metallurgy

Leon wanted to throw himself directly into his work. He had the iron he'd received as payment for Sunlight, and he had a few other metals to alloy it with, but he still needed a host of other tools and materials if he were to ever hope to create his armor as he'd envisioned. So, after speaking with the Thunderbird, he returned to the physical world and headed back into Occulara to do some shopping.

First on his list of needs was a better crucible. If he wanted to alloy his iron not only with other metals, but also with his power, then he needed an enormous amount of heat—enough, he was told, that normal, non-magically treated iron would probably boil under the heat he required, and all of his crucibles, while sturdy, weren't quite up to the task of handling that kind of heat. Neither was his workshop, but that was another thing entirely.

First off, he needed a new crucible. He met up with several of Emilie's assistants upon arriving at her tower around the Hexagon. Emilie had gotten quite settled into her role as Chief of Acquisitions, and always had time to make sure that Leon had whatever materials he required. All he usually needed to do was to place an order for certain materials, and if Heaven's Eye didn't already have it in stock, then he'd get a priority shipment for relatively cheap.

In this case, the kind of crucible he needed was already something that Heaven's Eye had in reserve. For every blacksmith like Sid, Heaven's Eye had many tools available, and to ensure that they could always do their work, those tools were often copied. Leon's crucible was something that was already present in Sid's workshop, but after a quick word with Emilie's assistants, he bought one of the reserve crucibles.

He wasn't worried about diminishing their supply; it wouldn't take long for another crucible to be manufactured and held in reserve, just in case Sid's or anyone else's ever broke.

His new crucible was as big as a large bathtub. It was made of ceramics that, after being specially treated, looked almost like obsidian. Along with that alchemical treatment, the entire outside surface of the crucible had been inscribed with thousands of runes to increase its strength and heat-retention properties. Leon made sure to give all of these enchantments full inspections both before and after his purchase; he'd only get one shot at forging his armor before leaving for the wyvern hunt, and he didn't want to screw this up and have to wait until after it was over for his second try.

But for all that anxiety, these were not the runes that had Leon most worried. Those that inspired most of his nervousness were the ones that he'd devised with the personal assistance of the Thunderbird, and which he'd have to apply himself. They were primarily light enchantments, but with a few water runes in there as well; a blood magic enchantment, designed to greatly aid the infusion of his power with the metal that would go within the crucible.

Leon picked up a few more specialized tools and less important materials, but then returned home, where Valeria had finished up with the labor golems. Leon left his brand new crucible in the center of his workshop, ordered the golems to start moving most of his tools and other materials to the edges of his workshop, and then began inspecting the ward scheme he'd placed upon the building.

He'd need extreme heat for this project, enough heat to boil iron. He had no earthly idea how dangerous gaseous iron was, but he decided to err on the side of caution and assume that the danger posed was beyond extreme. The heat, at least, he could more easily guess and prepare accordingly.

For several hours, he devised a new enchantment scheme to place upon his workshop that should control the iron fumes, while also protecting the rest of his more sensitive equipment from the extreme heat. He'd need some time to actually apply it, but that could wait. For now, he needed the most important material for this project: his own blood.

To that end, over the next few days, Leon spent his time relaxing in his villa with Elise, Valeria, and Maia, spending as much time as he could with them as a way to apologize for being so distant while he was working on Sunlight. At the same time, he was chugging potions brewed by Helen to stimulate blood and mana production in his body and reporting to a Heaven's Eye healer every three hours for a blood magic ritual that would extract mana from his body. The vat the mana was stored in was kept within his soul realm, and he only let it out when it needed to be filled; he didn't want his mana leaving his control for even a moment.

When all was said and done, though, Leon had enough mana for his purposes. He had a vat full of about twice as much mana as was in his body. Bleeding that much, even with Helen's potions and the skill of the healer who performed the extraction operation, Leon was still laid out for a few more days, resting from such bodily strain.

As he rested, he still the strength to apply his new enchantments to his workshop, ensuring that as soon as he felt better, he could begin immediately.

And he couldn't wait. *Adamant*, he could almost taste the word on his lips. The strongest and most powerful material in the universe. It was metal infused with the blood of a living being, becoming almost like an extension of their being, and being damn near impossible to destroy, to boot. As a happy bonus, adamant was an extremely versatile material, able to hold and retain enchantments from all elements with ease.

To create such a fantastic material was still beyond Leon's abilities—it took a far more intensive ritual than the Thunderbird had taught him to create it, but he'd still be able to create something similar. 'Half-adamant', he'd joked, and the Thunderbird had almost agreed, only refraining because the term implied something that the material wouldn't be. There was no such thing as half-adamant, what Leon would create would be something different, but with similar, if weaker, traits as adamant.

Leon finally began in his project a week after finishing Sunlight, and he couldn't have been more excited or nervous.

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As Leon stared at the crucible, its lip now glowing the blood magic enchantment that would infuse the power within his mana with the metal he was about to produce, the Thunderbird whispered soothingly into his mind.

[It's all right,] she said. [Even if you fail in this, is there anything stopping you from trying again?]

[It's a lot of time to invest into something that may not work,] Leon replied in a shaky tone, feeling slightly more nervous than excited now that the time to begin had finally come. [I just don't want to mess this up and have it all be for nothing.]

[Even if you regard what you do today as a great success, in a century, after your skills improve, you'll still look back on what you make today with derision,] the Thunderbird stated.

"That's not guaranteed," Leon responded aloud, hoping his voice would calm his nerves somewhat, "but I get your point. After all of my preparations, investments in both time and money, I just don't want to screw this up and then have to wait to try again."

[I suppose that makes sense,] the Thunderbird replied. [Just don't be afraid of mistakes. Own them, learn from them, but don't fear them.]

Leon took a deep breath and nodded.

His two new labor bronze golems stood nearby, awaiting instruction. They'd serve as forging assistants for this project, their enchanted bronze frames ideal for working in the harsh conditions that his workshop would soon be plunged into.

Valeria stood nearby, watching him with a grim expression. "Ready for this?" she asked.

Leon nodded, and with a wave of his hand, the golems standing by began to fill the crucible with the alchemical iron from the Sunlight job. His other materials were nearby, lying just outside of a thick circle of runes that would help the intense heat of Leon's metallurgical production from destroying everything else in his workshop. As he watched them work, Leon put on a simple silver necklace and felt its enchantment spring into effect. It was a simple enchantment, but it was going to be vital to his safety: so long as he wore the necklace, the fumes from his metalworking would be unable to interact with his body, as if he were surrounded by a protective bubble of clean air.

Valeria walked over to him, kissed him on the cheek, wished him luck one more time, and then left him to his work.

Leon took a few more deep breaths as the golems finished filling the crucible with iron and began to fill it with other materials.

First was a crushed charcoal-like substance that would alloy with the iron to form steel when all was said and done. After that came powdered crystalline dust that glowed with faint white light—quintessant sand, which carried quite a bit of light magic.

There were still two more materials, but they were to come later. After the golems finished with the quintessant sand, he ordered one of them to pick up a huge enchanted ceramic rod taller than Leon and prepare to mix everything once the heat started to liquify it. Then, with a wave of his hand, the vat he'd filled with mana appeared next to the crucible, and Leon ordered the other golem to pick it up and prepare to slowly pour it into the crucible.

And he needed it done *very* slowly. There was a ton of magic power in all of that bright red mana, and it had to be carefully controlled if he was to succeed in creating a pseudo-adamant material.

It was at this point that he needed to start taking a more active role in the process. With the golem holding the vat standing by, Leon summoned his fire magic and activated the powerful fire enchantments below the crucible. Bright orange fire erupted from his fingers, surrounding the crucible and heating it extremely quickly. In less than a minute, the crucible and its contents had already reached the point where the quintessant sand near the edges of the crucible was glowing red, but Leon knew this wasn't even close to the temperature he needed. Using his fire magic to control the heat, he increased the enchantment's power and kept all of that heat firmly trapped within the crucible.

He was helped in this endeavor when the enchantment covering the outer surface of the crucible started to glow with arcane light, the runes filling with magic power when Leon channeled some of his spare power into them. Using some of his own power, Leon sped up the process; fire poured out of him, and soon enough, the mixture in the crucible was almost entirely liquid. Seeing this, Leon ordered the mixing golem to begin its work, and it diligently stuck the ceramic rod into the glowing liquid and began to mix.

Leon took a deep breath as fire streamed from his body and covered the crucible. The enchantments he'd placed upon his workshop to protect it from this process were already hard at work, but he endured this heat all on his own, his fire magic ensuring that a truly hellish amount of heat would be needed to cause him serious harm.

[That's sufficient,] the Thunderbird said into Leon's mind as he continued to heat the crucible. [Begin pouring your mana.]

Leon relayed her command to the vat-carrying golem, and it tilted the vat slightly over the crucible, letting Leon's magic-infused blood drip into the metallic mixture only a few drops at a time. With how large the vat was, Leon knew he was going to be here for a long time at that rate, but that was the price he had to pay to forge his armor from the best materials.

As the mana began to drip into the molten mixture, sparks of silver-blue lightning began to erupt from the metal's surface. Without missing a beat, Leon activated the blood magic enchantment on the crucible's lip, which contained his power, preventing it from escaping from his blood. He needed it infused with the steel, not released all over his workshop's ceiling.

Drop after drop descended into the mixture, and hours passed. Leon maintained his concentration as best as he could, but a few more lightning burns were added to his ceiling as proof that he slipped up a few times. His mood was greatly buoyed when, as he continued his stream of fire, he thought he saw for just a moment a hint of black within his flames, but he blinked and it was gone. He might've thought it just a trick of his imagination, an expression of the yearning that he felt for the Great Black Dragon's power and the frustrations that he'd yet to learn anything new in the past ten years, but just as those thoughts entered his mind, a few black sparks burst from the metal in the crucible as a few more drops were poured in.

Leon tried his best to recreate that, but after a little while, he was forced to stop. He needed his attention fully on the production process, he couldn't let himself be distracted by anything, even if it was as great as the Great Black Dragon's power manifesting for a moment.

Hours later, as the last drops of his blood dripped from the vat and into the crucible, the Thunderbird whispered, [Good, things are looking very good so far...]

Leon, thusly encouraged, smiled, and let his fires finally die down. The crucible itself had received enough of his fiery attention to glow red, but the shining enchantments covering its surface did their job, allowing it to hold strong against even Leon's prodigious fire magic. He marveled at it for holding so strong even from that hint of black fire, but then he saw a miniscule crack in the ceramic. It wasn't damage enough to cause this process to fail, but it was something Leon was going to have to keep an eye on if he ever did this again.

[Keep your magic power under control...] the Thunderbird cautioned, pulling his attention back to the metal instead of the crucible. Leon knew that she didn't mean just the power in his body, but the power in the mana that had been poured into the crucible, as well. He could still sense it, still control it if he needed to—it was still his mana, and the power contained within it still responded to his will.

But if he didn't keep his mind in the game, then that wouldn't last for long. He could feel the mana flowing along with the steel mixture in the crucible, not quite mixing as he wanted it to. So, in what was undoubtedly the most difficult part of this process, Leon redoubled his efforts to keep the blood magic enchantment working, while simultaneously forcing the mana within the crucible to bond with the molten metal.

It wasn't easy; his mana tried to reject the bonding. He could feel his own skin start to burn as if he were within the crucible, even though at his level and with his mastery of fire magic, he was practically immune to heat like this. However, he kept pushing, envisioning his magic power like a hand that was crushing and compressing the mana and molten steel until they became one material.

Unfortunately, even with all of his preparations and power, he wasn't quite able to control his power well enough, and some of it grew unstable and was lost as sparks of silver-blue lightning that rose from the molten mixture like fiery embers.

With a scowl, Leon focused everything he had on bonding his power with the steel. He could feel the quintessant sand doing some work here, too, helping at least some of his mana bond to the steel almost like magnets, but he still strained.

The crucible began to shake, Leon's actions putting more strain upon it than it had been under when he was heating the initial mixture. The floor of Leon's workshop, made of heavily reinforced concrete, weathered the shaking, but many of his tools and equipment in the workshop began to fly around like the workshop itself was being shaken by a callous giant.

Another bolt of lightning suddenly erupted from the molten metal, arcing up and over the rim of the crucible and striking the floor, taking some of the metal with it. The metal cooled almost instantly, and the crucible was left with a long metal arch sticking out of it.

Leon gritted his teeth at the waste, but there was nothing to be done about it at this point, he could only focus on not wasting any more.

Within the crucible, he could feel the lightning magic he'd filled his mana with bursting from his mana, separating back into blood and magic power. Great arcs of silver-blue lightning danced around the inner surface of the crucible, and he could hear the ceramic starting to crack even more. It was designed for high temperatures, but this was a bit much for it to bear.

[It's working!] the Thunderbird called out, and Leon wondered if it was just to encourage him. He certainly needed it, for his forehead was wracked with sweat, and he was starting to feel uncomfortable in the immense heat spilling off the crucible. His climate controls could only do so much, and it seemed that they were being overwhelmed from the sheer heat contained within his work area.

But he kept going, straining to control the fire, the heat, and the magic power within the metal. Silver-blue lightning arced across the surface of the metal, dancing between the licks of nearly-white hot flame that sprouted here and there, a few of them black.

The process of bonding his magic power to the metal took more than three hours, and by the end, Leon was left panting and exhausted. The metal in the crucible was still molten, but it had transformed into an almost marble-like substance, being primarily white with long streaks of black running through it. It seemed to have an almost glassy surface, and faint arcane light shone from deeper within the metal.

With one last command, Leon ordered the golems to add the final two materials to the metal, which it would absorb as it was left to cool. The first was silver dust, which Leon hoped would increase the pseudo-Adamant's ability to channel magic power. The second were the petals of as'si, a deeply unpleasant noxious flower whose stench hit Leon like a sack of bricks even though the petals had been soaking in manticore venom for more than a year—something which was supposed to make them safer to handle and dampen their stench. The petals were disgusting things, but they'd float upon the glassy surface of his pseudo-Adamant as it cooled, slowly dissolving, and ensuring that his magic power remained bonded with the metal.

Finally, Leon had the labor golems put a lid over the crucible, creating a magic seal over it that would keep all foreign magic power out of the crucible until the process was complete.

And when that was done, Leon collapsed on the dirty floor of his workshop, his enchantments practically whirring around him as they handled the fumes and heat from the project. Even with all of his eighth-tier power, it had taken him more than twelve hours of constant focus and expenditure of magic power; he was drained of energy.

[Well done,] the Thunderbird said some his soul realm, her voice practically bursting with pride.

“Thank you,” Leon whispered aloud. “I can’t help but think that this whole process would’ve gone much more smoothly had I any skill in earth magic, though...”

[Of that, there’s no doubt,] the Thunderbird replied. [An earth mage skilled in metallurgy can turn mundane ore into processed bullion without even needing heat. If you were able to use more than the barest amount of earth magic, then you could’ve likely cut the time this process took in half, and that’s a conservative estimate.]

Leon nodded and half-groaned, half-hummed in agreement and appreciation. “I’ll keep trying to get it down, but it’s damn difficult...”

Earth magic was essentially the polar opposite of all but darkness magic, in a certain sense. In order to create elemental magic, a mage had to make their magic power flow through their body in ways that are reminiscent of the properties of that element. To summon his lightning, Leon had to compress his magic power and then release it, letting it arc around his body like bolts of lightning. For his fire, he had to gather his magic within his chest and let it radiate throughout his body like heat. For water, his magic power had to flow through his circulatory system like a river, while his wind magic had to be like a gust of wind, circling through his body like a cyclone. For light, meanwhile, his magic had to ‘shine’ through his body, something that Leon still found fairly difficult to grasp. Darkness was similar, with his magic having to suffuse his body and cover him like a shadow.

All of these elements, with the sole exception of darkness, were essentially active and energetic uses of magic power. To use earth magic, however, Leon had to slow down his magic, almost stopping its flow entirely. His magic power had to imitate the stillness and solidity of stone. It was heavy and ponderous, and it flew in the face of almost every single instinct and habit that Leon had built over his years of practicing fire and lightning magic, the most energetic of the elements. It didn’t come at all naturally to him, and even after ten years of Sid almost literally beating the concepts into his head, he still struggled to so much as transform a pebble into a keeps pie

Chapter 688: Increased Capabilities

Leon stared at his work, now finished, a strange feeling of relief, apprehension, and pride in his heart.

Pride in what he’d created. Apprehension at how it might perform. Relief that it was done. More relief that all of his toil seemed to have paid off.

His new armor was a dark, smoky gray, the color of storm clouds. Black marbly streaks crisscrossed its surface like lightning, while the smaller pieces bore faint dark flame-like patterns. Each piece of pseudo-Adamant plating radiated magic power, even disassembled as they were. The breastplate, in particular, almost glowed from the magic it contained—due in no small part to the tau pearl, Leon was sure.

The cuirass was a single piece of metal, combining the breastplate and backplates into one perfectly tailored piece that was slim in the waist and broader in the chest. If Leon hadn’t been able to pull it into his soul realm and summon it back on his body, it would’ve been damned difficult to get into. It covered him completely from hip to shoulder, was slightly rounded to deflect blows, and featured as its only ‘useless’ decoration—aside from the lightning and fire patterns that the smelting process had given it—an ivory griffin in profile right over Leon’s heart.

The griffin wasn't only decorative, lodged behind it where it was hidden from view was the tau pearl. Woven through the griffin and through the thicker plating over Leon's chest were many defensive enchantments, and within those were more that were specifically designed to hide the pearl from any prying eyes. It was so well-hidden that Leon didn't think anyone would even know the pearl was there unless they tore the plate apart; and given how strong the metal and enchantments within it were, that would be a herculean feat to pull off.

With the tau pearl in place, his armor could project a shield of light in two different ways. The first would completely surround his body in a strong oval shell of translucent white light, while the second would project a stronger, more opaque shield in only one direction—a result of inspiration that struck him during the creation process. His armor could also use the power of the tau to heal any injuries he might sustain, and even heal others that he touched.

His forearms and biceps would be covered entirely by single-piece plates, while an additional series of smaller interlocking plates would be layered over them. Within these smaller plates was a slot on each of his forearms, protected from view and danger, into which he could pull and summon different enchanted gemstones that would alter the enchantments within his gauntlets.

Or so he hoped, they still needed to be tested.

His helmet was nearly identical to his old helmet, being completely closed-face, with only a narrow upside-down wedge-shaped slit for his eyes. Thanks to his power, he didn't even need good airflow, which he exploited to add even more armor to his face—though, just for his own comfort, there were a few air enchantments woven into his helmet to compensate. The stylized ear-like wings that were on his old helmet were still present on this one, but a little smaller and pulled back just a bit.

His leg protection was generally made of larger plates, with long bands of riveted metal protecting his thighs, and long knee-high metal boots protecting the rest, all of it just as heavily enchanted as his old boots had been with enhancements to speed and strength. The biggest difference was that when he needed to swim, his boots would no longer project large fins of ice for him to use. Instead, the job of not only propelling him through the water but flying through the air would be the job of his belt.

His belt was one of the pieces that he was most proud of, for it represented a huge generational leap in the capabilities and accessibility of his flight suits. It was his sixth generation, and unlike all his previous generations, it didn't work by using jets of air as propulsion but worked more in line with his new flight technique—it greatly aided him in seizing control of the air around him and lifting himself off the ground. Even better, he'd designed it to work underwater, too, using a nearly identical technique that seized control of surrounding water rather than air. So powerful and accessible was it that he'd made similar belts for the rest of his family and retinue, letting them fly just as easily as he could.

Additional plates covered other vulnerable areas of his body, including mildly prominent angular pauldrons that looked almost like furled wings thanks to the marbled texture to the metal. Beneath his plates he wore a suit of lighter, smoky-gray scale armor made with leftover pseudo-Adamant that covered his body almost in its entirety, while beneath that was a thick suit of gambeson. Neither were nearly as heavily enchanted as his plates, but both carried at least a few strengthening enchantments to help resist any magical or physical attacks.

Of course, being infused with his power, his scale armor didn't necessarily need enchanting, but Leon had wanted to be as thorough as possible.

Next to his armor lay a dozen bright gemstones of varying colors, each one only the size of the last digit on his little finger. Each one was covered in runes so tiny that they were nearly imperceptible, which would slot into his gauntlets and change the enchantments therein.

Half of the gems were designed similarly to the anti-magic bracelets that he'd used against Jormun, but far more refined. They'd hopefully disrupt magic of each element save for lightning, which Leon was confident he could deal with on his own—not to mention lightning was his primary battle magic and using lightning disrupting weapons at the same time he was trying to use lightning magic was only going to end in frustration and possible injury or death.

The other half of the gems were designed for more specific purposes. He had a black and red onyx that could create a thin scalpel of fire which burned white-hot and should cut through just about any mundane material, and probably most magical materials, too. Another piece of onyx, this one redder than the last, was much simpler, able to shoot off powerful fireballs with greater mana efficiency than Leon was capable of doing on his own—which was saying something.

A piece of lapis he'd enchanted to create a more traditional shield of ice than the shield of light that his tau pearl powered. A pale gray moonstone could allow him to telekinetically influence stone. A white topaz was designed to fire off a thin beam of damaging light.

Finally, a black opal was designed to shroud him in shadows, making his body not only immaterial, but also imperceptible as well. If it worked as designed, he could even give his ring of invisibility to someone else, or better yet, make more shadow cloaks for the rest of his retinue so that all of his people could have great stealth capabilities.

Unfortunately, he hadn't the time to test any of this with any degree of reliability. He channeled some of his magic into each of the gems, ensuring that his magic could at least power the enchantments he'd designed, but that was about it. He was encouraged, though, to see that his enchantments had been at least properly applied, and that none of them failed to activate. It was just how well they fulfilled their function that he needed to verify.

But he'd run out of time to do so, for in only a few hours, he'd be heading off the Scorched Fields to prepare to deal with the wyverns as they came down from their aeries, seeking huge amounts of food for their hatching young. In fact, Leon was already running just a little bit late, and the rest of his retinue should already be at his home, waiting on him.

With a sigh of disappointment that he couldn't spend the next few weeks rigorously testing his new armor, Leon pulled all of his work into his soul realm and, for the first time in a month, left his workshop.

Immediately upon locking the place down and walking out the door, he projected his magic senses. He saw in his front courtyard, being seen to by the beastmaster that he kept on staff, a huge reptilian creature covered in dark green scales that was almost apelike in appearance. It had a pair of shorter, stumpier legs in the back, while in front it had two huge, heavily muscled legs that were only two opposable thumbs away from being arms. It moved mostly upright, but its head was massive and crocodilian, with a long, fang-filled snout and ten pairs of eyes all over its huge skull. Balancing out this

enormous head was an even bigger tail that looked strong enough to crush a third-tier mage's head with a single blow.

This monster was the result of the Attican Snapper egg that Leon had taken years ago on his way through the Illumerian Wetlands. Such monsters were rarely used as war beasts given their savage, unruly nature. They were beasts through and through and couldn't be tamed by any but the greatest and most patient beastmasters.

Leon was not even a semi-competent beastmaster, but with the onyx bracelet he'd taken from Jormun, the Attican Snapper had been subjugated and quite easily tamed. The beastmaster he kept on staff to see to Anzu and any other visiting mount frequently expressed shock at how little trouble the monstrous creature gave him.

However, even though Leon had been the one to use the onyx bracelet upon the snapper, he'd eventually had to conclude that he simply didn't have the time to deal with beasts in this way. He didn't want to just foist them off onto his beastmaster, having no personal connection to creatures that were supposed to be his personal war beasts. As a result, when Anna expressed quite a bit of interest in it, he gave her the onyx bracelet, and the Attican Snapper along with it. She'd taken to it with enthusiasm, and the snapper had become her personal mount and war beast. It couldn't move too quickly, but it was physically strong with rippling muscle that Leon's beastmaster nourished with an extremely high-quality diet, and magically strong at the fifth-tier already.

That the snapper was here meant that Anna was here, too, for she rarely left the creature alone anywhere, except in her own personal stable, or in Leon's stable. As tame as the snapper was, it made a lot of people uncomfortable.

Leon hurried into his home. He hated the idea that others were waiting on him, which they almost certainly were at this point. He found them waiting in his dining room, snacking and chatting quietly as he walked in. His family was there as well, and all eyes turned to him as he passed under the marble arch that separated the dining room from the main living room.

"Husband!" Elise cried out as Leon appeared, standing up so quickly she almost knocked her chair over. After he locked himself in his workshop for the better part of the month, she'd come to visit him in his workshop at least once a day after the most dangerous parts of the production process was concluded, but it was clear to everyone that she'd been long waiting for him to emerge.

Without another word, Leon strode over and took his wife in his arms, locking lips and he squeezed her against himself. He'd not intended to launch into such a project so soon after Sunlight, but the wyvern hunt demanded it, and at least now, thankfully, he could finally cross his armor off his to-do list. They only parted when Alix poked fun at them by jokingly cheering.

Leon and Elise separated, but neither were in the slightest bit embarrassed, despite the mild amusement in most of the others' expressions. In fact, Leon then gave Maia and Valeria equally passionate, if slightly more truncated greetings.

And then he turned his attention to his retinue.

Alix, having cheered, drew his attention first. His former squire had cut her hair short, her brown locks stopping about halfway down her neck. Her fifth-tier aura was robust and powerful, and Leon could feel something that almost felt like static coming from her—a sign of her skill in lightning magic.

Gaius sat to her right, a good-natured grin on his face even as Leon embraced Valeria, all signs of his previous animosity toward Leon now a thing of distant memory. He, too, had reached the fifth-tier, and his aura was as solid as the stone he manipulated with his earth magic.

To Gaius' right sat Marcus, a serene smile on his face to match his own gentle fifth-tier aura. He'd learned to use light magic, and though it was generally almost type-cast as healing magic, Leon had seen when Marcus could do with the element, and he could say for certain that it was going to be the people that stood against Marcus that would need the healing, not those who stood behind him.

On Marcus' right sat Alcander, still just as giant and muscular as ever. However, while he sat with patience, his eyes burned with excitement and anticipation—and with the power of his fire magic, which bled a little bit into his aura. Leon had to admit that the man had quite a bit of skill and natural aptitude for the element, perhaps moreso than any of the others had with their chosen elements. He couldn't help but feel some amount of pity for the enemies that might stand against Alcander in the future, for he'd used fire himself enough to know that death by fire was quite terrible.

To Alcander's right sat Anna, the sixth-tier hunter still at that power level. She looked a little different than she had ten years ago, though, her hair color having changed from green to a reddish-orange. When she'd had the dye job done several years ago, Leon had learned about some of the light magic that the Sacred Golden Empire pioneered: that of body alteration.

Light magic was unparalleled with how it could manipulate the body; healing was only the most famous and arguably useful of its applications. However, the ways that light magic could interact with the body went much deeper than that, with one of the most common treatments being to change hair color—among a host of other treatments. When Anna's treatment was complete, her hair hadn't simply been dyed, but changed completely to the new color, eliminating the need to maintain the dye.

She hadn't grown in power too much over the past ten years, but since she was at the sixth-tier already, she was already powerful enough that Leon wasn't too concerned about her lack of progress. She was young enough that she had plenty of time to grow further, and she'd had other business these past few years, anyway.

Her sister, likewise, hadn't advanced much in the magical arts, as was evident from where Helen sat to Anna's right. She was still at the fifth-tier, but given that she'd spent most of her time focused on her alchemical studies, Leon wasn't particularly upset at her lack of magical progress. She played a large part in his family and retinue's financial situation being so enviable, so even if he wanted to complain, he didn't have much of a leg to stand on.

In the past ten years, she'd whipped up enough healing potions to alleviate his retinue's reliance on Leon's healing spells. She'd also made a variety of other potions for them to use if the need arose, including potions to help speed up the body's production of magic power for a short time, potions to keep the body moving even when exhaustion threatened to impair their ability to fight, and even certain salves that, if used to cover exposed portions of the body, could be used to increase stealth capabilities, turning one almost completely invisible and masking their scent. She'd also devised various alchemical

bombs and poisons that Leon hadn't hesitated to add to their growing arsenal, and potions to help them resist foreign magics, which ought to help increase their survivability in violent situations.

So, Leon couldn't possibly be angry at her lack of magical progress when she'd already furnished them with the bountiful fruits of her alchemical labors.

The rest of the table to Helen's right was empty, while Leon's family sat across from his retinue. The only two who weren't sitting at the table were Anshu and Talal. The latter stood by the door, diligently awaiting Leon's arrival, while the former was leaning against the wall about as far as he could reasonably be from Helen, Anna, and Alix. Even after ten years, he was still maintaining his distance, but at the very least, he wasn't avoiding the ladies of Leon's retinue anymore or insisting that they needed to get married and stay at home, which Leon considered to be great progress.

The Indradian had focused quite single-mindedly on his magical prowess, however, perhaps feeling some competitiveness with Anna, the only woman in Leon's retinue who wasn't romantically attached to Leon, yet was stronger than Anshu. Leon never directly asked the Indradian the reason for his dedication, he was just happy the man wasn't sitting on his laurels content to collect Leon's money without working hard in turn. That diligence paid off, helping him to reach the sixth-tier.

"So, has everyone prepared themselves?" Leon asked the room as he took a seat at the head of the table, Elise taking the seat to his left.

"Of course we have!" Alcander exclaimed as he practically burst out of his chair in excitement. "What about your armor! Did you finish it? Does it do what you've claimed it can?!"

Leon fought the urge to laugh with pride. It took quite a bit of effort—after so long in his workshop, he felt like he could use a good emotional release.

"I'm unsure, as of yet," Leon replied with a subtle smile. "I'm probably going to spend as much of the trip westward as I can putting the thing through its paces, though I'm not too confident we're going to get the time I need since we're taking a Heaven's Eye ark to the Scorched Fields. However, the first thing I want to test is my new darkness stone—I've grown used to having the ability to turn invisible, and I don't want to give that up. High on my list of priorities, meanwhile, is ensuring that all of you get similar capabilities..."

The gratitude was plain on everyone's faces. They all knew the benefit of invisibility, and combined with the flight gear that Leon had already supplied them with, it could increase their capabilities as much as learning elemental magic did.

Leon continued, "We'll get into the details later, and it's mostly contingent on how well my tests go, of course. But the results of my testing will be used to upgrade all of our equipment, so all I can ask for is your patience."

"Patience is something I think we all have in abundance at this point," Marcus quipped, and Leon nodded in understanding. His retinue had acted almost entirely as his entourage for the past ten years, with not much of substance to do as he mostly stayed in Occulara, and only left to carry out some fairly mundane tasks for the Director. In short, while they were all stronger and more skilled in their own ways, they hadn't yet had much of an opportunity to test their new strength, with the singular exception of the previous wyvern hunt five years ago.

“Good,” Leon said. “My armor isn’t the only thing in need of testing, though...”

He glanced at Valeria and winked, the silver-haired woman grinning mischievously in response.

But it was Alix who responded, excitedly asking, “You’re bringing that thing with us?”

Leon smirked at her and nodded, and his former squire looked like he’d just told her she’d won the lottery.

Moving on before anyone else could comment, Leon conjured a map for everyone and spread them across the table. “Once this hunt is done, we’ll be heading to the Sacred Golden Empire, so get used to these maps. It’s about time that we start going after some of these old Thunderbird ruins that appear to still be lost...”

Chapter 689: A Wager Between Hands

Leon was excited, for in his ten years in the Ilion Empire, this was to be the first time he’d ever ridden in an ark before. Not even as a Hand of the Director had he had the privilege before now.

After he touched base with his retinue following the creation of his armor, he quickly packed up what he felt he’d need for the wyvern hunt—and there was quite a bit he wanted to bring with him. The first and most important thing was a weapon that he’d had in his workshop for a long while covered with a sheet to keep it clean. He’d built it after long lessons with Nestor and the Thunderbird that greatly expanded his knowledge of lightning magic, and while he’d never quite gotten around to testing it, let alone giving it any proper use, he decided to bring it this time.

Then, he made sure he was stocked up with all the spells, food, and clean clothes that he felt might be necessary. The last thing he readied—it already being in his soul realm—was an entire house.

When Leon had first seen such a thing, he’d been flabbergasted that such a thing was possible, but after building one himself, he had to admit he’d been not only cheating himself by not looking into such things before, but being extremely shortsighted in his application of enchantments.

The last time he’d gone wyvern hunting, he’d seen the Imperial hunting delegations set up temporary housing within large camps for their people to use. Given the nature of the Scorched Fields, there were precious few permanent settlements, so the hunters had to bring their own, and of course, the Imperials weren’t going to slum it while on such a prestigious hunt.

To solve this issue, they’d developed modular housing—essentially houses, or even entire palaces, that could be disassembled into much smaller pieces, stored in soul realms, and then reassembled in a matter of hours, if not less, upon reaching camp.

There wasn’t typically a limit to how large or small something had to be to fit into someone’s soul realm, but Leon had never really considered an entire palace before. Upon returning to Occulara and experimenting with the modular constructions a bit, he thought it would be a long time before he would consider a palace still, but a fairly large house was well within his range of possibility.

When he’d tried to explain why he didn’t want a palace in his soul realm to his retinue, he hadn’t quite been able to put it into words. Alcander, however, gave him those words when he said it sounded like ‘trying to physically shit out a house’, only through his soul realm.

Of course, the modular construction made things much easier, but it was still exhausting moving so much material into and out of his soul realm at any one time. Still, Leon had enough in his soul realm to ensure his family's and his retinue's comfort while they were out in the brush. And what made it even better was the fact that the modular construction that Leon had learned meant that pieces of the home could be added or removed at will, giving the house the versatility it needed to be set up on the side of a mountain or in the middle of a wide, open plain. It didn't matter where Leon might find himself, he'd be able to conjure up not only comfortable, but secure housing thanks to his increased skill in the arts of enchanting.

All of this Leon had ready when he made his way to Heaven's Eye. Accompanying him were his entire family and his retinue. Elise hadn't come with him on his previous wyvern hunt, but after a month forging his armor, and another month before that working on Sunlight, Leon had been rather distant recently.

For his part, Leon relished his wife coming with. He didn't like leaving her behind, and it was hardly like she needed protecting when Heaven's Eye was heading southwest in force. Besides, they'd only be gone for a few weeks, and the household staff was more than capable of functioning without either of them around for a little while.

Their destination was an arkyard not too far from the Hexagon. Heaven's Eye didn't have many arks, so the arkyard wasn't large, and to Leon's disappointment, didn't have any facilities that could construct the flying machines. Their arks were also fairly small, but more than large enough for their purposes.

The ark Leon's party was shown to was on the larger end of what Heaven's Eye had, with seating for about thirty or so people to travel in typical Heaven's Eye luxury. Ten of those seats were already taken by Penelope and her personal retinue of serious, hard-eyed men and women ranging from fifth to seventh-tier. The ark itself had the arrowhead shape of the other arks Leon had seen and had been built entirely from some kind of black metal. The main compartment was in a triangular chamber nestled within the arrowhead-shaped machine, close to the rear engines where the vehicle was thickest.

Upon entering, Leon saw that the roof of the compartment was much the same as the windows of the Hexagon: completely transparent from the inside, while completely opaque from outside. The five people required to pilot the ark were in an adjacent compartment in the back, leaving the passengers largely to their own devices.

"Leon Raime," Penelope drawled as Leon led the way inside. The interior of the ark was essentially a lounge in the same vein as what lay on the ground floor of Heaven's Eye Towers, and she and her retinue had occupied three of the tables, the curtains between the tables that would give them some measure of privacy pulled back. "You certainly took your time."

Leon shrugged. "There's on time and there's late. I'm not late." He didn't miss a step as he walked in with his family close behind, and his retinue just behind them. Anzu brought up the rear, but Anna's Attican Snapper was a bit too much and had to be kept back in Leon's stable for the time being.

"Goodness, it looks like you're bringing your entire household with you," Penelope replied as Leon's people filed in. "Are you that nervous about this hunt?"

Leon didn't rise to her bait, merely stating, "Those who don't respect the power of wyverns are going to die. I saw that plainly enough in the piles of mangled and burned corpses last time."

Penelope merely smiled derisively, but her one seventh-tier retainer, a young-seeming man with classical good looks murmured, "Weaklings who overestimated their power. They shouldn't have gone on the hunt if they couldn't handle the heat."

Leon glared at the man but decided it would be best to ignore Penelope and her people entirely. He took a seat at a table, at which Elise, Maia, and Valeria joined him. Anzu curled up between them and the slanted walls of the triangular compartment, while Leon's retinue sat at two adjacent tables.

It was with a modicum of amusement that Leon noted Anshu didn't seem at all put off at sitting with Helen and Anna—he was actually staring daggers at Penelope's retinue, and Leon guessed in the face of their warm welcome, had stowed his usual attitude to help present a unified front among Leon's party.

"Are these all you're bringing, Leon Raime?" Penelope asked, her tone one of the utmost innocence, yet Leon didn't believe it for a second. "As numerous as they are, they're still..."

As Leon sighed, Elise turned and sweetly asked, "Is there something you're trying to say, Lady Penelope?"

Penelope just smiled. "No, of course not, Lady Elise. You're just travelling with some very young companions, is all. I hope they can protect you if things get hairy over in the Scorched Fields."

With a low, predatory growl, Leon responded, "Is that a threat?"

"Why ever would you think it was?" Penelope innocently asked.

Leon glared at the Director's daughter. This woman had never liked him, and he'd never really liked her. He supposed his success with the flight suits and the dull tau pearl the Director had sought grated on her. She hadn't wanted him recruited at all, and yet here he still was, ten years later, thriving in the Ilion Empire and Heaven's Eye.

But he didn't immediately respond. Instead, it was Alix who shouted, "He thinks that because you're being a catty bitch!"

Three of Penelope's retainers shot to their feet, killing intent suddenly pouring out of them as their fifth and sixth-tier auras focused in Alix's direction. Alix, Alcander, Marcus, and Gaius clearly anticipated this response, and rose in response, their own auras spiking enough for Leon to know that they were perfectly willing to throw down if things got violent.

But things weren't going to get violent—not for them. Leon, without rising from his seat, reached out with his magic power in the same way that he used it in his new flying technique. His magic wrapped around Penelope's retainers like a glove in only an instant, and their auras were greatly constrained. He wasn't powerful enough to completely freeze them in place with his power, yet, like Anastasios had done during the duel with the Forest Watchers, but the simple act of laying his power down upon them had the desired effect: Penelope's three retainers didn't take another step, and after less than a second, looked near collapse under the weight of Leon's magic.

"There's no need for this to get ugly," Leon said threateningly as the rest of Penelope's retainers rose, fury in their eyes.

Penelope herself, just as Leon and Elise were doing, remained seated. However, he caught a quick glance the Director's daughter sent Maia's way, as the river nymph had risen as well. Maia alone could probably deal with Penelope's entire retinue, and she had Valeria and the rest of Leon's party at her back.

"Enough!" Penelope shouted. "We'll revisit this another time, Leon Raime."

As Penelope's people returned to their seats, Leon graciously released his hold on the initial three who'd risen. "Don't make promises you can't keep," Leon replied with a vicious smile. Then, after a moment's thought, added, "How about this, Penelope? Let's have a little wager."

"A wager, hm?" she said, looking mildly interested and not the least bit perturbed at the fight that nearly broke out between their groups, or at Leon's retinue who were a little slower in taking their seats as her own retainers had been. "And what kind of wager might this be?"

"Just a... *friendly* competition," Leon explained. "Let's see who bags the most wyvern heads."

"What do you suggest we wager?" Penelope inquired.

"What are you willing to lose?" Leon shot back, confidence written in every tiny detail of his face.

Penelope grinned back at him and conjured from her soul realm a bright blue diamond that sparkled like the clearest of water. The diamond was set in a frame of gold, with both stone and frame cut and shaped to look like a flat blue rose. The diamond was large enough that it just barely fit in the palm of her hand.

It was an expensive piece, to be sure, but it was utterly mundane. It held no magic power whatsoever. However, Leon still smiled in appreciation. It was a valuable piece, and from the way Elise's eyes suddenly darted first in its direction, then in his, and then back to Penelope, he guessed it was probably more valuable than he realized.

In response, Leon pulled a gorgeous agate from his soul realm and laid it on his table. The gemstone was black, white, and gold, the three colors spiraling and emanating from the center in long, irregular waves. It was beautiful, but not nearly in the same league as the diamond. However, this was one of the stones that Leon had practiced his modular enchantments on, and as such carried quite a few runic glyphs. This particular stone could call a lightning bolt down from the heavens, but only during a naturally-occurring storm, and even then, the bolt wouldn't be particularly powerful—about on par with an attack by a sixth-tier mage, if he had to make an estimation. However, in terms of value, he'd rank the agate as higher than the diamond, if for no other reason than it had a practical purpose, even if that purpose was below Penelope's level.

Still, it was clearly enchanted, as Leon showed off when he channeled a few sparks of magic power into it, just enough for the otherwise completely unnoticeable runes that covered its egg-shaped surface to glow with golden light for a couple of seconds.

"Interesting," Penelope breathed. "I'll accept your wager, Leon Raime. Whoever brings in the most wyvern heads by the end of the hunt will be the winner, and will take the other's item, is that right?"

Leon shook his head, and bartered with the Director's daughter a bit more, each making more specific rules for their wager, all of which Talal quickly wrote down, and each signing their names to the paper once he was finished. Their wager was to be based not only on number of wyvern heads, but the power of those wyverns, too. If any of them brought in any freshly-hatched wyvernlings or wyvern eggs, then they'd receive points for those, as well. However, in the interest of fairness, their wager would be mediated by a third party they could both agree upon before the hunt began.

When everything was signed, both sides calmed down significantly, though neither side interacted any further aside from a few venomous looks. It seemed that with the wager in place, both sides had silently decided not to screw with each other anymore.

Leon sighed in relief, and then summoned up his darkness magic. It still didn't feel quite natural, but he had to admit that he liked the ability to speak directly into people's minds, if he wished.

He said to his retinue, [If we lose this wager, we're all going to pay for it. So don't let me down.] He capped his statement off with a smile of challenge, which Alcander, Marcus, and Valeria returned with burning smiles. The rest of his retinue was a little more circumspect, but he could tell that they were just as motivated.

Talal returned to his seat, and Alcander immediately began teasing the man about his fighting prowess—he'd risen with the others and seemed ready to fight, but Leon knew that Talal wasn't much of a fighter. Still, he appreciated the gesture, even as he tuned out his retinue's more raucous bonding.

He was about to turn his attention to his armor, wanting to head into his soul realm to run it through some tests, when Elise rested her hand upon his thigh. He looked up, his golden irises meeting her glittering emerald eyes.

"You're not thinking of just leaving after all that, are you?" she asked, sounding a little aggrieved.

"No," Leon immediately replied, though guiltily looking away.

"Of course he was," Valeria chided. "He just finished building a bunch of new toys, it's too much to expect him not to want to play with them..."

Leon glared at her, though he wasn't seriously angry, and she responded with a cheeky wink and a smile.

[Stay with us a little longer,] Maia requested, though it didn't quite sound like a request, more like an order. [You've been gone too long.]

"I agree with Naiad," Elise responded. "We need some time together. There'll still be time enough to play with your toys when we reach the Scorched Fields, don't worry..."

Leon smiled at his wife, then at his lovers. There was only one answer he could give, and only one answer he wanted to give in that moment. "My time is yours..."

—

While Leon had intended to spend some time testing his new gear during the flight to the Scorched Fields, in the end, he didn't spend a single second doing so. He wasn't worried; they'd reach the Scorched Fields with probably days or even a week or more to spare. He was far more concerned about Penelope and his family.

So, for the half hour or so after the exchange and bet with Penelope, he quietly chatted with Elise, Maia, and Valeria.

And then it came time for the ark to take off, and all talking between Leon's people ceased.

It started with a low rumble from down below, and Leon sensed a huge pulse of magic travel through the ark's frame. The magic engines roared into life, though only some of that sound managed to pass into the compartment. Then, slowly, the ark began to lift into the air, borne aloft on a combination of fire and wind magic from its wings. After it reached about a hundred feet in the air, the rear engines fully engaged, and the ark began to advance at a snail's pace.

However, the ark then tilted backward slightly, pointing its nose into the air, and started accelerating. It rapidly built up speed, and its rate of acceleration increased to the point where all the passengers were thrown backward slightly. All were powerful mages, so losing their balance wasn't the easiest thing, but their seats helped out greatly, even when those seats weren't braced against the forward motion.

Through the transparent compartment roof, Leon could see clouds whipping past the ark faster and faster, and when he projected his magic senses, they went through the roof easily, and he could see that they were moving at an incredible speed already, and they were still accelerating.

It took several long minutes for the acceleration to stop, leaving the ark at a constant speed, but Leon estimated that they'd reach the Scorched Fields thousands of miles away in less than a day—a mind-blowing speed given what he was used to.

What was even more mind-blowing was the magic flowing through the ark. There was so much of it feeding the ark's enchantments that his estimation of the amount was probably in the quadrillions of aetoi. To put it even more simply, if the ark were powered in a manner consistent with what he'd seen of the Thunderbird Clan, then it would probably take two or three eighth-tier mages in their prime being constantly drained of magic power to maintain the ark's flight.

[Nestor...] Leon breathed into his soul realm. [Xaphan...]

[Hm? The fuck is it, human?] the demon responded immediately, sounding mildly irritated at Leon's interruption of the, no doubt, *tremendously important* business he was taking care of.

Nestor was quieter, merely pulsing his magic senses to let Leon know he had his attention.

[I want one of these. Teach me how to build one of these...]

Unfortunately, the response to Leon's desire to learn how to build an ark was disappointing. While he was making great progress in his efforts to learn the art of enchanting, his skills were still below what they needed to be to accomplish such a complex feat as the creation of an ark, even one that was only capable of intra-planar travel. One that was capable of inter-planar travel, meanwhile, was so much further beyond his capabilities that his expression of desire to Nestor and Xaphan was almost laughable.

That didn't stop him from dreaming, though.

Chapter 690: Vyrias

The Scorched Fields were far to the southwest of the Ilian Empire. The entire breadth of the Empire had to be traversed before the ark even reached the halfway point of their journey, though, fortunately, the

ark moved so quickly that the journey that had taken Leon weeks ten years ago was done in reverse in a matter of hours. However, they did have to cant west a bit to avoid flying over the Sunlit Empire, adding what Leon considered to be a negligible amount of time to their journey.

Once past the border of the Empire, they were in the comparatively lawless and sparsely populated Kyron Steppes. The steppes weren't quite as depopulated as the Ilumerian Wetlands, especially this close to Imperial territory, so while cities were few and very far between, there was never a point where Leon couldn't see at least a couple of nomads grazing their horses or stopping to trade with each other.

He even saw two huge warbands doing battle about a hundred and fifty miles away from their ark, at one point, fighting over something he couldn't even guess at. Ten thousand horsemen clashed against a comparable number, horse archers harassing their foes, heavier cavalry smashing against each other in a vicious melee, and Leon above it all, looking down upon it from the sky.

He couldn't help but feel strangely uncomfortable at the sight of it. He supposed this was part of what achieving Apotheosis might feel like: a god, reigning supreme above all, the petty concerns of mortals and weaker mages so far below him that even their most serious of blood feuds was little more than a curiosity to him.

Still, he watched with rapt attention for as long as the ark remained close enough for his magic senses to reach the battle. Unfortunately, that wasn't long, and he was able to watch the battle for less than a quarter hour before it slipped out of view.

Other than that, the Kyron Steppes were vast and empty, with rolling hills of yellow grassland as far as the eye could see, broken up by the occasional stream or small copse of trees. It was a barren place, and Leon could fully understand why neither the Ilian nor the Sunlit Empire had pushed into the region. Quite simply, there wasn't any reason for them to, not with how few material resources seemed to be here, and especially not with the apparent lack of arable land and water sources. To build an Imperial city out here would be to invest an enormous amount of money into the necessary magical infrastructure that such a settlement would require, and little would flow back into the Empire.

No, he could understand why the borders stopped where they did if this was all that lay beyond. Better to leave the nomads to their own devices and trade with them for whatever, if anything, may be needed from the steppes.

As they were flying over the steppes, Elise told Leon about the nomads, and he learned that they had been quite bothersome in times past. However, the Empires had grown so powerful and magically advanced that the nomads were no longer a problem. The nomads, for all their power and advantages over armies that Leon was more familiar with, simply couldn't compete against the Empire's magical might.

Given the kind of arks that Leon knew just the Ilian Empire had, he could understand that, too. Even a small ark like this one, if equipped with a couple of Imperial Lances, would've annihilated that battling horde of nomads with ease, if it had to.

It was the first time that Leon had ever seen the Kyron Steppes, and as they reached their rough edge, he wasn't quite sure what to think. The last wyvern hunt had taken him on a different route, passing through the Sunlit Empire into the Pegasi States, and he wasn't sure he ever wanted to return to the

steppes. They were just so damned bleak and empty that even Leon, who reveled in solitude and the wilderness, felt uncomfortable.

He'd take the Illumerian Wetlands, filled as they were with dangerous creatures, over the steppes any day.

After the steppes came the Ivory Plains, somehow even bleaker and more inhospitable than the endless grasslands to the north. The plains were almost nothing but stark white salt flats that stretched for hundreds of miles. The entire Bull Kingdom could get lost in them.

Of course, the sheer emptiness of the Ivory Plains made it surprisingly easy to distinguish them from the Scorched Fields. Grass and trees were everywhere, but the Scorched Fields hardly made much of a forest. Instead, massive trees rose hundreds of feet into the sky, and had hundreds of feet between them. Their flame-blackened trunks were so large around on average that twenty men couldn't encircle them when holding hands. Their roots stuck out of the ground for dozens of feet around them like great, entangling webs, and around those roots stretched some of the greenest grass that Leon had ever seen. He'd only ever seen more vivid grass in the Forest of Black and White, where grass of any color could be found.

Other than the grass and the trees, however, there was little in the way of significant plant life. A few thin bushes and weeds, but little else.

There was little evidence, too, of human habitation. The Scorched Fields had few permanent settlements, much like the Kyron Steppes, but here and there Leon could see a few tiny huts built along the trunks of the massive trees, suspended over the ground. Some tree clusters—as much as such distant trees could be called 'clusters'—had enough huts to almost qualify as a small village.

Such settlements weren't meant to be permanent and were probably nothing more than groups of hunters setting up shelters to prepare for the upcoming wyvern hunt. When the wyverns left their aeries to hunt, most of the Scorched Fields would burn since fire wyverns were the most common variety, and while those huts and small villages were vulnerable built so high up on the massive trunks, given the fact that wyverns could fly, they were still safer up there where the fires couldn't reach.

A hut in a tree was only in danger of being burned by a wyvern, but a hut on the ground was guaranteed to be lost to fire without other protections.

The ark continued further into the fields, pushing south and then a little bit east until they reached something that more closely resembled a city. Huge buildings and villas dotted the landscape, many with large walls built around them.

This was Vyrias, the city that sprang up on the western edge of the Pegasi States every five years to see to the needs of the wyvern hunters. Since the Pegasi States were most in danger of incineration without these hunters, it was no surprise to Leon that many of the city-states that made up their confederation committed their powerful mages to the hunt and invested quite a few resources into supporting the hunters as best as they could.

Vyrias wasn't a real city, though. If anything, it more closely resembled an army camp than a proper city, with every formal delegation and mercenary band forming their own camp adjacent to all the others. Dozens of individual camps dotted the landscape, just close enough to support each other if need be,

but separated just enough to maintain their individual identities. The majority of these camps were from the various Pegasi States.

The largest camps were those set aside for the Empires and Heaven's Eye. However, of the Empires, only the Ilian Empire and Sacred Golden Empire were sending delegations this year, and even then, the Ilian delegation was less than half of what Leon remembered it being five years ago.

That marred its appearance just a bit, making the Ilian delegation seem small even though they were larger than any individual Pegasi delegation.

The Sacred Golden Empire's delegation, on the other hand, more than made up for it, for they were clearly moving in force. Six clusters of gigantic, clearly foreign trees had been grown in the center of the camp, each cluster made up of four trees with trunks as thick as the footprint of Leon's entire villa. They stretched quite high into the sky, but that massive footprint still made them seem rather squat and short compared to the much slenderer and more graceful-looking trees that were native to the region.

Leon had only ever seen these massive trees once before: during the previous hunt, and he'd never been inside of them. However, he knew that the Sacred Golden Empire used their mastery of nature magic to grow them extraordinarily rapidly, and they served as residences for the delegation. Each tree was built with long, winding tunnels and luxurious rooms throughout its unnaturally thick trunk, while its upper branches were entangled with the branches of their neighbors in the cluster. These branches served as hallways, or even rooms unto themselves depending on their size, that connected each tree to the other, so residents of one tree could visit all the other trees in their cluster without actually leaving the tree. The largest cluster of palace trees had their branches so entwined with each other that they effectively made a roof over the area in between them, and resting upon that leafy canopy were three arks, each one larger than the one Leon was in by at least half. The largest of them was pure white with gold accents, and was so sleek and stylish that Leon couldn't imagine it belonged to anyone but someone of Imperial rank—Princess Cassandra's personal ark, he assumed. As far as he was aware, no one else of Imperial rank was participating in this hunt, so the daughter of the current Sacred Golden Empress had to be that ark's owner.

The trees were dotted with windows, and their leaves glowed in all the colors of the rainbow in a manner reminiscent of the trees that helped to light the Ilian streets at night. From what he could sense, Leon knew that a huge amount of magic flowed through those trees, and they even served to collect much of the magic in the area to fuel those enchantments, functioning in a similar manner to the obelisk that once stood in the center of Leon's home in the Forest of Black and White, and to the enchantments he'd placed upon his villa in both the Bull Kingdom and Occulara.

Next to these tree clusters, the Heaven's Eye camp, for all its luxury, seemed rather mundane. There were a lot of modular, pre-fabricated homes similar to what Leon had in his soul realm, but marble and gold would always lose out in Leon's eyes to bark and leaf, no matter how magical each was. Still, the Heaven's Eye delegation was quite large, with personnel numbering at least five thousand. Not all of them were going to participate in the hunt—hells, not even a quarter were going to do so. Instead, Heaven's Eye was going to support their own hunters and provide their usual logistical support to all the hunters venturing out to help contain the hungry wyverns.

Throughout its approach to Vyrias, the ark slowed almost imperceptibly. Its speed had dropped by more than a third before they needed to more noticeably brake, and even then, it was still quite smooth.

The ark came down vertically, landing in the center of the Heaven's Eye delegation where space had been specifically cleared for the ark to do so. Waiting just next to the area were a number of Heaven's Eye personnel of high rank, clearly meant to welcome Leon, Penelope, and all the rest to the temporary city.

Leon was used to this treatment, having endured it himself many times in the past ten years. He was quite tired of it and was more than happy to leave most of the glad-handing to Penelope as they disembarked from the ark. The ark would stick around, and when the hunt was over, would fly them home.

After the pleasantries were had with the local administrators of Vyrias, Leon and the others were then escorted toward where they were going to set up their own camps. Once they arrived, Leon found it to be quite the expansive plot of land given what everyone else had to work with in the relatively cramped city—more than enough for his fairly small modular house to be set up in any configuration he wanted.

He went with a standard design, with an atrium opening into a courtyard, surrounding which were his retainers' rooms to the left, the common rooms to the right, and his family's rooms in the back. He and his lovers would share one bathroom, while the rest of his retinue would have another. Anzu even had his own stable.

While he was busy getting each piece of the rooms out of his soul realm and fitted into place, he noticed a beautiful woman dressed in a sleeveless tunic that, from the distance he was observing from, seemed to be spun of gold, ride a winged horse up to Penelope's retinue, who were busy setting up their own camp in an adjacent lot. The woman spoke with Penelope for a quick moment, and then waited. She seemed to be a messenger of someone important, and from what Leon could discern of her dress, she was from the Sacred Golden Empire.

Penelope was clearly elated by whatever the woman had told her, and after barking a few orders at her retinue, she took over a nearby horseless carriage and followed the messenger toward the Sacred Golden Empire's campsite.

Leon paused in getting his retinue's camp set up and shouted, "Talal!"

His assistant appeared at his shoulder a moment later, almost as if he were waiting for Leon to call.

"Boss?"

"Penelope just rode off with someone from the Sacred Golden Empire. Find out what she's doing."

"Will do," Talal responded, and he took off to speak with the leaders of the rest of the Heaven's Eye delegation. He didn't return until after Leon had finished setting up their small villa, and the rest of the retinue was getting busy settling in.

Upon his return, Talal met with Leon and Elise in the dining room.

"The Sacred Golden Empire's Princess leading their delegation sent a messenger to Heaven's Eye," Talal explained once they'd taken their seats. "This Princess invited Lady Penelope to a welcoming banquet."

"Just Lady Penelope?" Elise inquired, sounding more than a little offended, her emerald eyes narrowing as her lips turned downward in a subtle frown.

"No, actually," Talal said. "The *written* invitation was for all agents and managers of sufficient status. To my understanding, that should've included both of you, too."

"No one came to tell us," Elise murmured, her offense growing. Leon remained silent as he took her hand and gave her a reassuring squeeze.

"The messenger was escorted to Lady Penelope's camp," Talal continued. "I don't know what was said between them, but Lady Penelope and the messenger both left for the Princess' palace-tree."

"Why?" Leon wondered aloud. "If the invitation was for us all, then wouldn't it have been sufficient to just give it to Heaven's Eye and have them relay it to us?"

Elise answered through a clenched jaw, "An invitation from a Princess isn't one to entrust to just anyone. It's better to pass it along in person. However, they *should've* informed us at the same time!"

Leon sighed. "Are we still expected at this banquet, or has it already passed?"

"It'll be held later in the evening," Talal explained reassuringly.

"Huh. So Penelope just took the opportunity to leave early with the messenger?"

"I can't say what she was doing," Talal replied.

Leon sighed again. All it took for him to know that this wasn't something he could blow off was a single glance at Elise. From the look she wore, he could already guess that she was mentally putting together her outfit for the night.

"Thanks, Talal," Leon said, and his assistant nodded respectfully. "Do you have a specific timetable?"

Talal nodded again. "The banquet begins at dusk."

"So we'll arrive a little later than that," Elise said almost absent-mindedly, much of her offended wrath having dissipated knowing that they weren't being entirely spurned. However, there were still a few fiery sparks within her, that Leon could easily see.

"A thing done easily," Talal replied.

Leon, Elise, and Talal continued discussing their plans for the evening, including exactly what to wear, who to bring, how to arrive, and how long they'd stay. Once everything was settled, the three broke up to finish their business and get ready for the banquet to come.

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The interior of the Princess' palace-tree was splendid, looking almost indistinguishable from a proper palace, save for the fact that the interior was made of a golden brown wood that almost seemed to glow in the light of the magical lanterns spread throughout. The curving, rather organically-shaped walls had no figurative art, but were instead covered in dark brown root-like patterns that spiraled around and wove through each other, giving the walls a beautiful textured look.

There were no stairs within the tree, but Leon, Elise, Talal, Valeria, Maia, Helen, and Anna were borne aloft on magic lifts that ran up through channels in the palace-tree. Elise, Maia, and Valeria were dressed in their usual colors—a red and black form-fitting dress for Elise, a dark blue dress for Maia, and a long, light blue tunic with slightly darker blue trousers for Valeria. All three wore quite a few pieces of gold jewelry, including the emerald rings of invisibility, Valeria's amulet of invisibility, the ring that Leon gave Elise to enhance her earth magic during their wedding ceremony, and the diamond amulet that Elise had given to Leon at the same time.

Helen and Anna, meanwhile, were dressed in gold dresses that exposed their arms and most of their legs, with stylish dark brown sandals with elevated heels—a style fairly consistent with natives of the Sacred Golden Empire, as far as Leon was aware.

In contrast to the ladies, Leon and Talal were practically beggars, dressed mostly in smoky gray and black.

The magic lift carried them all the way into the upper branches of the palace-tree, and when its doors opened, allowing them to spill out into the central audience chamber, it was almost as if they'd stepped out into a completely different world. The branches hadn't just interwoven enough to have strong arkpads above but had woven together to create a huge chamber hidden amongst the rainbow leaves that had such support that it seemed almost as if they'd somehow stepped out onto the ground despite having risen many stories.

There was a wide stone pathway leading away from the lifts, flanked by floating golden lights and grassy soil that blocked the rainbow light of the leaves below. Branches of the palace-tree rose from the 'ground' like trees unto themselves, while the roof of the huge chamber sparkled with dull rainbow light. Most of the light within the chamber, however, came from a single huge seed-like thing that hung over the center of the chamber like a chandelier, shining bright golden light throughout the chamber as if the sun itself had descended to rest in the branches of the palace-tree.

The stone pathway led to a beautiful stone pavilion surrounded by a stream conjured by water magic. The stream not only surrounded the pavilion, but separated it from a tall, terraced platform, at the summit of which was a large throne of carved gray stone.

And sitting in that throne was the Imperial Princess, surveying the pavilion like a dispassionate god and radiating a strong aura of eighth-tier magic. Her blood-red eyes swept over toward Leon's group as they arrived, lingering for a moment on each of them, but pausing longer when they reached Maia, and stopping entirely when they found Leon.

Leon stared back at her, his golden eyes meeting hers. For the first time, Leon made eye contact with Cassandra, Princess of the Sacred Golden Empire. Attached at her hip was a familiar weapon, too—Leon would recognize that eagle pommel anywhere, he'd forged it himself. The Princess was in possession of Sunlight.