

Storm King 701

Chapter 701: Round Three

The gorge was deep and dark, certainly unnaturally so. Leon's magic senses could only penetrate so far before the darkness became like a shroud, making the gorge appear like it led down into the deepest depths of the plane.

It wasn't like this the first time Leon had seen it during the mission to grab the eggs and wyvernlings. It had been a fairly normal, if deep gorge, and had only revealed itself to be more than that when the black wyvern first appeared from the shadows. Now, however, with the sun almost completely set, and the black wyvern seemingly returned, the gorge was shrouded in unnatural darkness such that none in their hunting party could see the bottom.

"That's encouraging," Alix quipped as they stared down from the cliffs. "Kind of glad we're not heading down there..."

Leon's entire retinue, minus Talal and Elise, were there at the cliffs overlooking the gorge. Penelope's surviving retainers were there, as well, and so were a number of heavily armed and armored female warriors in Cassandra's service. None of them would be accompanying the main fighters down into the gorge. Instead, they'd be keeping an eye on the cliffs within Leon's fortified villa, keeping an eye on the surroundings while Cassandra's ark circled around overhead.

Only Leon, Maia, Penelope, and Cassandra would be braving the darkness below.

That wasn't their original plan, but with what they could sense, it was the safest. Penelope had already lost several of her retainers to these wyverns, and she wasn't looking to lose anymore. Besides, they had four eighth-tier mages. Even with all the power of the wyverns, that was still an enormous amount of power on their side.

More, if Leon counted Xaphan, though the demon was reluctant to join this fight, and even gave Leon no small amount of mockery when he'd asked Xaphan to be ready. Xaphan didn't think this was a matter worth his power, and refused to join the fight unless Leon's life was actually on the line.

Still, even with all the power on their side, Leon didn't allow himself to ignore the danger in this foray into the black wyvern's lair. Wyverns were incredibly powerful, stronger than mages of equivalent tiers, and down there, he wouldn't be able to summon lightning from the sky.

With Alix's statement ringing in his ears, Leon turned to his three companions standing to his left.

"This could very well be our point of no return," he observed. "Heading down into that abyss will mean entering Black's domain. He's been chased off twice, but down in his lair, who knows if that'll even be an option? If anyone wants to back out, now, I think, would be the time."

Maia didn't respond, though she didn't need to. Through their connection, Leon could feel her readiness for battle, and for whatever might come down there—though, that readiness was tinged with the barest hint of fear, likely stemming from the last time they'd plumbed the depths of the earth and encountered significant darkness magic, back during the campaign in the Serpentine Isles.

Still, she was ready and wasn't going to turn around, not at this point.

Cassandra, it seemed, shared that resolve. "I'm not running away," she proclaimed, her aura rising in intensity and filling with killing intent. Leon saw that she wore an almost mad smile, an expression of anticipation that rather surprised him coming from a Princess. "A little darkness doesn't scare me."

Penelope then added, "I can handle some darkness magic. Just try to keep up, Leon."

Leon didn't respond to the challenge; he could tell her heart wasn't in it, and the statement itself seemed almost token. If he was worried about anyone, it would be Penelope. She was clearly the most reluctant to head down into the gorge, even before finding it filled with darkness magic.

But she wasn't running away or begging off the mission. Instead, she simply stared down into the dark, her almond-shaped eyes unwavering in conviction. For all her reluctance, she was committed to heading down there, at least.

"All right, then," Leon said. He then turned to Valeria and channeled his own darkness magic.

[Keep an eye on everyone out here,] he said to his silver-haired lover. [Stay where that ark above us can cover you. Don't take any risks.]

Valeria nodded back to him, and Leon relaxed ever so slightly. With Valeria in charge of his retinue, he felt like he didn't have to worry too much about them and could focus on the hunt.

"If there's nothing else," he said aloud, "shall we begin?"

Cassandra laughed with an almost manic anticipation and leaped off the cliff wall and into the gorge. Leon had no doubt she'd survive, given the fact that not only did she have Sunlight drawn, she also wore her gleaming white armor with powerful defensive enchantments.

"After you, Leon," Penelope replied.

Leon smiled at her and took one last moment to check his own gear. His armor was donned and in his left gauntlet was the anti-darkness opal. His right gauntlet gem slot was empty, waiting to be filled with the gem he felt might be best suited for whatever awaited them down in the gorge. But most of all, his helmet was coursing with magic power, the wards that protected him from darkness magic strong and active.

Confident his gear was in top shape, Leon waved to his retainers and then jumped from the cliff, Maia following not even a second later. Finally, Penelope leaped off the cliff, her hesitation plain for Leon to see even as he plummeted into the depths of the gorge.

They fell quickly, the walls of the gorge rising around them like the jaws of a massive beast. Leon controlled his descent with his flight gear, but otherwise didn't slow himself, and he hit the curtain of darkness at the bottom of the gorge with great speed.

He braced himself for a hard impact, but none came. Instead, he hit the black shroud and fell right in like it was as tangible as a cloud.

And he kept falling for much longer than he expected. All the light above vanished faster than it should've, and he felt some magical pressure assert itself around his helmet, though fail to penetrate his wards.

Finally, he hit the ground with a tremendous crash, the stone at the bottom of the gorge fracturing beneath his feet with the force of his impact, throwing dust everywhere and sending cracks spider-webbing out from him. At the same time, lightning blazed through not only his body, but his armor, too, fending off the darkness that now surrounded and pressed in around him.

Maia landed beside him with considerably more grace, though creating a crater of her own. She had surrounded herself with five spears of water during her descent, and they now revolved around her, aimed outward and ready for battle.

Cassandra was already on the ground, Sunlight glowing in her hand, her purple hair glittering in the cast light. Finally, Penelope landed just beside her, a large spear in her hand pulsing with white light magic.

The four instinctively closed ranks with each other as they evaluated their surroundings, not getting too close to each other, but still ensuring that nothing could strike at their backs without going through one of the others, first.

Their magic senses inundated their surroundings, passing harmlessly through the curtains of darkness magic that surrounded them.

They found themselves in a dark and gray world, surrounded by crags and boulders, and little else. The walls of the gorge could still be seen, but they seemed strangely distant, and the sky above them was shrouded by the black curtain of darkness that shielded the bottom of the gorge from view. Much of that inky darkness leaked from the shroud like heavier-than-air gas, pooling in the cracks between the crags and lapping at their ankles, reaching for them, pulling at them, but not doing any real damage.

The atmosphere was oppressive, the four just waiting for something to burst out of their surroundings and strike. All of them were just waiting for the black wyvern to lunge out of the darkness around them and snap and bite and swipe at them, but nothing happened.

Until they began to relax.

"I thin—" Cassandra began, turning her head slightly to glance at Leon, her posture dropping just slightly, but before she could even finish the second word, the ground beneath their feet shattered and exploded upward. They were showered in deadly stony shrapnel infused with magic power, making each sliver of stone that much tougher and more dangerous.

For all their danger, the shards pinged harmlessly off Leon's armor, doing likewise for Cassandra. Penelope was armored a little lighter, but she came out just fine, if a little unbalanced. Maia, however, had to pull her water spears in, taking a few good hits before getting her water shield in place.

Once the explosion calmed, Leon reached out and grabbed his river nymph, letting the power of the tau pearl flow into her. She wasn't injured particularly seriously, but she was still bleeding from a few cuts here and there, and that was a sight Leon couldn't allow.

It only took a second to fix those wounds, and in that second, a roar of fury filled the gorge. Leon barely turned his attention back to their surroundings before the massive form of the brown wyvern erupted from the earth like it was water and snapped her massive jaws at him.

Leon was ready, though, and he swung his blade, blazing as it was with silver-blue lightning, as he slid right underneath Brown's gnashing jaws. He hit the beast in the chin, his prodigious strength hitting like

a blow from a stone giant. Lightning poured out of him, arcing all over Brown's face, blackening and tearing at her scales. She reeled back, hissing in pain.

Maia furiously hurled one of her water spears at the beast, but the seventh-tier wyvern sank back below the surface as if the stone beneath her claws was as liquid as the sea and Maia's water spear sailed off into the dark for a few dozen feet before freezing in place, and then promptly reversing course to rejoin Maia.

"That was a bad hit," Leon said to the others. "I don't think I did much damage."

He half-expected Penelope to make some snide comment, but he thought that maybe the situation was settling into her mind a bit, for she let his statement go without comment.

"Then just hit it again when it shows itself," Cassandra responded with gleeful anticipation. "And hit it harder!"

Leon spared a moment to regard the Princess with some surprise, her raging killing intent and clear bloodlust standing in contrast with what he expected from her. He quickly turned his attention back to the situation at hand, though, and summoned his enchanted moonstone into his gauntlet in preparation for another strike from Brown.

He didn't have to wait long, and this time, the strike didn't come for him. Instead, a massive stone spike erupted from the ground and tried to impale Maia, but she nimbly leaped out of the way, and continued to dance through the air as the ground beneath her opened up, threatening to swallow her up into jagged rocky pits.

"Take to the air!" Cassandra shouted, and without hesitation, everyone engaged their flight gear and rose up a couple stories.

Another spike then blasted out of the earth, aimed at Cassandra, and this one Leon was ready for. As soon as he saw it, he engaged the enchantments in his moonstone, and the spike halted in midair. He gritted his teeth and hurled the spike back into the ground.

"Very nice," Cassandra said appreciatively. "That was an enchantment, wasn't it?"

"It was," Leon readily admitted, though not taking his eyes off their surroundings. Cassandra might take this situation fairly lightly, but he was just waiting for any of the other wyverns to appear from the dark.

"I thought so," Cassandra calmly replied. "You don't look much like an earth mage. Not quite brutish enough."

Penelope finally interjected with a barbed comment, saying, "I might disagree with you on that, Your Highness..."

"Brute or no," Leon responded, "this is hardly the time to relax. Let's try to stay focused, yeah?"

Cassandra shrugged and Penelope scowled, but neither of them said another word.

Brown then made herself known again, rising from the earth about two hundred feet away. The earth simply split open, and she crawled out, her teeth bared, her aura staggering, her wrath more than evident. She roared in challenge, and all four of them turned their attention in her direction.

A moment later, Leon realized their mistake. As soon as their eyes were locked upon the roaring brown wyvern and no longer focused on the rest of the gorge, the shadows beneath them burst forth. A column of smoky darkness shot up and enveloped them completely, pressing in and trying to take root in their minds.

These tendrils barely managed to close around Leon's helmet before his enchantments flared to life and vaporized them. Without a second's thought, Leon summoned his magic power and let his lightning blast out from him while he engaged his black opal at the same time, hoping to weaken this attack.

The result was that all the darkness around him was ripped and torn asunder, though that radius didn't quite extend to the rest of his party.

They didn't need his aid, though, for a moment later, a massive water dragon broke free of the confines of the black column, carrying Maia to safety. Penelope emerged with a blast of fire, looking a little haggard but otherwise all right. Cassandra, meanwhile, cleaved her way through the darkness, her body protected by a shield of brilliant white light projected by Sunlight. The blade itself glowed with white light that projected outward, tripling the weapon's effective length.

As she came out to hover by the rest of them, Leon heard her say more to herself than to anyone else, "By the Gardeners, I *love* this fucking sword..."

Behind his helmet, Leon couldn't help but beam with pride, his face splitting open in an utterly absurd smile that would've had him burning with embarrassment had it not been hidden.

But his reverie was shattered a moment later when Black finally revealed himself, bursting from the ground with White and Green in tow, all three wyverns having been shrouded in darkness and hidden from view. But now, White opened her toothy maw and horrible light streamed forth.

Leon, however, swapped his moonstone out for his enchanted lapis, projecting a shield of ice to hang in the air just as this beam of light lanced toward them. The light hit the shield and scattered right off, the frozen water crystals refracting and reflecting the damaging light and preventing White's attack from doing any damage.

Leon had to fight to maintain the shield, though, as White kept up the pressure, not ceasing her light breath and threatening to overwhelm Leon's shield.

Fortunately, the mages at his back sprang into motion immediately, and Maia sent a pair of mid-sized water dragons slithering through the air on either side of Leon, one toward Green and the other toward Brown. Penelope pulled back a little bit and started conjuring firebirds as fast as she could and letting them fly out on their own to harass the wyverns. Cassandra took a more personal approach, surging toward Black with Sunlight still brightly illuminated.

Black roared in indignation and launched himself toward her, while Green hissed and flapped her wings, sending dozens of sharp wind blades at Maia's water dragons. Brown, ignoring the water dragon bearing down on her, called her earth magic and the ground beneath Green's water dragon cracked open, sending thousands of tiny pieces of stone shrapnel rocketing skyward. Finally, White turned her head and her light breath sliced into the water dragon's flank.

That water dragon was mercilessly torn to shreds, but the second crashed into Brown, wrapping itself around her and squeezing hard enough for the massive wyvern to shriek in pain.

Black roared in anger and launched himself into the air, his slitted reptilian eyes fixed upon Maia even as Cassandra spun around in the air to keep up. Leon growled in defiance, understanding where he was heading. Black barreled down upon Maia as smoky tendrils of darkness erupted from the shadows beneath him to tangle and tear into Penelope's firebirds.

Leon and Cassandra both swiftly moved, interposing themselves between Black and Maia, but the beast didn't slow down, barreling right past Cassandra, ignoring a strike she laid against his flank with Sunlight, and knocking her right out of the sky. He didn't even slow as Leon pushed out and summoned his lightning magic as he fell back towards Maia, letting streams of lightning erupt from his fingers and rake across Black's scales unimpeded. The beast was consumed with rage at Maia, and he ignored all else. Even when Cassandra righted herself in the air and charged after him and slashed at his wing with Sunlight, Black continued on, ignoring the burning light that pierced through the membrane of his wing, spilling a few drops of blood before the blade seared the wounds shut.

Cassandra, however, was thrown from the monster's wing as he flew, leaving only Leon hovering between him and Maia.

But Maia wasn't helpless, and as Leon reached out with his left hand, intent on disrupting the beast's darkness magic, another water dragon peeled past him. It was a huge water construct and packed full of Maia's power. However, it slid right through the wyvern as his scaled body dulled and darkened. Leon shouted in frustration as his lightning harmlessly slipped right through the wyvern, his black opal unable to sufficiently disrupt the monster's magic power, and the wyvern battered him aside like a leaf in the wind.

Leon felt the flash of pain lance through him through their connection as Maia was hit by the wyvern, and he lost all peripheral vision. All he saw was the wyvern slamming his jaws shut upon his river nymph, and white-hot fury exploded within him.

Leon righted himself and hurtled after the wyvern, burning through his magic power to go just that much faster. Within his body, his lightning magic changed to fire, and he could feel it was just slightly different compared to what he usually felt when he channeled this strength. It was deeper, wilder, more potent, more primal. This fire yearned to be released, demanded to be let loose upon his enemies. It held a savage need to incinerate, to destroy all it touched.

With a bone-crunching impact, Leon slammed into the flank of the black wyvern and let this fire loose. Orange flames poured from his extremities like water through a burst dam, and within them were licks of black fire, searing and burning through Black's scales, the beast's shroud of darkness unable to stop this conflagration. At the same time, Black's jaws were forced open by a pillar of ice, and Maia, encased in a small and weak-looking water dragon, fell the beast's maw, bleeding from several enormous wounds that ran the length of her torso. Maia didn't immediately respond to Leon's attempts to communicate through their connection and didn't move much from where she lay on the ground, her water dragon disintegrating all around her. Black roared in pain as he snapped the ice in his mouth, clearly hurt but not out of the fight.

Leon smiled; more of his power was needed, then. He let every spark of power flow through him and out through whatever body part would hold it. Fire exploded from his body like he was the sun itself, and Black screeched in pain again.

And then Leon felt another bone-crushing impact, and he was thrown away from Black with terrific force. He hit the ground and shattered the stone beneath him, not even his armor's padding and defensive enchantments able to absorb all the force of that blow.

Above, Leon could see Black's tail still swinging back after having struck him, and he could see a horrific hole burned into the beast's flank by his black flames.

In an instant, Leon evaluated his condition and realized that while he'd broken a rib in that impact and had many more bruises, he was hardly debilitated. The power of the tau pearl was already going to work, fixing his wounds.

A bright flash of light got his attention again as he forced himself to his feet, and he saw Cassandra tangling with Black, Sunlight gleaming with light magic. Further away, Penelope was keeping the other three wyverns busy with her firebirds, but she was being overwhelmed little by little. She was unable to stop White from sending a beam of light into Black, causing much of the damage Leon had done to rap

Chapter 702: Red I

"What in the Ashen Fields was *that*?" Cassandra demanded as she, Leon, Maia, and Penelope finally sealed the door of the conference room behind them.

They'd emerged from the black wyvern's gorge not even two minutes ago, and with barely a word to their retinues, Leon and Penelope had steered them into the most private room that the Heaven's Eye contingent had established in their little camp.

Given how steamed she seemed to be, Leon was surprised Cassandra managed to hold herself back from exploding in anger until now, when they were no longer relatively public eye of their retainers.

"We could've had them!" Cassandra vehemently continued. "We were doing damage!"

"Not enough to overcome White's healing powers," Penelope replied. "And we took some damage of our own."

"Not enough to overcome *Leon's* healing powers!" Cassandra replied, pointing at Leon for emphasis.

As soon as he'd entered the room, Leon had taken to examining Maia, fussing over her a bit and ensuring that her wounds were fully healed. Maia, for her part, didn't seem to mind the attention, though fury at having been injured at all spilled from her through their connection. After making sure Maia was fully healed and sensing that this exchange had the potential to spill over into an extremely heated argument, Leon calmly responded to the Princess, "What was the point of this fight?"

"To kill those wyverns, obviously!" Cassandra almost shouted back.

Leon nodded. "That was the end goal, I agree. But how important was it? As far as we can tell, these wyverns are stuck here defending their own turf. They're not going anywhere. We can do damage them enough to ensure that they'll flee battle, and they've proven that we're not untouchable, either." Leon gestured to both Maia and Penelope, neither of whom seemed happy about being called out like this.

But Leon continued, "What was this battle supposed to be? Were we supposed to fight to the bitter end? As far as I was aware, this wasn't an existential, no-holds-barred fight to the death. In the face of danger, it was all right to retreat, we can afford to come back later with a better plan that won't risk injury or death."

Cassandra scowled and said, "And by leaving like this, we've only given them more time to prepare to fight against us! We've given them time to heal and regain their lost power!"

"Wyverns are terrifically powerful," Leon pointed out. "I don't think we really taxed their powers that greatly..."

Cassandra just folded her arms across her chest and glared at him.

"My point stands, though," Leon replied. "What were the stakes of that battle? Civilization is hardly going to end after retreating, so why not let them have this round and come back later? We're pressing them against a wall, here, and that makes them dangerous."

"I don't think we were in as great of danger as you seem to think," Cassandra insisted.

Leon sighed.

From within his soul realm, the crackling voice of his demonic partner added, [Neither do I. If things got truly dire, you could've always summoned me. You may be too weak and cowardly to fight these creatures, but I could certainly make up for that...]

[I know that,] Leon replied, saying no more.

He turned his gaze from Cassandra to his right hand, where he could still feel a bit of leftover heat from his final strike against Black. He'd used *black fire*... and he was both excited and somewhat apprehensive about what that meant. Unlike almost every other time he'd used that power, he was fully conscious of himself when he'd used it, and he was fully conscious after. He could remember what his magic had felt like, and how it had changed...

It took him a couple seconds to tear his thoughts away from that power and back to the conversation at hand, and fortunately, Penelope had spoken up as he fell into contemplative silence.

"Those were only four of the wyverns," she said. "Where were Red, Blue, and Gold? If we committed to that fight any more, then we might've been ambushed again and truly put in a dangerous position. Without knowing where those other three are, I think committing too far to this fight isn't in our interest. Besides, as Leon pointed out, we're not too battered, and just as they can rest and heal, so can we. We can make another play at them later, after we analyze what we did right, what we did wrong, and what we can do next time to make sure we're all as safe as we can be."

"In that respect," Leon responded with great hesitation, "I think I know what we can do to increase our powers some."

"Do tell," Cassandra responded a little bitterly. Her tone and body language were a little calmer, but she was still angry, that much was obvious.

Leon took a deep breath and, taking some comfort in Anna and Helen's response to learning Xaphan resided within him, explained, "I happen to have a contract with a demon..."

He quickly told them about Xaphan and his powers, and to his immense relief, other than a few hints of surprise, neither Cassandra nor Penelope interrupted him. If they'd been truly opposed to demonic power, he guessed they would've stopped him soon in his explanation.

When he was finished, he let out a quick sigh as fear and anxiety settled within him. It was his first real time offering information on Xaphan of his own accord, without the demon manifesting in ways that he couldn't otherwise explain away, and the possibility that the information would be poorly received, even with Cassandra and Penelope's relatively subdued reactions, still weighed on him.

His companions were quiet for a couple seconds before Cassandra exclaimed, "Why the *ashen fuck* didn't you call upon that demon instead of calling for a retreat?! If you still had powers you could've invoked, then why didn't you invoke them instead of decrying this hunt as hopeless?!"

"I didn't decry it as hopeless," Leon countered, his temper starting to rise in response to Cassandra's anger. He'd calmed down significantly with Maia healed, but the memory of her injury still had him feeling a little emotionally raw, and Cassandra's tone was insinuating that she thought him a coward. "This was *dangerous*, and there was no reason—"

He cut himself off and turned away from Cassandra, taking a few deep breaths to steady himself.

Silently, he told himself, *'Maia's fine, I channeled black fire. No reason to get angry with her. No reason at all. Stay calm, dumbass, stay calm!'*

"I think we're starting to argue in circles," Penelope finally stated. "What's done is done. Let's do what we can to locate those few remaining wyverns, and then we can make another play at Black?"

Her voice wavered a bit—from fear, Leon guessed. She clearly didn't want to go back down there, and yet was more than willing to. In spite of himself, Leon felt a tiny smidge of respect blooming within him for Penelope.

Before anyone could properly respond to Penelope, though, a knock sounded at the conference room door. It was a messenger bearing news of a rather strange guest the camp had just received.

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Leon stared at the woman in front of him, unsure if he was seeing things true or not.

She was quite beautiful, being rather tall and fair. Her hair was as red as Elise's, and long enough to hang down to her lower back. She wore a plain red dress and held herself with arrogant grace.

Most strikingly of all, however, were her eyes. They were the color of amber, and slitted like a snake's. Surrounding her eyes were hundreds of tiny red scales, showing her to be inhuman, and her aura radiated seventh-tier equivalent power.

When the messenger brought news of her arrival, it was with the addition that she brought information on the black wyvern that they might find useful. Leon and the others agreed to meet her, but as soon as they saw her, all four almost immediately knew who she was.

She was the red wyvern in the group they were hunting.

The fact that she wasn't overtly hostile was the only reason she was still alive—that, and the sheer confusion that she engendered with her arrival. She refused to meet with them in their camp, so the eighth-tier mages met with her on the edge of the camp, where she awaited them a few dozen feet from their sentries.

Leon, after taking her stock, projected his magic senses and examined their surroundings in great detail. This could very well be a trap, though he was inclined to think it wasn't, thanks to Red's lack of participation in the previous fight. However, he wasn't able to sense any other wyverns around.

When he refocused back on Red, he found her staring at him, a strange intensity to her gaze that had him feeling like he was being examined in greater detail than he was comfortable with. He could even feel her magic power lightly settling around him as she used her own magic senses to take his stock, in turn.

"Who are you and why are you here?" shouted Cassandra's seventh-tier guard commander, who'd accompanied them to the edge of the camp.

Red ignored her and continued to focus on Leon. He felt a light touch brush against his mind, which he found familiar: it was almost akin to a darkness magic probe, but not nearly as serious. It was a mental communication technique almost identical to Maia's. He wasn't able to hear anything, however, now that he was a little more experienced with and more heavily warded against such magic.

In response, Red stared at him with some exasperation, her mouth turning downwards in a shallow frown, but refraining from audible speech. With some reservations, Leon opened himself up to the mental communication, but kept his magic power on standby, just in case.

He felt that magic almost recoil in surprise, then brush against his mind again with the lightest of touches, forming a loose mental connection. A moment later, information passed along that connection: thoughts, feelings, and intentions, forming something in his head that he interpreted as perfectly-understandable speech.

[... There, finally,] Red said to him, as far as he could interpret. [I don't speak your language, this is the only way we can communicate.]

"I see," Leon whispered, drawing the attention of his companions and interrupting Cassandra's seventh-tier guard captain as she continued to shout at the wyvern. To them, he explained, "She's speaking to me in my head, much like how you do." He nodded to Maia, who nodded back in understanding.

"What's she saying?" Cassandra impatiently demanded.

"Nothing substantial, yet," Leon replied aloud as he turned his gaze back to the wyvern, while also using his own mental communication technique to repeat his words in a way she could more readily understand. "What do you want and why are you here?"

[You know what I am, human?] Red asked.

"You're that red wyvern, aren't you?" Leon asked.

[Yes,] Red replied. [I've come to speak with you. I believe we may be able to come to an accord...]

Leon stared at her in shock before relaying her statement to the others. After a few moments of surprise on their part, they hurriedly made mental connections with Red so that they could communicate, too.

"You want to help us?!" Penelope said in disbelief once a mental connection between her and Red was established strongly enough that she could speak aloud without need for translation.

Red glanced at her for a moment before stoically nodding her head, though tempering that agreement by stating, [That depends entirely on what kind of deal we can work out...]

"Why?" Cassandra demanded, her Imperial haughtiness making itself known as she glared at Red in an unmistakable challenge. "Why should we take the words of a monster seriously? What's to stop us from killing you here and now and throwing your corpse down into that canyon?"

Red's stoicism cracked slightly with that threat, and she glanced questioningly at Leon.

[Do they... not know what you are?] she asked him.

Leon's heart skipped a beat, and he remembered that he'd first seen Red when in avian form. *'Does she remember that? Is she able to connect that with me?'*

Carefully measuring his words to make it clear they were still speaking, but trying not to draw any suspicion, he asked Red, "What do you mean?"

Red's reptilian eyes narrowed slightly.

[I take that as a 'no'? Perhaps this was a mistake...]

She almost turned to leave before Leon called out, "Wait! If you're here in good faith, we're not going to hurt you!" He glanced at Cassandra, who gave him a subdued look of exasperation, but didn't argue with him.

Red paused and looked back at him.

[Shall we talk, then? And come to an accord?]

—

As soon as Leon, Maia, Penelope, Cassandra, and Red returned to the conference room and left the public eye, Cassandra demanded, "Why are you here?"

Red, looking almost bored by the question and not at all perturbed by Cassandra's mildly turbulent eighth-tier aura, replied for all four of them to hear, [I want my mate dead. He threatens my unhatched young and takes my kills. His usefulness has ended.]

"What usefulness?" Leon wondered.

[His strength is passed to my progeny,] Red explained simply.

"Where are the other two?" Penelope asked, not elaborating.

Red gave her a quick look, then explained, [They are nearby. If you kill me, then they will return to our mate and fight you alongside him.]

“And if we *don’t* harm you?” Penelope continued. “If we come to an accord?”

[An accord with me is an accord with them,] Red explained. [We want our mate dead. We want our eggs returned to us.]

“Why you three, then?” Penelope inquired. “Why not White, Brown, or Green?”

Red cocked her head slightly as if parsing out just what Penelope meant. A moment later, she replied, [They are scared. They fear our mate’s power, and do not wish to call his wrath down upon themselves, as others have before.]

“What exactly *is* Black out here?” Leon wondered aloud.

Red cocked her head again but didn’t respond this time.

“I mean, he had a *lot* of wyverns following him yesterday,” Leon elaborated. “Is some kind of King? How did they fall in line? And should we expect more hordes like that in our next tangle with him?”

Red explained, [Threats were made, others followed out of fear. His power was enough to gather others. No others have been threatened since his flight, though.]

Leon lightly frowned, but he supposed that was as good an answer as any.

“What will you do after we kill Black, then?” Cassandra asked a little bitterly.

Red glanced at her and merely said, [Hunt.]

Cassandra scowled, her ruby eyes narrowing as her aura began to close around Red, who stiffened and seemed about ready to leap out of her human skin and fight. Leon almost intervened before Cassandra schooled her expression and retracted her aura slightly. “If we do this, then there are going to be some conditions,” she said. Without waiting for Red to reply, she said, “First and foremost, you are to stay away from the Pegasi States.”

Red replied, [Human civilization holds no appeal. If we are left to hunt in peace, we’ll leave you humans in peace.]

“Good,” Cassandra drawled. “Second, we get to keep Black’s body when all is said and done. If the other three resist and fall to our blades, then we keep their bodies as well.”

[We have no need for them,] Red replied.

“Wonderful,” Cassandra responded.

[In return,] Red said, causing Cassandra to straighten up a bit and regard her with deep suspicion, [we want your guarantee to leave us and our young alone. No plundering our aeries. We fight alongside you to get rid of our mate and to secure our young. No other reason.]

“Allies can expect that respect,” Leon responded. “Fight alongside us, and we’ll depart, if not as friends, then at least not as enemies.”

Cassandra clicked her tongue but didn’t argue. Penelope nodded, as did Maia.

[Then we have an accord?] Red asked.

“As much of an accord as I think we’re going to get,” Leon replied.

Red blinked, but appeared to accept Leon’s statement.

“If we have an agreement,” Penelope said, drawing everyone’s attention back to her, “then we should get to strategizing, shouldn’t we? Black has run away when battles turned against him twice now, what’s to stop him from doing so again?”

[This is his aerie,] Red replied. [He’ll not abandon it.]

“Why not?” Penelope pressed.

[His hoard is here,] Red replied.

“Hoard?” Leon asked, his eyebrows shooting almost all the way up into his hair, his interest certainly piqued. “I didn’t think wyverns built hoards...”

[Few do,] Red explained. [Only males do, and only when they grow strong enough to establish permanent aeries. My mate is strong and established a permanent aerie, and so built a hoard.]

“You sound disinterested in this hoard,” Cassandra responded. “Are you laying any claim to it?”

Red sighed a moment, then glanced at Leon. Speaking only to him—or so he assumed—she said, [I don’t know how you stand humans...]

Speaking again to the room as a whole, she simply said, [No.]

“Spectacular,” Cassandra replied, an avaricious smile blossoming across her face.

“Is there anything else we might need to know about Black and his capabilities?” Penelope inquired. “Is there anything in his hoard that might be some kind of weapon he could use against us?”

[No,] Red replied.

Leon smiled, the promise of a hoard to loot at the end of this hunt getting his heart racing with excitement like nothing else, yet.

“Let’s all get a night’s rest, and then move back down there tomorrow morning?” he said. He wanted to head back down there immediately, but the memory of Maia vanishing into Black’s jaws, and his subsequent use of black fire weighed a little heavier on his mind.

“So be it,” Cassandra replied, the sentiment shared around the room.

After only a few more brief exchanges, they arranged with Red to have herself, Blue, and Gold appear at the camp at dawn, and then the eighth-tier mages went their separate ways to see to their own people for the remainder of the day as Red departed the camp.

However, hours later, as the sun set, Leon’s rest was interrupted when Talal hurriedly found him in his portable villa and said, “Leon, there’s... uh, a *visitor* here to see you...”

Leon projected his magic senses out of the villa and found that even though she’d left the camp after the meeting was over, Red had come back, and now stood outside of his villa.

Leon nodded for her to be shown in. He didn't know why she was here, but his curiosity was piqued, regardless.

Chapter 703: Red II

"Have to admit," Leon said as Red was shown into his portable villa's small sitting room, "I wasn't expecting to see you again so soon. Figured you'd only show back up tomorrow morning."

He gestured toward a nearby lounge for her to use as he took one himself, but Red simply stood just inside the doorway, slowly looking around the room with a thoughtful look on her face.

Leon gave her a moment to think, which stretched out over many long seconds. Eventually, she walked over and rather stiffly sat on the lounge, her focus slowly turning toward Leon.

[I don't know how you stand this,] she said to him. [All of this... humanity.]

Leon opened his mouth to respond verbally, but decided against it. Instead, he called upon his middling skill with darkness magic to respond to Red in the same manner that she spoke to him.

[I'm not entirely sure what you mean,] he replied. [I'm not too fond of other people, but I get the feeling that simply being in crowds isn't what you're talking about.]

Red scowled for a moment and said, [No. I mean taking part in human civilization. So many... expectations... and ceremonies.]

[Is it better being a wyvern?] Leon asked. [As far as I know, you're rather solitary beings, without much in the way of ceremony. Just living in your caves, occasionally coming down to hunt, only getting together to mate... Is that a better life, in your opinion?]

Red was silent for another long moment. [... I don't know,] she eventually admitted. [I can't say. I've spent little time in human civilization, and I still don't know it well. But what I have seen so far already taxes my patience. But...]

[You're curious?] Leon finished.

Red frowned and growled into Leon's mind, [I wouldn't say that... but it's not inaccurate to say. The life of my kind is solitary and static. We've lived as we have for a long time, and I can easily imagine myself doing the same thing until the day I die. Existing only for the purpose of raising young, who will go on to only live to raise more young. It's...]

[Boring?] Leon offered.

Red's frown deepened. [I'm curious,] she restated. [I can't stand the thought of human civilization, but there's something about it that intrigues. There's something about the world beyond the aeries that intrigues me even more. I suppose that's why I'm here: I want to know what's out there, but I don't want to hear it from a human perspective. Aside from those in my flight, you're the only other being I've ever seen who isn't human, yet could assume such a form...]

It was Leon's turn to frown, and he stiffened slightly as he reclined in his lounge.

[I *am* human, though,] he said to her.

Red turned to stare at him, a hard look on her face. [Impossible,] she said. [Humans don't have other forms. I saw you transform, I know you're not human.]

[I *am* human,] Leon insisted. [One of my Ancestors wasn't, though, and it's through her power that I've inherited that I can change my shape. I've spent nearly my entire life as a human, though, and that's what I consider myself.]

[But you *aren't* human...?]

Leon felt a brief spike of anger at the half-statement, half-question, but it faded almost immediately. It was easy enough to remember that Red herself wasn't human, and didn't have much knowledge of, or patience for, human niceties.

[I *am* human,] Leon repeated again. [At least, in my mind. What are humans to you?]

Red frowned again as she turned her reptilian eyes away from him. [Meddlesome,] she snarled. [Always looking to kill my kind when we venture down from the aeries to hunt. Greedy, looking to plunder our aeries and our very bodies for the treasures we were born with. Humans are disgusting creatures.]

[And yet you're still curious about them?] Leon pointed out.

[Mildly,] Red argued. [It's interesting to note how widespread they are, and the power of their magic. And how quickly they move. And how active they are.]

[Active?]

Red explained, [My kind hibernate for long periods of time. Raising even a single young one is taxing, and when they leave their birth aeries, they need to establish themselves. So, for both their sakes and our own, my kind hibernate following the departure of our young from our aeries. For years we remain in the dark, conserving our energy, allowing our young to grow and flourish without competing against us—at least, until it comes time to mate again.]

[It kind of sounds like you want to leave that life,] Leon stated, noting a hint of bitterness in Red's tone.

Red just looked at him and said nothing more, but Leon decided to continue pressing, anyway.

[You know, if you wanted to, you could accompany me when all of this over?]

Red continued to stare at him, her expression frustratingly blank.

[I have plans to see much of this world, and the universe beyond,] Leon said enticingly. [There's far more to existence than these plains and mountains. Far more wonders to see and experiences to have...]

[I would not fit in human society,] Red replied.

[Why not?] Leon asked.

[I'm not one of them,] Red simply replied.

[You claim I'm not human,] Leon pointed out, [and yet I fit in fairly well. No worse than a lot of other humans, I'd say.]

Red fell silent again.

[Out of my own curiosity,] Leon began, letting his offer hang in the air for a moment, [what do you consider humanity to be, and why am I not included in that definition?]

[Humans have their shape,] Red explained. [It is immutable. They do not change. They have no capacity for it.]

Leon waited a moment, hoping she'd elaborate a little bit more. But he was left disappointed.

[... Is that it?] he asked. [Just their physical shape? Humanity, to you, is the inability to change shape?]

[What more is there?] Red inquired.

[There's quite a bit more,] Leon protested. [Morality, philosophy, ceremonies, accepted behavior... What might be considered 'human' goes far beyond physical shape. Defining humanity isn't something I think anyone can do absolutely, and even if someone can define it in a way that everyone agrees with, does that tarnish inhumanity? One of my mates isn't human, but my opinion of her isn't any lesser than my other mates.]

[That sounds complicated,] Red replied.

[It is, compared to doing nothing but hunting, mating, rearing, and sleeping,] Leon said with a light chuckle. [It's not for everyone, that I can say quite easily. But if you want to experience it yourself...]

[I will... consider it,] Red said. In an abrupt switching of tacks, she then asked, [Are you going to fight as a human tomorrow?]

[Probably,] Leon replied. [I don't like showing off that other form. It's, umm... well, it's not something I'm reluctant to use, really, or something I'm ashamed of, it's just that it's something that can provoke some questions I'd rather not answer right now. So, I'd rather not use it in front of an Imperial Princess.]

[But why not?] Red pressed. [From what I recall, it's more powerful, isn't it?]

Leon shrugged. [If the power is needed, then I'll do it, but if it's not needed, then why invite unwanted attention?]

[To kill my mate,] Red replied. [If you used your other shape, then killing my mate would be easier. I think you should use it.]

Leon smiled somewhat self-deprecatingly. It was a little embarrassing that four eighth-tier mages had retreated from a fight where the other side only had one eighth-tier equivalent being, especially since they still had power left to tap, but Leon stood by his decision. Maia had been injured, and they weren't there to bet everything they had against the black wyvern and his harem.

Things were looking much more promising now, though, with the addition of three seventh-tier wyverns fighting on their side, plus Leon's reveal of Xaphan to Penelope and Cassandra.

[I don't think that'll be needed,] Leon replied. [Our side is... well, a little overwhelming now, isn't it?]

[That remains to be seen,] Red replied noncommittally. [I've seen my mate survive many things, since long before either of us could change our shape.]

[He can change his shape, too?] Leon asked.

[All of us can,] Red replied. [We rarely do so, but we're all capable of it.]

[And none of you have ever expressed any interest in human society?] Leon inquired. [Not even just a mild interest? Not even for just a few weeks or days?]

Red paused for a fraction of a second that Leon read as the tiniest of hesitations before answering, [No.]

Leon lightly smiled. [A shame,] he said. [There's quite a bit of fun to be had in human society. Things to see, things to do, you know. Far more interesting than the life of a wild animal, I think.]

[Do you really think that?] Red wondered.

It was Leon's turn to hesitate for a moment. He couldn't honestly say that he hated the idea of Red's lifestyle up to this point: hunting, mating, rearing young, and sleeping. It was pure and simple, bereft of much responsibility, and that in and of itself held a certain allure. Add onto that Leon's own comfort with the wild, and if he were honest with her, he would've admitted that he was even a little jealous of that lifestyle.

But he wasn't going to say that to her, not when he was trying to convince her to leave all of this behind. Not when he was seriously entertaining the idea of trying to convince her to join his retinue.

[It has its virtues,] Leon replied, [but I'd choose life in human society over one outside of it. Maybe it's just because I've grown soft and used to comfort, but a soft bed and controllable heat aren't things I'd want to live without anymore. Besides, two of my own mates are women of the city and would probably go insane if they remained too long in the wild.]

[Hmm...] Red hummed in thought, not otherwise responding.

The two then sat there in silence for several long, awkward minutes.

[How are Blue and Gold?] Leon asked, breaking that silence. [Are they nearby?]

Red frowned, then answered with some hesitation, [They are...]

[Well,] Leon continued, [I'd like to extend an invitation to both you and to them to spend the night here, maybe get the slightest of tastes for what might await you in human civilization.]

Red didn't immediately respond, but her orange reptilian eyes flickered southward for a moment. [They refuse,] she said, and Leon was almost surprised when he felt a slight hint of disappointment. However, that disappointment soon vanished when Red then said, [But I would take you up on that offer.]

—

Leon rushed to provide Red with everything that he could, eager to show off what could be hers if she were to join his retinue. He added another room to the portable villa, one for her private use for the night. He arranged for her to get some of the finest food he had access to this far outside of civilization and doted on her about as much as he could without seeming servile or subordinate.

That night, he met with his retainers and asked them if they would be comfortable with her joining them. He got some expected discomfort, but no one felt strongly enough about the issue to directly

disagree—not even Anshu. Leon found their responses particularly interesting, especially considering their responses when he took the matter of Santiago to them.

Dealing with Red's issues was hardly the only priority on Leon's mind. After most everyone had fallen asleep, he took to silently meditating in his villa's courtyard. He could still remember the feeling of black fire at his fingertips, and he was hoping he might be able to recapture that feeling. If he could, he hoped that the power would unlock in spite of the Great Black Dragon's attempts to seal it away.

As he meditated, he felt the attention of his more favored Ancestor fall upon him.

[Trying to unlock sealed powers, are we?] she whispered into his mind. He didn't think she was in human form, but she certainly sounded like she was smiling.

[Something like that,] Leon cheekily replied. [I wonder what kind of face the Great Black Dragon might make when he finds out what I'm doing. He isn't actively monitoring me, is he?]

[No, he isn't,] the Thunderbird answered with some exasperation. [In some ways, I think your journey would've been easier if he was, and harder in other ways. But what's done is done. I only see him poking his snout in your direction every six months at the most frequent, so I wouldn't worry about him seeing you right now.]

[When was the last time, would you say?] Leon wondered.

[Maybe three months ago?] the Thunderbird replied. [I made it known that I'd seen him, and I think he left out of embarrassment. He cares about you a lot more than he professes.]

[I almost wish he didn't,] Leon said, his tone thick with venomous ire. [He wouldn't be suppressing me if he didn't care, would he?]

[No,] the Thunderbird admitted. [Honestly, though, I wonder just what he's playing at. He can't keep your blood sealed forever, and as it is, you've already been made to resent him.]

Leon almost made a snide comment about the Thunderbird's own imperiousness when she felt it was warranted. On a purely intellectual level, he could understand that the Great Black Dragon might've made a hasty judgment based on factors Leon couldn't guess at, but once his ancient mind was made up, it wasn't going to easily change.

But Leon didn't care about the why of the suppression. He was going to unlock that fire, and the Great Black Dragon wasn't going to stop him.

He concentrated within himself, remembering the wrath that had burned through him when he saw Maia vanishing within the black wyvern's jaws. He remembered how, purely by instinct, his fire had come forth, and how it writhed and blazed within him, yearning for release.

Most of all, he remembered the sheer visceral satisfaction he'd felt when that fire had been given an outlet, when that black fire had been turned upon an enemy.

He couldn't work himself up into that emotional state as he pleased, but his fire magic still surged through his body. He hoped that it might respond to his will and turn black, but as the tiny, candle-sized fire that burned in the air before him demonstrated, his fire remained stubbornly orange and relatively mundane.

[You're thinking too much,] the Thunderbird chided didactically. [That power is inherent to you. It's a part of you, it can't be taken away. It's there, it just needs the right trigger.]

[And what might that trigger be if I can't get it to come out like this?] Leon wondered.

[How do you manifest my power?] the Thunderbird replied. [Do you call upon it, specifically? As an addendum to lightning magic?]

[No...] Leon replied. [I just call upon lightning, and your lightning comes. If I want it to be 'normal' lightning, then I have to concentrate a little bit harder...]

[What are you doing differently, then?] the Thunderbird asked.

Leon frowned and didn't immediately answer, having none to give. As far as he could tell, the fire he was calling upon was about as natural as he was able to make it. He wouldn't say it was as natural as breathing, but it was...

'Well, it isn't as natural as lightning,' he thought. His lightning *was* as natural as breathing, but his fire wasn't. He needed to actively *try* to use fire, even if that effort was miniscule compared to something like earth or darkness magic. But the simple fact was that his fire magic didn't come as naturally to him as lightning.

[If you figure out what that difference is,] the Thunderbird continued, [then I think you may finally figure out how the Great Black Dragon is suppressing you. Do that, and his power that you've rightfully inherited will be yours, to do with as you please...]

Leon smiled at that prospect, but he didn't *know* what he was doing wrong, why his fire wasn't natural, why it wasn't as much a part of him as his lightning was.

He and the Thunderbird exchanged a few more words, but in the end, Leon wasn't able to figure this riddle out.

At the very least, though, he at least had been given some direction.

Black fire was close, he could feel it.

—

Leon, Red, and Maia met up with Penelope and Cassandra early the next morning in the same conference room that Penelope had erected the day before.

"All right, has anything changed since last night?" Penelope asked once they were all around the table, sparing Leon any of the snide looks or comments that he'd come to expect from her up to this point.

"Nothing material," Leon replied.

"Really?" Cassandra asked a little provocatively. "I heard that Red over there spent the night in your villa... Are you *sure* nothing happened?"

"Quite sure," Leon replied without missing a beat, meeting Cassandra's playful gaze without a hint of embarrassment. "We were simply discussing the fight today, and a few personal matters. Nothing more."

"I'm sure, I'm sure," Cassandra replied, though her eyes were flitting between Leon and Red fairly quickly, and while she was smiling, Leon could feel the tiniest sliver of killing intent making its way through her aura, and he didn't quite know what to make of it.

"So, then, how should we proceed?" Penelope asked loudly. "I'd like to get this over with right now and return to regular hunting. All of this delving below ground really doesn't agree with me..."

"Black hasn't left, has he?" Leon asked Red. "He hasn't gotten freaked out by our continued presence up here and skipped out?"

[He wouldn't,] Red replied. [He could escape easily, if he wished, but this is his territory. He *won't* leave.]

"Well, he didn't attack us, either," Cassandra pointed out. "He can't be feeling too confident about his chances."

[He'll be in his aerie, waiting,] Red replied.

"Should we expect anything unusual?" Leon asked.

"Tricks and the like?" Cassandra clarified. "Ambushes, fortifications, wards, that sort of thing?"

[Unlikely,] Red responded. [My kind respect power. If he is weaker, then he is weaker. If he is stronger, then he is stronger. Nothing else matters.]

"That's encouraging," Leon said with a frown of surprise. "How many should we bring, then? Just us four along with Red, Blue, and Gold? Or should we bring along some of our retainers?"

"I think most anyone we bring will fall quickly to those things," Cassandra replied a little dismissively.

"Besides, if they're not here in this room with us, they'll just get in the way down there. If we could control the battlefield, then *maybe* we could bring some of our warriors for support, but as it is, I fear they'd just get in the way and wind up killed or injured. We need to concentrate on Black, not try to defend our followers from his attacks."

Leon slowly nodded. He'd thought the same, but he'd been hoping that one of the others would have an idea that could let the rest of his retinue participate.

"In that case," Leon continued, turning his eyes toward Red, "can you, Blue, and Gold handle White, Green, and Brown?"

Red nodded without hesitation.

"Good," Leon continued. "I think our biggest problem wasn't that Black was too strong, but that White was healing too quickly. If she can be distracted, then this battle should go our way pretty easily."

"Are you going to kill them?" Cassandra asked Red.

Red replied, [If we must. If our mate falls, then they'll run. If they run, we'll let them go.]

"Would you object to us killing them?"

Red's eyes narrowed slightly, but she said, [No.]

"Oh, good," Cassandra responded with a cheery smile. "Adding three seventh-tier wyverns to my count will put me on track to retaking the lead..." She punctuated that statement with a different sort of provocative look sent Leon's way.

Leon shrugged, not rising to the challenge. They were about to face an eighth-tier wyvern, and he wanted to focus on the fight ahead.

"If there's nothing else, we ought to get going, shouldn't we?" Penelope said.

The other four around the table agreed, and they left the conference room. It was time to end this back-and-forth with the black wyvern once and for all.

Chapter 704: The Final Round

Leon, Red, Maia, Cassandra, and Penelope stood on the edge of the cliffs overlooking the gorge, all dressed in their respective armor and ready for battle. It wasn't much longer that they were met by two more women, each one looking quite similar to Red, though the scales that surrounded their eyes were Blue and Gold, respectively, showing better than any introduction who they were.

"Everyone ready?" Cassandra called out as the other two joined them.

[We are,] Red replied, speaking for the other two as well, and saying no more.

"Good," Cassandra replied. She then glanced at Penelope and Leon. "Hopefully this will go better than the previous fight..."

"I have no doubt that it will," Leon replied as a challenging smile spread across his face, his aura rising to match.

"I want this over and done with," Penelope said, her eyes unwaveringly locked upon the curtain of darkness at the bottom of the gorge.

Without a word, the three wyverns spread out, and then their bodies began to shift, drawing Leon's intensely curious gaze. A blinding rush of magic power exploded out from them, however, forcing Leon to look away for a second. When he looked back, he didn't see three humans with scales around their eyes, but three enormous wyverns, one with ruby-red scales, another with scales the color of the clearest, cleanest ocean waters, and the last with scales like forged gold. All affixed him and the other three in their imperious, almost baleful gazes, their orange eyes blazing with magic power and killing intent.

There was nothing more to say. So, Leon turned around, checked his equipment one last time, and then leaped off the cliff, closely followed by Maia and Cassandra, and only a step or two behind them came a more reluctant Penelope. The wyverns went over the edge a moment later, but spread out quite a bit more to accommodate their gigantic bodies.

The gorge was deep, but in only a matter of seconds, Leon hit the black curtain and passed right through, encountering no physical resistance. He felt the darkness press in on his helmet, but his defensive enchantments warded that pressure off with ease.

A second later, he hit the ground on the other side of the curtain, the stone beneath his boots shattering from the force of his impact.

Immediately, he heard a roar of fury from his right, but to his left he sensed a momentary spike of magic power, so that's where he turned his attention.

He found the ground already cracking open in a long line making right for him originating from the brown wyvern. However, that crack that opened like the earth itself was about to try and swallow him up never made it to him; he barely had time to register what was about to happen and to formulate a response before Red came barreling out of the darkness above and sank her fangs deep into the neck of Brown. Red's enormous weight and force from the descent had them both crashing into the floor of the gorge and disappearing in a titanic cloud of dust and debris. The crack that had nearly reached Leon immediately halted as Brown's attention was forcibly shifted to Red.

"Ha!" Cassandra shouted in glee from where she'd landed beside Leon. "Monsters righting monsters! Glorious!"

Leon just gritted his teeth and filled the area beneath the curtain of darkness with his magic senses. He saw White about three hundred feet ahead of his group, but Blue had already landed and had engaged her. Green was behind them, and likewise, Gold had seized her attention by breathing a stream of golden lightning at her.

That only left Black, to Leon's right, who was glaring at them with both unmatched fury and extreme wariness.

"Do you think he's scared?" Cassandra asked, seeming to revel in this as she started to slowly, menacingly, walk in Black's direction. "He has to realize that this isn't a battle he can win, anymore..."

"Be careful!" Penelope shouted. "A cornered monster is more dangerous than one who can run away!"

"I know," Cassandra replied, and a moment later, she leaped into the air, Sunlight in her hand tripling in length as the blade blazed with white light.

"You two take range!" Leon shouted as he began sprinting after Cassandra, her opening slash already connecting with Black, who began trying to stomp the Princess into red paste in response.

Behind him, he could feel Maia forming a huge water dragon and half a dozen ice lances big enough to threaten even the immense Black. Penelope, meanwhile, began conjuring a huge fireball above her, but for what, Leon couldn't say, for she wasn't throwing it at Black or any of the other wyverns.

Regardless, he charged Black, lightning surging through his body, the world seeming to slow down as his senses were elevated and dramatically sped up. He could see with perfect clarity the way that Cassandra danced around Black, Sunlight raking across his scales and deflecting his retaliatory blows.

But the Princess wasn't keeping her situation or the physical capabilities of her foe in mind, and Black whipped his tail at her. Leon surged right past her and crashed into the beast's tail, the impact causing his body to shudder and all the air to erupt from his lungs. His body strained as he dug his feet into the stone around him, trying to find purchase, and the enchantments in his armor designed to heighten his strength flooded with power.

But he caught the tail and stopped it from hitting the Princess. He couldn't wrap his arms around the entire thing, but his body detonated in a storm of lightning, flowing out through his arms and dancing across the sparkling black scales of his enemy. Black roared in pain and whipped his tail back, pulling

Leon along with it. For all his strength, both personal and conferred by his new armor, he still didn't weigh that much compared to the wyvern.

But as he was lifted off the ground and pulled through the air, Leon kept his magic power flowing. Lightning cracked and sparked across Black's backside, inundating his tail and ripping at his scales.

Black violently shook his tail, but Leon stubbornly hung on, and after a moment, Black could no longer focus on Leon as Cassandra charged. Light flashed as she swung Sunlight, her own skills in light magic showing as bright white light struck Black again and again, the wyvern only avoiding damage by coating his body in darkness. But Leon knew that Black couldn't become intangible, though, not while he was still hanging onto the monster's tail.

But a moment later, Black whipped his tail again and slammed Leon into the ground with colossal force, and the stony ground beneath him crumbled. Leon was battered and nearly crushed; all the air in his lungs was forced out once again, and his mind momentarily whited out with pain. His stream of lightning was interrupted, and Black's tail rose into the air above him again, was quickly coated in a smoky black film of darkness magic, and then slammed back down on Leon.

This time, everything that Leon could see was shrouded in darkness, though mind-numbing pain raced through his battered form. He even felt a couple of his ribs crack, not even his armor or his eighth-tier body able to stand up against such weight and physical strength.

He came to only a second later as the tau pearl's healing power spread throughout his body, repairing his ribs and clearing the fog of pain from his mind, only to find that everything around him was still and quiet. He couldn't sense anything other than darkness magic—not Maia's water magic, not Cassandra's blasts of light, not Penelope's fire. Everything around him was pitch-black darkness, and when he tried to move, his mind panicking at the unfamiliar surroundings—it felt like he'd been submerged in the thickest, dirtiest, muddiest bog in all Aeterna.

And he realized where he was: Black had pulled him into a shadow, somehow. If his black stealth opal had functioned as well as he'd hoped, it would've been able to do just this sort of thing for him, only he didn't think that it would leave him so weak and feeling like he was beneath a thousand feet of water.

Leon wasted no time calling upon the Thunderbird's lightning. Silver-blue lightning surged out of him, arcing across his body, channeled and amplified by his armor. In the same breath, he conjured his anti-darkness magic gem into his left gauntlet and activated it. A pulse of magic spread out from him, and under the pressure of both of his magic and his antimagic tool, the shadows that surrounded him melted away.

He rose from the ground almost as if he'd been encased in the stone of the gorge's floor, still lying down, and quickly leaped back to his feet. He'd been absent from the fight only a few seconds, but much in the fight had changed: Cassandra was on her knees, staring at something only she could see; Black was wrestling with Maia's water dragon, and one of the river nymph's huge spears of ice was lodged in his left wing; Penelope was still charging up her magic, and the fireball floating above her head was starting to almost resemble the sun itself, the yellow-hot flames roiling and churning. Meanwhile, Red, Blue, and Gold were still tangled up with the other three wyverns. Red looked like she was winning, but the other two fights were a little more even.

'Shit,' Leon thought to himself as he ran for the Princess. Black was occupied with Maia, for the moment, so he needed to see to Cassandra. Then, the two of them could resume their assault on Black.

When he slid to Cassandra's side, he roughly shook her, hoping that that would be enough to shake her out of her stupor, but the Princess remained unresponsive. Leon focused his magic senses in and around her, and had his suspicions confirmed: she'd been somehow affected by darkness magic. It wasn't quite as dramatic as the time he was knocked unconscious by the vampire Bran during the Bull's war with Talfar, but as far as he could tell, it was still the same affliction.

Without hesitation, Leon rested his hand upon Cassandra's armored shoulder, intending to use just enough of the Thunderbird's lightning to dispel this affliction. But as powerful as his magic was, her armor was strong. Every arc of lightning that surged out of him was pulled to her cuirass, no matter how he tried to channel it. He'd need to either use more powerful magic to overcome her wards or touch her a little more intimately. Leon wanted to do neither, but a quick glance at Black still struggling with Maia's water dragon was all he needed to convince himself that he needed to move quickly.

Instead of getting more powerful, though, Leon went for the other option—he couldn't be sure that bypassing Cassandra's defensive wards wouldn't injure her. Fortunately, unlike him, she was wearing a helmet with a liftable visor, so Leon lifted her visor, pulled his gauntlet back into his soul realm, and placed his hand upon her cheek, then channeled his power to defend the mind against attack as gently as he could.

This time, after the first arc of lightning touched her skin, her eyes lost their dazed look and she focused on him. Leon immediately pulled his hand back, redonned his gauntlet, and shouted, "You back?"

Cassandra blinked in confusion, looking like her mind needed a moment to catch up, and then she nodded to him. Sunlight was still in her hand, and her gaze dropped to it. A moment later, her fingers tightened around the hilt, her ruby eyes blazed with light magic, and she shot to her feet.

"I'm all right!" she shouted, though her voice wavered a bit.

Still, Leon had no real reason to think she wasn't good to go, so he just nodded to her and began charging at Black, Cassandra only a step behind him.

Black had managed to overpower Maia's water dragon, black tendrils rising from his back like eldritch tentacles and whipping through the water dragon like the sharpest of knives. Maia's water dragon reformed almost instantly, though, and continued throwing itself at the wyvern.

Leon punched outward with his left fist, the runes on his anti-darkness gem flashing with arcane light, and about half of Black's darkness tendrils dissipated like smoke and, without his power completely devoted to his protective shroud, the dark sheen on his scales vanished. Maia's water dragon then surged forward and wrapped itself around the monster once more, and Maia launched the remainder of her ice lances, each one piercing through his wings without his darkness or mobility to protect him, nearly nailing them to the stony floor. Cassandra and Leon then leaped forward, Sunlight ablaze with radiant white light, Leon's ancestral blade sparking with silver-blue lightning. Each of them swung their blades, the light and lightning hitting Black in the flank that Maia's water dragon had exposed, cleaving scales from flesh and driving deep into his body.

Black roared in pain, but they weren't done. Cassandra gave a roar of her own and slammed Sunlight into the deep fissure she'd carved, the enchantments within the blade burning all of Black's flesh that the blade touched.

Leon did likewise, though he remained quiet. But his family's Adamant blade pierced Black's body, and he let loose with the Thunderbird's lightning.

And then they felt an immense spike of fire magic, and both Leon and Cassandra glanced over at Penelope, who was finally making her move.

The fiery sphere she'd been building up was now flying in their direction and taking on something of an oval shape and burning almost white-hot.

"You two might want to move!" Penelope shouted as her face contorted with the strain of keeping her power from dissipating. She'd packed quite a bit of it into whatever she was doing, and Leon was quietly impressed that it hadn't all exploded, yet.

Without a word, Cassandra and Leon hurled themselves back, each moving with the extreme speed inherent to light and lightning mages.

Only a couple seconds later, Penelope's fire detonated outward, toward the roaring and screeching Black, who was still held in place by Maia's water dragon and ice lances. This outpouring of fire formed into the shape of a hand in the air, and extended down toward the wyvern, wrapping around both him and the water dragon, and squeezing.

Maia's let go of her water dragon, and it immediately exploded into steam thick enough to shroud Black from view, were it not for the fire that now squeezed his body. Black's roars intensified, and then several seconds later, quieted. The wyvern stopped struggling, and as far as Leon could tell, fell still.

Penelope kept her magic on his body for a few more seconds, though, and the conflagration of magic and light blinded Leon's magic senses to what was going on within the steam cloud.

But then her fire dissipated, and the steam cleared, revealing Black crumpled on the floor, about as strong and upright as a wet noodle. A few twitches showed that he was still alive, but Leon could see that his aura was incredibly weak, and his body still shuddered with labored breath. Most of his scales had been burned right off, though, and everything beneath seared as black as the scales that had just covered them a moment before. The holes that Maia, Leon, and Cassandra had opened were much worse, though, with Penelope's fire having burned away so enough flesh as to expose some of Black's bones.

With the intent to put the beast out of his misery, Leon conjured a lightning bolt and almost casually threw it at the wyvern's fallen form. The bolt hit the monster in the chest, and Leon felt the flash of magic power as his heart exploded, the sign that the powerful beast had died as his soul realm collapsed and all of his stored magic burst forth and returned to Aeterna.

The black wyvern was dead.

Leon didn't think that that was the end of their battle, but when he turned to face the remaining wyverns, he found that Brown had been torn asunder by Red, who now stood on wing and claw, staring at Black's obliterated body. Blue and Gold, meanwhile—both looking much more worse for wear than

the seemingly-untouched Red—stood above Green and White, both enemy wyverns now lying on the ground, their vulnerable backs and necks exposed to Blue and Gold in an obvious display of submission.

The battle was over. Their enemies either dead or surrendered.

“HA!” Cassandra bellowed as she ran to Black’s corpse. “Now *this* is what I was hoping for when I came down here! Ahhh, such a battle really heats the blood!”

Leon cocked his head in surprise, not expecting the Princess to be so overt in her revelry of blood and battle. But he smiled, understanding quite well her elation; his own heart beat furiously in his chest, pride swelling within, his glee in their victory unable to be overstated. They’d tested themselves against a true monster, and won.

True, they’d had the help of Red, Blue, and Gold, and even without the wyverns they hadn’t fought alone, but it was still a rush. One man against one wyvern, each equivalent in magic power, was hardly a fair fight.

Leon sighed as he walked over to join Cassandra and admire their kill, Penelope and Maia making their own way over. The black curtain above them, meanwhile, was already dissipating, allowing the light of the morning sky above the gorge to seep in.

“Everyone all right?” Leon called out.

Cassandra obviously was, despite her minor incapacitation partway through the fight. Maia, meanwhile, smiled at Leon, sharing in his elation at their victory and telling him without words that she was fine. Penelope, for her part, simply nodded, and stared at Black’s body, a look of utter satisfaction on her face.

“So,” Cassandra said, ignoring Leon’s question, “who gets the credit for this kill?”

Chapter 705: Looting the Wyvern’s Lair

The black wyvern was dead, the battle was over. The brown wyvern was dead, too, and the remaining two wyverns that had remained loyal to Black were allowed to flee. Cassandra had argued against that, but Red, Blue, and Gold didn’t stop the two from flying away once the black veil obscuring the canyon floor dissipated entirely. The two wyverns flew away, hopefully to never be seen again.

As for who got the credit for killing the black wyvern, Leon was content to let it remain uncounted and for the beast’s body parts to be split up amongst their three groups. He’d technically scored the final, killing blow, but Penelope had mortally wounded him, making Leon’s strike a mercy kill more than anything. In the end, though, with Cassandra’s insistent prodding to count Black as part of their wager, Leon and Penelope agreed to split up Black’s score between themselves evenly, reasoning that even if Penelope had struck the most important blow, Leon had done quite a bit of damage to the creature by that point, anyway.

This left Cassandra out in the cold a bit, but when she pointed that out, Leon and Penelope simply glanced at each other and shared a quiet, restrained smile. They knew what they were doing, and were giving the Princess a bit of punishment for her insistence.

But once that was done, their *real* work began, for killing Black was only part of the hunt, and now they had to loot his lair and process his and Brown's bodies. For that, their retainers were collected from the cliff and brought down, with only a token force remaining above to watch over the Heaven's Eye and Imperial arks.

During that time, Red, Blue, and Gold disappeared into the caves at the bottom of the gorge and didn't tell anyone where they were going. However, Leon knew that they'd aided them for the sake of their eggs and wyvernlings, so he assumed that's what they were seeing to.

So, for a couple hours, Leon and his retinue spent their time chopping apart Black's body, Leon using his magic to keep the beast lifted into the air while everyone else went to work on him. He was fascinated to watch the Heaven's Eye workers do their thing, many using weapons of light similar to the weapons that he'd seen used in the Ilian exhibition at his first meeting with Anastasios, with blades of light that cut beautifully through the dead wyvern's corpse.

Leon joined in on some of the tougher parts, as well, using his enchanted black and red onyx's scalpel of fire to make short work of the wyvern carcass.

As their work was nearing its end, Red returned, sans Blue and Gold. She drew some panic upon her reappearance since she came in wyvern form, but Leon, seeing that she had come without killing intent and was making no overtly hostile moves, waved them all aside and welcomed Red back.

[It's good to see you!] he said with his mental communication technique, his tone as merry as he could make it with his inexperience using darkness magic.

Red slunk closer to him, her amber eyes warily watching the Imperial guards that were, in turn, warily watching her, their weapons close at hand and their auras flickering.

[I thought I'd return to give you an answer,] she replied mentally. Leon felt himself going slightly dizzy for just a moment as she did, her communication technique not quite the same as his.

When he parsed what she was saying, he eagerly waited for her answer. He'd offered to make her a retainer, and he was hoping she'd agree.

[I've decided,] Red continued, pausing for just a moment as Cassandra approached, [... to accept. For now.]

A smile broke out across Leon's face, one that had Cassandra asking, "What are you two conspiring about that has you looking so happy, Leon?"

Leon glanced at her and replied, "Red's something of a comedian. She was just talking about that sword of yours, is all, and it was *hilarious*."

Cassandra's sly smile immediately turned into a deep frown. "Keep making jokes about my Sunlight and you'll learn what it can do *first-hand*," she declared.

Leon just smiled, and Red's slightly confused response echoed in his mind. [I made no jokes...]

[I know that, but it upset her to hear it. Anyway, we should get the details worked out, shouldn't we?]

[I suppose we should.]

Leon and Red took about ten minutes to hash everything out, during which time Cassandra, frustrated that they were practically ignoring her to focus on their own conversation, loudly announced that she and her retainers were going to explore the caves a bit and locate Black's hoard. Leon was tempted to drop everything to join them, but the addition of a new retainer was greater than his desire to plunder a wyvern's hoard.

Barely.

In the end, Leon and Red came to an agreement. Red still had an egg to care for, and the wyvernling was going to hatch in about a week. She was going to take about a year to keep an eye on her young, but when the time came for other elder wyverns to hibernate and let the young wyverns establish themselves, she would leave the aeries and find Leon, to formally join his retinue. Leon was a little put-out that they'd have to wait a year, but he completely understood her need to look after her young, even if she treated it a little more lackadaisically, reminding Leon that wyverns didn't form familial bonds as humans did.

Regardless, Leon accepted the year-long wait, and he gave Red, who was largely unfamiliar with human civilization, extremely specific instructions for how to find his villa in Occulara, and with Talal's aid, even wrote up a pass for her to show to any member of Heaven's Eye, instructing them with Leon's authority to assist her in reaching his home.

And with that, Red departed the gorge, spreading her wings and flying right out without a look backwards.

"Was that wise?" Valeria asked Leon as he rejoined his retinue a moment later. "I don't just mean letting her go, but all of the other wyverns. *Five* powerful seventh-tier wyverns, and we just..."

"It's fine," Leon replied. "These hunts are about culling their population and protecting the Pegasi States, not about wiping them out completely. So let's revel in the felling of that black wyvern and end the violence here."

"If you say so..." Leon could tell by her tone that Valeria was unconvinced by his reasoning, but he knew the perfect distraction.

"By the way," he said to his retinue as a whole, "Princess Cassandra has already taken to looking for the wyvern hoard here. How about we go join her?"

Alcander, always boisterous and amped to take action, was the first to reply. "By my Ancestors' wrinkled anuses, yes!"

His overly crude sentiment, if not his overabundance of enthusiasm, was shared by the rest of Leon's retinue, and they marched on into the caves. After about five minutes, they caught up to Cassandra and her Imperial followers. The Princess and her entourage had occupied the largest cavern that Leon could find with his magic senses, and one that had him almost floored with the display of wealth that was within: huge piles of gold were scattered rather haphazardly around the room, mostly bullion and jewelry, but a few small idols, sculptures, and other artistic pieces made of the shiny metal. There were several mountainous piles of silver coins, along with a great many vessels made of jewels and precious crystals that held even more treasure.

Leon honestly hadn't been expecting such a large hoard, especially since the black wyvern apparently hadn't been well known enough for Leon to have heard of him before. And yet, the sheer size of this hoard indicated that he'd been incredibly active in pillaging from mankind.

Leon and his retinue stopped at the entrance of the cavern, utterly stupefied for several seconds.

"I'd tell you to pick your jaws off the floor," Cassandra called out from where she was sitting in a majestic golden chair, padded with red velvet, "but my people and I had similar reactions upon reaching this place."

Leon blinked a moment and glanced at the Princess. She was sitting rather close to the entrance, a pair of sixth-tier mages on either side of her, each displaying several pieces of jewelry. The Princess wasn't even looking at Leon's retinue when she'd spoken, her eyes were instead trained on the rings, necklaces, and tiaras that her sixth-tier guards were showing her. Her armor had largely been pulled back into her soul realm, but all of that beautiful white armor had been replaced with a long cloak woven of cloth-of-gold, embroidered with red geometric patterns, and trimmed with gorgeous white fur.

However, even with that heavy sparkling cloak draped over herself, Leon could see that she was trying on the various pieces of jewelry that she'd found so far, with all of her fingers glimmering with gold and gemstones, large earrings that glittered as they dangled from her ear lobes, and three different necklaces resting against her chest, one studded with blue diamonds, the seconds with emeralds, and the third with large rubies.

"I'm so glad you refrained from saying it, then," Leon sarcastically retorted. "Would've been *incredibly* embarrassing if you were unable to hold yourself back."

"I know," Cassandra replied sarcastically. "I'm a paragon of humility and restraint." As she spoke, she reached out and took one of the tiaras that her guards were showing her. It was a beautiful, if quite delicate piece. Even from several dozen feet away, Leon was in awe of its craftsmanship.

It had a single crescent of gold that would rest upon the wearer's brow, with much finer golden strands rising from that band, forming complex floral patterns. The centers of each of these flower patterns were highlighted with diamonds of varying colors, with the largest and most eye-catching stone being the one in the center: a blood-red diamond about half the size of Leon's fist.

The tiara wasn't enchanted, as far as he could tell, which only made its extravagance even more alarming, given that it was solely a fashion piece and had no practical use.

"Those are beautiful pieces," Elise remarked as she strode over, stopping a respectful distance away from the Princess, but more than close enough to admire the jewelry that the Princess was examining.

Cassandra smiled with pride as she placed the tiara on her head, adding yet another piece of jewelry to her ensemble. "I was thinking of taking all of these pieces as my prizes for the battle," she stated, her eyes flickering from Elise to Leon. "Most of the treasure in here is marked and should be returned to those it was stolen from, but there's still plenty even with that for you and Lady Penelope."

Leon brought a hand up to his chest in faux-relief. "Oh, thank the Ancestors! I was just *waiting* for your permission!"

Cassandra glared at him, a dangerous smile on her lips. "Be careful how you speak to Royalty, Leon Raime..."

"Perhaps Royalty ought to be more conscious of how it presents itself in public?" Leon innocently replied. "It would be the height of embarrassment to be known as someone who takes the spoils from others, or as one who doesn't return stolen property..."

"Is that a threat?" Cassandra's glare sharpened, and her aura began to spike.

"Of course not," Leon replied as Elise took a few alarmed steps back from Cassandra. "I just think it's a bit tacky for a Princess in your position to be pillaging all of this loot so shamelessly, is all. Personally, I didn't think you'd be quite so into all of this gold."

"There's nothing wrong with gold," Cassandra said as she leaned back in her golden chair. "It's pretty. I like it."

"Be that as it may," said Penelope's voice from behind Leon, "perhaps we ought to take complete stock of what's here *before* we start carving out what we think we're all owed?"

Leon glanced over his shoulder, surprised to hear Penelope taking his side as she walked into the cavern, half a dozen of her retainers at her back and a dozen more members of Heaven's Eye following them.

Cassandra appeared to take a moment to think, pursing her lips as she slouched in her chair. Then she sighed, sprang to her feet, and threw off the golden cloak and began to take off all of the jewelry that she'd put on. "I suppose that's only fair," she said, her tone light and nonchalant, as if she'd just been joking this whole time.

"I'm glad we could come to an arrangement," Penelope said with the welcoming smile of someone who'd been in Heaven's Eye all her life. "Lady Elise, if you would?"

Elise smiled in response as she walked toward Penelope and the Heaven's Eye workers behind her. "I'd be happy to. Talal! With me!"

Talal gave Leon a look, and when Leon subtly nodded, the Samarid sprang into action to follow Elise.

Over the next hour, Elise took complete control over the looting and categorization of the black wyvern's hoard. Cassandra, Penelope, and Maia largely sat around not participating too much, simply watching the workers doing their thing, but Leon took a somewhat more hands-on approach to supervision, directing his retinue to help out where they could.

In that respect, Anshu wound up being one of the most helpful members of his retinue, as he learned after only five minutes.

Anshu had stood up, a look of bewilderment on his face with a large silver jug in his hand.

"What's that you've got there?" Leon asked as he joined the Indradian.

"Nothing much," Anshu replied, turning the jug so that Leon could see the artistic patterns of scrolling foliage and roaring beasts rendered in silver raised off the surface of the jug. "Well, it's nothing much by itself. Kind of an ordinary thing back home. What's interesting is this..."

Anshu indicated a large symbol emblazoned on the size of the jug, a floral pattern that Leon found somewhat familiar, flanked by a pair of silver elephants that appeared to be holding it aloft.

"This emblem is of the Prince of Paramara," he explained. "The Prince ruling a large part of the eastern Raj on the other side of these mountains."

"A Prince, huh?" Leon said.

"That doesn't mean what I think you think it means," Anshu replied. "We call the heads of the most powerful families in the Raj, 'Princes'. They're not the Rajah's children."

"I see. What about this Prince of Paramara, then? Is it surprising to see something marked with his symbol here?"

"Yes. I'm quite well-acquainted with Prince Siyaka, I can't imagine that he'd let raids on his holdings go unpunished... though I suppose against an eighth-tier wyvern..."

"It's just one bit of silver," Leon replied. "Let's get it catalogued and see what we have by the end. We can save the wonderings for after we know what and how much we have."

Anshu got a distant look in his eye as he set the jug aside. "Right," he said, his tone distracted. "Right."

The Indradian went back to helping out, easily able to identify the various markings and seals on much of the treasure that was found. Unfortunately, nearly all of the gold bullion had the markings of various Houses in the eastern regions of the Indra Raj, so none of that was up for grabs—Heaven's Eye would see to returning all of that gold to its various owners.

The jewelry and other such pieces, however, were rarely given such identifying marks, so much of that was up for grabs.

But typical treasure wasn't the only thing that was in the hoard.

"Hey Leon!" Alix called out as the cataloguing was nearing its end, nearly all of the treasure now accounted for.

"What is it?" Leon called back, and his former squire bounced toward him holding a box of some of kind of dark, polished wood in her hands about large enough to hold a fairly large piece of jewelry or something similar within. Leon only had to take one look at the thing to know that it was quite well-enchanted with some of the most robust locking enchantments he'd ever seen. Other than a few runes carved into the box's outer surface, though, the polished wood was devoid of any kind of marking or decoration.

"No idea," Alix replied as she set the box down on a nearby table. "I was thinkin' you'd want to look at it. Figured that if anyone can get it open, then it'd be you."

"Your confidence is flattering." Leon approached the box, training his magic senses upon it, looking at it from every possible angle, analyzing what he could about the enchantment. Unfortunately, most of the enchantment was likely carved upon the box's inner surface, and his magic senses couldn't penetrate the box to see within, so all he had to go on were the outer runes.

And they weren't that promising. Still, he'd opened boxes locked with magic before, and he couldn't sense much active magic within the box, so he was confident he could get this one open.

That confidence was tested when, fifteen minutes later, he was still inspecting the box and probing the box's wards with various kinds of magic. No matter what he did, the box's golden latch just wouldn't budge. He almost resorted to asking Nestor for some advice before he decided to just try the brute force approach.

He conjured his black and red onyx and used his armor's fire scalpel to liquify the latch. He sensed some kind of failsafe within the box attempt to activate, but as soon as the latch was gone, lightning was surging through Leon's body and he almost ripped the lid right off.

Not the most elegant of solutions, he had to admit, but it disrupted the box's internal enchantments, leaving its contents intact.

The interior of the box was lined with black silk and nestled within was a pouch of black velvet. Leon gingerly picked up the pouch and pulled open its drawstring, shaking its contents out into his hand.

Three tiny golden seeds fell out of the pouch. They were each only about the size of an apple seed, and even though they weren't emitting that much magic power, Leon could tell that they were all incredibly powerful.

He just couldn't tell what, exactly, they were supposed to be, or what use they might have.

He opened his mouth, about to call for Helen, but he restrained himself. It didn't seem like his opening of the box had drawn much attention, and just in case, he decided to be a bit more low-key about this, so he used his mental communication technique to call for his retainer, instead.

[Helen, come here for a moment, I need your expertise...]

Helen glanced over at him, a questioning look on her face, and when Leon jerked his head toward the table, she walked on over.

"What's up?" she quietly asked.

"What are these?" Leon whispered, showing her the seeds.

As soon as Helen saw the seeds, her eyes went wide as dinner plates. "Put... P-Put those away right now!" she urged him, her voice tinged with panic, surprise, and greed.

Leon, though confused, did as he was bid, tossing the seeds back into their pouch and tightening the drawstring. He then stole another glance at everyone else and was relieved to see them all still absorbed in the rest of the hoard to have paid the two of them much mind.

When his attention returned to Helen, he found his retainer staring at him with the biggest smile on her face that he'd ever seen.

"Maybe we keep these under wraps for the moment?" she suggested. "But if we have to choose anything to take from here, make sure we walk away with these seeds." She punctuated her evaluation with a wink, and Leon smirked and nodded in understanding.

"I'll trust your judgment on that," he said, putting the pouch back into the box and closing it as best as he could now that it was broken.

It seemed that some of his cut of the hoard had already been chosen, and he couldn't wait to find out just what use these seeds could possibly have.

Chapter 706: Hesperidic Apples

When the hoard was finally all accounted for, there wasn't that much to divide amongst their three parties. Since most of the goods were marked with some kind of sigil or other identifying emblem, those were off-limits. There was always the possibility that these *weren't* stolen goods, of course, but they were still going to be returned, anyway, for that possibility was small.

However, even then, there were still more than enough items around for everyone to take at least one item. Cassandra took quite a few pieces of jewelry, as did Penelope, but Leon restrained himself quite a bit more, taking only the box with the seeds and letting the rest of his retinue take anything else that might've been set aside for him.

And so, most of his retinue walked out of the cave with new pieces of jewelry. Gaius, Alcander, and Marcus all took rings, while Anshu, Helen, and Anna took necklaces. Alix got a new pair of bracelets, and Talal took a silver scepter. Elise took perhaps the most out of all of Leon's group, claiming an emerald necklace, a new pair of earrings, and two gold rings. Maia and Valeria both refused to take anything at all.

It was a little disappointing, but the shiny pieces were hardly the real treasures to be had during the hunt—Leon's group alone had a dozen wyvern kills to their name, and that represented a ton of wealth on their own, let alone the eggs or the two wyvernlings. If any of them wanted anything golden after the hunt was over, they'd be able to easily buy it with the spoils of the hunt.

Leon found himself contemplating all of this from the cliff's edge overlooking the gorge. The black wyvern was dead, but that didn't mean the hunt as a whole was finished. There were still several weeks remaining where thousands of wyverns would be swarming over the Scorched Fields, hunting down just about everything that moved to feed their hatching young, and the hunters would have to work hard to ensure that enough of the wyvern population was culled that they didn't wander too far afield and threaten the Pegasi States.

Leon's party, for their part, wasn't just going to wait around, not when they still had a wager to win. They were in the lead thanks to their trip into the aeries, but that could still change if they rested too long on their laurels. So, by the afternoon after the slaying of the black wyvern, they joined Leon at the edge of the cliff, their flight gear on, ready to fly back out into the Scorched Fields to rejoin the hunt.

Before they could leave, though, Leon noticed Cassandra and her entourage walking by on their way to the Imperial ark, and the Princess couldn't resist calling out a parting challenge to Leon.

"It's been fun, Leon Raime! Enjoy this taste of victory, and let it provide you solace when you hand that enchanted stone over to me!"

Leon didn't verbally respond, choosing instead to just smirk back at the Princess, who didn't seem at all fazed by his response.

"Let's go," he quietly said to his people, and almost as one, they rose into the air and flew away from the gorge.

—

That night, only several dozen miles away from the gorge, but further east and back in the Scorched Fields proper, Leon met with Helen and Elise in his portable villa's dining room. The retinue had brought down another wyvern, but it had only been a fifth-tier beast, one small enough that Leon didn't even bother doing anything himself, instead choosing to let the weaker members of his retinue deal with it.

The box in front of him was far more exciting, in his mind. He trusted Helen when she told him that he had to take it over anything else, and while he didn't question her expertise, he was still eager for an explanation.

So, he opened the broken box and retrieved the seeds from the pouch they were in.

Elise gasped when Leon laid the three small golden seeds on the table, her emerald eyes going wide in surprise, then narrowing from a gleeful smile.

"*These* were rotting away in a wyvern's lair?" she whispered in disbelief.

"What a waste," Helen responded, smiling at Leon's fire-haired wife. "Thankfully, we should be able to put them to much better use, now..."

"What are they?" Leon asked, feeling more than a little left out.

"Hesperidic Apples," Helen answered. "Or seeds for the trees that grow into trees that produce Hesperidic Apples."

Leon gave her a blank look. "... They're valuable, I presume? And not just in the monetary sense?"

"Hesperidic Apples are *incredibly* valuable," Elise stated in a hushed whisper. "If eaten freshly picked, a Hesperidic Apple will help a mage form their magic body..."

As Elise trailed off and Leon's eyes grew wide in shock and understanding, Helen picked up the explanation. "That's only if eaten as apples. I've heard that the juice of Hesperidic Apples can be used in various potions to help a mage ascend no matter what tier they are. The juice can be brewed into a potion that will help a mortal's body adapt to magic, or help a mage learn to use elemental magic power safely. It can be brewed into a potion that will give a mage visions that supposedly help them figure themselves out and build their Mind Palace, while helping even stronger mages grow their soul realms."

"These apples sound downright miraculous," Leon observed, doubt creeping into his tone now that he'd had a couple of seconds to process the explanation.

"They do," Helen conceded. "However, the power they have in helping a mage to form their magic body is real. These apples are mostly grown far in the east, in Beloran and the Menomonee Valley, and even then, yields for good apples are typically low. Given the power of their fruits, they tend to be targeted by vermin and scavengers, and even under ideal conditions, they can be incredibly difficult to grow..."

Helen and Elise shared a look, both of their expressions falling now that they were thinking about this problem.

"All right," Leon said. "I'll believe you when you say the magic body thing is real. What about these other uses? I can't believe that a fruit like this would exist and not be *everywhere*, given just how useful it seems to be."

Helen nodded. "Granted, most of what I've heard is hearsay, these apples are incredibly carefully controlled. Supposedly, even Heaven's Eye has trouble getting small amounts, let alone larger amounts."

"And these small amounts are always reserved for Imperial interests," Elise added.

Leon hummed in thought. "I'd imagine, then, that these seeds would've had to be smuggled out of Beloran or the Menomonee Valley?"

"Most certainly," Elise said. "It would've been incredibly risky, and prone to failure. A Hesperidic Apple seed can survive for a very long time outside of its natural environment, but getting one to grow into a tree outside of its natural environment is almost impossible. Not many people bother trying, given the potential risks. Smuggling these seeds is one of those laws that are usually punished with torture and execution..."

"Harsh," Leon whispered.

"But understandable," Helen added, and Leon shrugged in begrudging agreement.

"Then," Leon continued, "we come to the most important question. Can we get these to grow? And I mean that as in, is it *possible* for us to grow them back home? Or is the Ilian Empire not close enough to these apples' home environment for that? And more than that, is it *illegal* for us to do this? Will this get us into any trouble?"

"Probably best not to advertise our possession of these things," Elise said, her eyes narrowing again, a sign that Leon recognized as her turning the problem over in her mind. And a moment later, she smiled, a solution already in mind. "We'll need to buy new property. You'll need to secure it, husband..."

"Not a problem." Leon was more than confident in his abilities to secure any location from scrutiny and intrusion, so long as he had the time and materials.

Elise continued, "We'll surround the place with other apple trees as cover and have these grown in the center of the grove. We can claim various experiments are being conducted if questioned, which will hardly be a lie, and that's the reason for the security."

Helen nodded again. "I'll get a list of equipment we'll need for that to be believable."

Leon blinked, doubt entering his mind again. "Just claim that we're using an apple orchard for *testing*? Testing of what?"

"Leave the explanations to me," Helen replied with a confident smirk. "I can come up with something. Maybe that I'm trying to replicate Hesperidic Apples or something, keep it fairly close to the truth. This isn't *illegal*, so we don't need to have iron-clad cover. This is just something to ensure we're not being overly scrutinized, right?" She cast a questioning look to Elise, who nodded.

“We don’t want to tempt people to try and test our security, so we should probably come up with a different lie. Still, we’re going to need some fairly robust hiring standards for grove tenders, and ensuring that these seeds will actually grow is going to be a task unto itself...”

Elise continued muttering, and Helen occasionally pitched in with her own insight, but Leon zoned out for a little while, trusting that if they said that growing these trees and cultivating these powerful apples was possible, then it was. He could already imagine what he could do if such powerful fruit trees were in his possession. He just had one question left.

“How long until we can start producing fruit?”

Elise looked up at him, her train of thought momentarily disrupted, before a light frown spread across her face. “It’ll take years.”

Helen got more specific, “An apple tree will start producing within three or four years. Given the magical requirements for these things, I think a more conservative estimate of seven or eight years would be better.”

With a grin of anticipation, Leon said, “A relatively long time. Let’s not waste any once we get home.”

Elise leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. “It’s going to be hard waiting that long...”

“Let’s not do anything that’ll raise suspicions, then,” Leon replied, wrapping an arm around his wife. “Make sure we keep all of these apples for ourselves. I think we’re going to need them, especially since we’re going to have a wyvern coming to us in a year or so, and I’m sure *her* appetites are going to be quite massive...”

Elise smiled at him again, and after a few more minutes of discussion with Helen, Leon pulled the seeds back into his soul realm where they’d be safe and out of sight. He was excited to get this apple grove built, but for now, they still had a hunt to finish.

—

Leon wished he could say that the rest of the wyvern hunt was as eventful as the hunt for the black wyvern and his harem, but it wasn’t. Three weeks passed, and his retinue bagged another many more wyverns, none of them stronger than the sixth-tier. The population of hunting wyverns had thinned out well enough that simply finding the beasts started to take days by the end.

About a month after the hunt began, the time came when a wyvern hadn’t been seen, let alone reported killed, in more than three days, so the hunt was called off and the hunters summoned back to Vyrias or one of the other small, temporary hub cities.

Naturally, Leon and his people made their way back to Vyrias and set up camp in their assigned lot.

Penelope arrived less than an hour later, riding in on her floating chariot pulled by Saternan horses, flanked by her retainers. Leon noted that her retinue numbered three less than it had when the hunt began. He also noted that when Penelope met his gaze, he didn’t notice any scorn or derision—a stark contrast to what he’d come to expect over the past ten years.

They didn't exchange any words, and simply set about setting their own camps back up. A couple hours after Penelope's arrival, Leon noticed Cassandra's ark return to her palace-tree, and not long after, one of Cassandra's hangers-on showed up to invite Leon and Penelope to another banquet.

Leon braced himself for that particular meeting. It was where they were all going to formally report their kills and other accomplishments during the hunt, and when the winners would be announced.

He thought about the red-eyed Princess and wondered just how she might take a loss. He hadn't heard any updates from her side since their parting following the fight with the black wyvern, so he didn't know how many more wyverns she'd killed in these past few weeks. Given the ark she had, he supposed she probably scored at least double his kill count, but even then, with the eggs and wyvernlings, he calculated that he was still in the lead.

The reminder of those wyvernlings had him glancing at them in his courtyard. They'd been left behind with some Heaven's Eye beastmasters while the hunt continued, but now that it was over, Anna had taken over her two new charges, and was currently preoccupied with feeding them a small pile of raw red meat and crushed bone. The pale white wyvernlings, having grown to the size of small ponies already, ate with ferocity, and if they hadn't been in the grassy courtyard, Leon might've been annoyed at the mess they were making.

As it was, he could endure it well enough knowing that these wyverns were going to add their strength to his retinue's someday, though that might be a long ways off. Wyverns would be old enough to hunt on their own within a few months, but old enough to fight at the levels that Leon would need would be years in the future.

Leon put those thoughts out of his mind for the moment and refocused on Cassandra's banquet. The eggs and the heads his retinue had captured had been accounted for by Heaven's Eye before dealing with Black and his harem, and though there had been no agreed-upon third party to mediate the wager, Heaven's Eye would back up their scores, so there wouldn't be any shenanigans on anyone's part.

As evening rolled around, Leon, Elise, and Talal set out for the palace-tree, leaving everyone else behind—at this point, Leon didn't particularly feel like bringing an entourage with him, and he wanted his retainers to get some rest following weeks of constant movement during the hunt.

His small party was shown through Cassandra's palace-tree and to the familiar chamber at the top formed by branches and the thick, roof-like canopy, where Cassandra and the highest ranking members of the Sacred Golden Empire's hunting delegation awaited them in the stone courtyard.

Cassandra herself wasn't sitting in her simple stone throne, glowering imperiously at all who entered her court, but instead was mingling with the several dozen people present. Leon noted that unlike nearly every other time he'd seen her, she wasn't wearing her armor. Instead, she was clad in simple greens and golds, with her new cloth-of-gold cloak over her shoulders and a delicate diamond tiara perfectly placed in her purple hair.

As was the case last time, Penelope had beaten them here, though this time she wasn't standing at Cassandra's side, silently gloating over her position. Instead, she was chatting quite pleasantly with a number of high-ranking officials from both the Sacred Golden Empire and Heaven's Eye.

When Leon, Elise, and Talal were announced, most people gave them a few moments of their attention before turning back to their own conversations. Cassandra, however, excused herself from her conversation and made her way over to greet them personally.

“Lady Elise,” the Princess said, lightly embracing Elise, then turning her eyes toward Leon. “Leon Raime.” Her second greeting came with much less familiarity, though no less warmth. She seemed genuinely happy to see the two of them.

Talal, meanwhile, was given a cursory nod, then summarily ignored—to his quiet displeasure, Leon was sure.

“I’m glad the two of you have finally arrived,” the Princess continued. “No one else accompanying you?”

“My retainers were tired, and I didn’t have the heart to drag them out, even for this,” Leon replied.

“That’s a shame,” the Princess said. “I’m sure we could all do with blowing off some steam...”

She gave Leon a strange look, her ruby eyes almost looking like they were seeing more than what was just on the surface. It wasn’t the first time she’d looked at him like this, and Leon wasn’t quite sure what it meant.

“That depends on *how* one blows off steam,” Elise replied, her hands moving to take Leon’s arm rather possessively. “There are some fun ways to go about it, but many others can be... destructive...”

One of Cassandra’s eyebrows rose, and a thin smirk spread across her face. “Can it really be called ‘blowing off steam’ if everything’s intact afterward? I find that strenuous activity is the best way to relax.”

Elise’s grip tightened, and her gaze shifted to Leon. He didn’t have to look at his wife to know that her emerald eyes were filled with lustful heat, and he immediately began making plans to leave this place as soon as humanly possible. He and his wife had had plenty of alone time over the past few weeks, but that didn’t stop him from wanting to immediately drag her back to their portable villa and into their bedroom.

Elise replied to the Princess, “I think we can agree on that point...”

“Lovely,” Cassandra said. “Now, how about we stop wasting time...” She paused to stare at them for a moment, and Leon felt a momentary spike of panic rush through him as the possible implications of what she was saying ran through his mind. He *wasn’t* looking for another romantic partner, Elise’s insistence on him building a harem be damned.

Fortunately, Cassandra didn’t leave things there.

“... and tally up our scores? I’m *very* interested to see who won our wager...”

Leon breathed a quick sigh of relief, did his best to force his aroused libido to return from whence it came, and nodded. “Let’s do that,” he said.

Chapter 707: An End to the Hunt

It was about all Leon could possibly do to stop from grinning like an idiot as Cassandra handed him the mask that she'd wagered. The thing was supposed to help its wearer concentrate on their tasks, and he was looking forward to testing it out, but the main reason for his attitude was the simple fact that he and his retinue had won the wager. Both Penelope and Cassandra had killed more wyverns than he and his people did—in Cassandra's case, she'd hunted almost a hundred in total—but the eggs and wyvernlings that Leon's group had managed to seize had carried the day.

"Well done, Leon Raime," Cassandra said with graciousness as Leon took the mask. It might've just been his imagination, but Leon thought he heard quite a bit of disappointment, anger, and competitiveness in her voice, and the way her ruby eyes were locked upon him made him think that she was going to remember this for a long time.

"Your Highness did admirably well, too," Leon modestly replied, pulling the mask into his soul realm without examination. There'd be time enough for that later, but examining it here and now would've just been insulting to the Princess' honor, and he didn't want to gloat, despite his pride in his victory.

"My efforts aside," Cassandra said, "your win is well-deserved. Infiltrating the aeries themselves and stealing the young of these monsters is a feat worth remembering." The Princess' eyes narrowed and she leaned in a little bit to whisper, "You'd best hold onto that mask, Leon Raime, I'll be looking for a chance to win it back in the future..."

Without waiting for a reply, the Princess turned around and walked away.

From right next to Leon, Elise whispered into his ear, "I think she likes you."

"I think she certainly feels *something*," Leon said back as he watched the beautiful Princess walk away, his eyes riveted to her. They'd had their disagreements during the hunt, but he had to admit that, for his part, he liked the Princess quite a bit, and he hoped that they'd get an opportunity to test their skills against each other again.

At the very least, he knew that he and his retinue were going to be heading into the Sacred Golden Empire in the near future, and he couldn't help but hope that they might run into Cassandra again during that time—though he knew that, being a Princess, this was hardly likely. She probably had better things to do than make friends with him.

Almost as if she had a psychic understanding of Leon's distraction, Elise gently squeezed his arm just enough to bring his attention back to his surroundings, and with a quick step and soft pulling of his arm, she turned Leon enough to face Penelope as the other Hand of the Director participating in this hunt approached.

"Congratulations, Leon," Penelope said, nodding to the group of Heaven's Eye bureaucrats who'd effectively verified his win. They were standing next to a small mountain of wyvern heads, sans bodies, that Cassandra had dramatically revealed not five minutes ago, quietly talking amongst themselves as they prepared to process the Princess' kills for her.

"Congratulations to you," Leon good-naturedly replied. Penelope had considerably less frost and vitriol in her tone, and Leon felt like they'd achieved at least some kind of camaraderie following their slaying of the black wyvern, but there was still some awkwardness between them, with him not quite knowing how to act around her and her seemingly feeling the same.

"I didn't win," Penelope replied. "Congratulations don't come often to those in last place."

"Our wager notwithstanding, slaying more than seventy wyverns will always be something worth congratulating."

"If you say so." Penelope glanced back at the small crowd attending the banquet, many of whom were staring at them, some whispering amongst themselves. With an almost theatrical flourish, Penelope conjured the Bright Heart of Promise from her soul realm, the huge diamond set in the gold frame, the stone brightly glittering with entirely mundane light. "You've earned this."

Leon smiled and took the diamond, barely resisting the urge to inspect the thing right then and there for the same reasons he didn't with Cassandra's mask.

Penelope then asked him, "Would you mind coming with me for a moment? Lady Elise, you're more than welcome to come, too."

"We'd be delighted," Elise replied without giving Leon a chance to refuse.

Not that Leon thought that he would've, he could detect no ill intent in Penelope's request.

Without much further ado, Penelope led them out of the courtyard, down a stone path, and out into the grounds of the palace-tree's upper chamber. The chamber within the tree's branches was enormous, with the stone courtyard only taking up a small fraction of available space. It was like an entire park had been built up there, and Penelope took them a fair ways away from the court, though not so far that they were out of sight.

"You seem to know your way around here," Leon observed in an attempt to make some conversation. "Are you friends with the Princess?"

"You could say we have a pretty good relationship," Penelope replied, "but I wouldn't call us friends. We've known each other for about seven years, now, ever since her twentieth birthday celebration, and I've been her primary contact with Heaven's Eye for her entire adult life. Our relationship is friendly, but professional in nature."

Elise added, "For us in Heaven's Eye, becoming friends with political figures is a tough thing to do."

"Aren't you friends with Princess Cristina?" Leon pointed out.

"I am, which shows that I know what I'm talking about."

Leon shrugged and half-grinned, half-grimaced.

Elise continued, "You know that it's extremely important to Heaven's Eye to be neutral in political dealings, but you've hardly had to experience it that much first-hand, given your lack of interest in making friends. If you interacted with politicians more often, you'd probably be getting this principle drilled into your skull on much more regular basis."

"Indeed you would," Penelope agreed with the exasperated tone of one who had much personal experience with something aggravating.

The Director's daughter came to a stop at a small flower garden along the path, which featured several intricately decorated wooden benches. None of them took a seat, but it seemed like as good a place to have a private chat as any.

Penelope took a deep breath, then turned to face Leon head-on. "I need to thank you, Leon Raime. When you arrived to reinforce me during my fight with that black wyvern, my injuries were more severe than I was letting on."

"No need for thanks," Leon said with a modest wave. "That black wyvern was dangerous, but I think you could've gotten away if your life was truly in danger."

"You still saved me a great deal of pain, and who knows what might've happened had you not arrived? Besides, my retinue wasn't faring too well against those other wyverns, and even if I could've gotten away, they couldn't have. My gratitude is owed, and I intend to pay that debt."

"There's no debt at all," Leon said again as discomfort started to settle in his stomach. As far as he was concerned, she was making a bigger deal out of this than was necessary, and he just wanted them to move on. "I only wish I could've aided your people more, before casualties were inflicted."

Penelope frowned in grief for the briefest of moments, then, with a sigh, schooled her countenance. "Your generosity only makes this worse."

Leon awkwardly shrugged. "I'm not one for formalities."

With a quick interjection, Elise said, "Maybe you *should* be a little more formal right now, husband..."

Leon smiled at her, but took her light rebuke to heart. Turning back to Penelope, he said, "Your gratitude is well-received, though I think myself unworthy of it."

"It's not just for the healing and the reinforcements," Penelope continued. "You also supported me when I recommended we fall back when fighting the black wyvern. For that, I'm grateful as well."

Leon fought the urge to wave away her gratitude again, replying, "It was the best thing to do at the time. No point in continuing the fight if we were taking a beating, especially since we weren't operating on a time limit."

"Still, all of this has caused me to think over the past few weeks. My thoughts have distracted me to the point where my retainers have noticed and grown worried."

"What sort of thoughts are you having," Elise asked, "that would distract you from wyverns?"

Penelope took a long moment to respond, appearing to struggle with admitting what was on her mind. As the silence between them grew awkward, Penelope quickly responded, "Most wyverns... are fairly weak... They don't provide much in the way of moment-to-moment occupation..."

Leon nodded in agreement, but he didn't interrupt her, and she slipped into silence for another long moment.

Finally, she took a deep breath and looked Leon in the eye. "I... was wrong about you. I thought you were just riding in on Lady Emilie's coattails, that you were going to be insufferably arrogant because of

your power and age, that you weren't going to submit yourself to any authority and be a thorn in my father's side. You've proven yourself to be none of those things, so far."

Leon stared at Penelope in abject surprise, his stoic mask slipping off completely. For a moment, he thought this was some kind of trick, perhaps a bait-and-switch just meant to insult him.

But the switch never came, and when she paused to think over her words, he realized that he'd have to take her at face value.

"Your words," he said, "are greatly appreciated. I'm sure there are quite a few people who might dispute them, considering me *quite* insufferable, but I'm happy beyond measure that you seem to be moving out of that group..."

"I am," Penelope replied, a shallow smile spreading across her face. "In hindsight, I should've 'moved out of that group' sooner, but... I kept provoking you, and using your response to justify staying in 'that group'. I was too proud to admit that my initial judgment may have been incorrect."

"There's always time for me to change, if that would make you feel better," Leon said with a self-deprecating smile. "Just say the word and I'll be the barbarian you thought me to be, give you some vindication."

Elise, with a playful smile of her own, sharply pinched his arm. Leon quickly glanced at her and winked, only to see her winking back, and sticking her tongue out at him, to boot.

Penelope chuckled and said, "No, no, that won't be necessary."

After a moment of silence where none of them seemed to know what to say or how to end their conversation, Leon set aside his more joking demeanor. He had something weighing on his mind and this was probably the best time he could ever pick for giving voice to those thoughts.

"Penelope," he said with great seriousness, "I think I also need to apologize to you."

"What for?" Penelope responded, her tone curious and apprehensive.

"That black wyvern probably wouldn't have attacked you if I hadn't provoked it. It's not like that monster was well-known, he probably would've sat this hunt out given how those other wyverns were bringing him food. If I hadn't led my people out to those aeries, then all of that might not have happened..."

"Maybe," Penelope whispered, but it was Elise who spoke more in his defense.

"That might not have been the case," the fire-haired woman said, pausing until Leon turned to look her in the eye. "That hoard of his was *very* large, wasn't it? Where did he get all of that treasure? Stealing it, most likely. Probably robbing trade ships passing along the southern coast or caravans moving through the Kyron Steppes. Either way, it seems clear to me that that wyvern was a raider and had likely killed before. Maybe he wouldn't have gone after anyone specifically, but killing him has still made this region much safer."

"That doesn't change the fact that my orders led directly to the black wyvern's retaliation, and that left dozens of hunters dead." Leon broke eye contact with Elise to give Penelope a genuinely apologetic look. "You were injured and you lost retainers because of that, and it was my fault."

Penelope sighed and shook her head. "Don't take responsibility for the choices of a beast, Leon. If we were to follow that logic, then we wouldn't have had our bet and I'm sure you wouldn't have gone into those aeries if I hadn't provoked you. That wyvern wouldn't have done anything if he lived further away and didn't see you, or if he didn't care about what you were doing, or an endless host of other reasons. Ultimately, the responsibility for what happened is on the black wyvern, not on you."

Leon grimaced, but he was grateful for her words, anyway. "You're too kind."

Penelope sighed again and fell into a faraway look, her eyes seeming to stare at something far in the distance. "No, I'm not," she whispered. Before Leon or Elise could ask what she was talking about, she focused back on Leon and said, "As a courtesy, Leon, I'll let you in on a little secret: I don't know why, but you're a person of interest to a *lot* of people."

Leon stared at her, both confused and alarmed. Alarmed because he knew why a lot of people might want to consider him a person of interest and confused for who she was talking about and what reasons they may have chosen. "Could you be more specific?"

Again, Penelope paused for a moment, clearly thinking over her words. It appeared to be quite the struggle to say, though, leading Leon to think that she was *not* supposed to be saying these things. When she did find her voice again, it came tinged with bitterness and a hint of resentment.

"... My father doesn't tell me much. Or anything, really. He keeps all of his cards close to his chest, and only shows one or two at a time to those who he feels needs to know. That includes me. No one knows what he knows or what his plans are. All I, or anyone, can do, is guess at what his motives are."

"But a few things *can* be pieced together, on occasion."

Leon nodded along, while Elise asked, "He sent you to watch Leon, didn't he?"

Penelope nodded. "Ten years ago," she explained. "Part of my job was to watch all of you, but he specifically called you out. You were to be put under covert observation at least until he could meet with you."

Leon frowned as Penelope stared at him, a curious look in her eyes. "Any idea why?" He felt like he already knew, but he wanted confirmation, anyway.

"No," Penelope replied, and as far as Leon could tell, she was being sincere. "But I know other things. A sharp uptick in internal investigations following your recruitment, accusations of Imperial espionage in Occulara, research into blood magic, and the transfer of funds and personnel for a private project..."

Penelope trailed off, and Leon did his best to absorb what she'd said.

"How does all of this relate to me?"

"I'm unsure, though your name keeps cropping up whenever I try and get an idea of what's going on," Penelope replied. "And all of this shady business started around the time of your recruitment. Maybe I'm being paranoid and making connections that don't exist, but it certainly *feels* like your arrival has disturbed quite a few anthills down here. And I don't know why."

Penelope regarded Leon with a searching look, as if she hoped his secrets might be revealed if she simply observed him long enough.

But he remained tight-lipped. He was concerned about all of this—it definitely sounded like he was under some kind of Imperial surveillance, but that was hardly surprising given that Anastasios had all-but outright stated that he knew who Leon was. However, he didn't want to offer too much to Penelope, either—not so much because he was trying to keep his identity a secret, as that wasn't really true, but because he just didn't want to involve her too much in his affairs.

What was more, he didn't really trust her, even after her apology.

"Do you know which of the Empires are supposedly active in Occulara?" Leon asked.

"All of them," Penelope replied, and Leon felt his heart skip a beat.

"Really...?" Leon whispered distractedly. If he had to guess, it seemed that all four of the Empires knew about him. Of course, they may simply be targeting Heaven's Eye for more practical economic reasons, and it was just a coincidence all of this started as soon as he showed up, but he doubted that. He was the last descendant of their ancient enemy; keeping an eye on him was something that he expected.

He just didn't realize that all of the Empires would be involved. He glanced back at Cassandra's court and wondered how many of them might know who he was.

'Cassandra, maybe? She has been staring at me since we met, and this would handily explain why. But she didn't really feel like she knew who I am. Wouldn't she realize that I was the smith who forged Sunlight if her Empire was keeping an eye on me?'

Leon scrunched his face up in thought, but Penelope soon interrupted him before he could get too far.

"I don't know what's going on," she said. "However, I'm going to be keeping my eyes open. If you want my advice, Leon, you stay on your toes. There are a lot of eyes that are, if not looking directly at you, then at least are trained in your general direction. So it would be best to act with discretion."

Leon nodded appreciatively. "Thanks for the heads-up."

"It's the least I can do," Penelope replied. "Now, how about we all get out of this place, yeah? Enough of the heavy talk and the banquets and all that."

"Yeah..." Leon absent-mindedly replied.

"I suppose it's best we leave early," Elise said with some reluctance. "You've given us a lot to think about, Lady Penelope. We're grateful."

The two shared a few more parting words, and then all three of them returned to the courtyard, picked up their other followers, and then begged their leave of the Princess. It was still quite early, but fortunately, Heaven's Eye policy demanded they not stay too long.

But Leon wasn't too happy, his mind turning what Penelope had revealed to him again and again in his mind. Not even the overcast sky, the smell of imminent rain, or the rumble of distant thunder was able to raise his mood. All he wanted to do now was to collect whatever materials had already been processed and accounted for by Heaven's Eye and get home as quickly as he could.

Chapter 708: Lord and Subject

By the time Leon, Elise, and Talal returned to Leon's portable villa, it had begun to rain. In some ways, it caused the already depressed mood to worsen, and the short journey was made in silence.

But Leon relished the smell of rain on the wind, the sound of drops hitting the grass, the howl of wind through the distant branches of the huge local trees, and most of all, the flash and boom of distant lightning and thunder. Each rumble of thunder vibrated in his chest like a war drum, every flicker of lightning filling him with power and clearing his mind of distraction.

And every drop of rain that hit their carriage soothed his mind, acting almost as a counter to the storm's thunderous demand that he rise and unthinkingly smite his enemies.

But he wasn't sure if he had any enemies to smite, and even if he did, he didn't know where they might be.

He remained calm, reveling in the storm for the short trip back to the villa, and when they arrived, he walked out into the courtyard and let the rain soak him, bringing power with every drop.

'The Empires know who I am,' he thought to himself. He wasn't surprised. What surprised him was that in ten years, no one had overtly acted upon that information, aside from Anastasios' offer to recruit him into the Ilian Empire. *'It seems that the Director knows, too. Should I confront him about it? Should I pretend that nothing's changed? Has anything changed?'*

He stood in the courtyard, letting the storm wash over him, immersing himself in a quiet meditative state as he processed this new information.

He didn't need that long, and after about ten minutes, he walked back inside. With barely more than a thought, he was dry, his water magic pulling all the excess moisture off his body and out of his clothes, and his fire magic heating himself back up.

When he walked into his family's section of the villa, he found that Elise had already called Maia and Valeria together, and it seemed from their concerned expressions that Elise had informed them of what Penelope had revealed.

"Husband," Elise said, her face breaking out into a wide smile as Leon entered the room.

The smile was reflected in both Valeria and Maia, and Leon quickly returned it.

"Have a good think out there?" Valeria asked.

"Good enough," Leon replied. "I think my soul realm's healed. I *should* be able to start growing it, again..."

"That's fantastic news," Elise replied, sounding a little unsure despite herself and her smile slipping a little.

"You're astoundingly convincing," Leon quipped as he collapsed onto the same lounge she was resting on and pulling her over to him.

"It *is* great," she replied, her smile returning in full force as she practically draped herself over him. "I just think we have other things to talk about right now."

“Do we?” Leon asked, glancing at his lovers.

Valeria was nodding emphatically, and Maia looked fairly concerned, and Leon thought that he was the only one among them who wasn’t that worried.

“You have to admit,” Valeria said, “that this information is concerning...”

“I was shocked, I’ll admit that much,” Leon replied. “However, ten years have passed since our arrival in Imperial territory. And in that time, nothing’s happened. Besides, I was never exactly trying to hide my identity. I wasn’t advertising it, but as I said way back in Ancon, I’m not going back to being Leon Ursus. I’m Leon Raime, and I’m going to own that.”

“I’d never ask you to deny who you are,” Valeria replied. “However, aren’t you even a little bit concerned that the Empires have apparently had you under surveillance? That the Director seems to know who you are? That he seems to be working on a personal project that not even his daughter knows about? Something involving blood magic?”

A frown began spreading across Leon’s face. “That *is* concerning,” he conceded. “However, I think it was inevitable that the Empires figure out who I am. It’s actually kind of... *relieving*, I guess, knowing that I don’t have to pretend to be something that I’m not. I always figured that someone would act against us, and this arrangement with Heaven’s Eye was always temporary, so again, I have to wonder just how much has changed?”

[But the blood magic?] Maia repeated. [Wouldn’t that mean the Director is moving against us?]

“Not necessarily,” Leon replied. “I’m not going to sit here and defend the guy, but we don’t know what Penelope was talking about. We don’t know what the Director is planning. We don’t even know if Penelope was telling the truth or not; her apology aside, she hasn’t exactly been friendly to us—or at least, to *me*—since our arrival. I think it’s equally likely that Penelope is trying to drive a wedge between us and the Director as it is that she was being completely honest.”

“Regardless,” Elise interjected, “I think we should have some kind of plan if hostile moves are made against us, right?”

Leon hummed in agreement, despite his personal feelings. Better to have contingencies than not, he supposed.

“Where could we go to get away from the Empires, though?” Valeria wondered aloud. “If push came to shove, I don’t think there’s really anywhere we could go or anything we could do to escape them...”

“We can think about it,” Leon replied. “It’s hardly a pressing issue, is it? I suppose until then, always have enough stuff in your soul realms that if we had to get out quickly, we don’t have to waste time packing essentials.”

“Already done,” Valeria replied with a shrug, surprising Leon not at all.

[Same here,] Maia replied, though Leon was even less worried about her than he was about Valeria. She’d lived for almost two hundred years alone on an island in the middle of an underground lake, she wasn’t one that needed many luxuries.

Elise, however, was the one he knew he would worry about the most if they ever had to run, and when he glanced at her, he found her frowning quite deeply.

"I can do that..." she said hesitantly.

Leon squeezed her against him and, with a loving smile and a confident tone, said, "It won't come to that. And if it does, we'll deal with it."

"I hope you're right," Elise replied with uncertainty.

Leon just held her tighter, hoping he could physically express his confidence better than voice it. No matter what would come, they would face it head-on, and he knew they'd emerge stronger for it.

—

Leon, Penelope, and their retainers returned to Occulara the next day, only staying in Vyrias just long enough for Heaven's Eye to return their processed wyvern materials.

Leon, for the most part, simply sold most of the materials for silver, and after becoming richer by several hundred million silvers, he immediately spent much of that on bonuses for his retainers, much to their surprise and excitement.

He knew that a little generosity could become a lot of loyalty down the road, and he didn't want to lose his people if higher-paying offers came along or if they became disgruntled for any reason. They deserved much of that money after hunting many of those wyverns, anyway.

Once all of that was taken care of, the flight back home was fairly quick and easy. With the losses sustained, Penelope's retainers were a little more restrained in their behavior heading back than they were coming out, and Penelope herself was nothing if not unfailingly polite to Leon the entire flight back.

It made for a nice contrast, Leon had to admit.

As soon as they touched back down at Occulara's arkyards, Leon dismissed his retinue, letting everyone return home without bothering to head back to his villa, along with a couple days off. Once those days were over, though, they had to start their preparations for heading out to the Sacred Golden Empire and the Thunderbird Clan lab out there.

With that done, Leon and his family made their way to the Hexagon, with Valeria, Maia, Elise, and Anzu waiting for him in the building's atrium while he made his report to the Director. He reached the Director's office several minutes after Penelope did, who was already waiting to give her own report to her father. She gave Leon a polite nod upon his arrival, which he returned, and a couple minutes later, they were both shown into the Director's office.

The Director was, as always, sitting behind his massive desk, his entire body obscured both by shadow and by the harsh light shining in from the windows behind him. However, Leon saw his shadowed face warp slightly in a way that made him look like he was smiling.

"Ahh, there you two are," he said with fondness. "I've been waiting for you. I've heard good things about the hunt down in the Scorched Fields. Have my people lied to me?"

"They haven't," Penelope replied. "We brought down more than a hundred wyverns between us, and defeated a powerful one with magic equivalent to an eighth-tier mage."

"Additionally," Leon added, "Not a single wyvern made it east of Vyrias."

"Welcome news," the Director drawled. "Especially so given the lack of resources available this time, what with the absence of most of the Imperial delegations."

"Just more wyverns for us," Leon said with a smile.

"So it would seem. Well done, both of you. I expected nothing less than a spectacular performance, and you've both more than exceeded my expectations. I've arranged for generous bonuses for each of you."

"Thank you, father," Penelope responded formally.

"It's nothing, my dear, nothing at all. Now, if you could leave me with Leon for a moment, I'd appreciate it. Please, wait outside."

Penelope cocked her head in confusion, gave Leon an almost fearful look, and then started backing away toward the door without another word. Leon watched her go with just as much confusion as she seemed to be feeling, and his heart rate began to accelerate in anxiety—though, he had to admit that this was a convenient time for him, too. After Penelope's revelation that—

Interrupting Leon's thoughts, the Director stated without a trace of inquisitiveness in his tone, "My daughter revealed to you that I had her keep an eye on you after you arrived in the Ilian Empire."

One of Leon's eyebrows rose; he hadn't thought that the Director knew about that, let alone that he would bring it up on his own. Though Leon had to admit that this made it easier, he was going to start this conversation anyway even if the Director didn't.

"Did she tell you that?" Leon asked.

"She didn't have to. I know everything that happens within Heaven's Eye."

"Do you really? I find it hard to believe that you're aware of absolutely *everything* that happens within such a large organization."

"I'm aware of everything that I need to be aware of, and I need to be aware of this."

Leon lightly frowned. "And why's that?"

The Director leaned forward in his chair, resting his elbows on his desk and folding his hands in front of his shadowed face. "Because you're important, Leon. Or at least, your blood is."

"How important?" Leon asked as he leaned on his back leg and crossed his arms in front of his chest, amused and deeply nervous about this turn of events in equal measure. He kept his attention on the Director, but he was already considering how long he'd need to don his armor, retreat to the door, and smash it open if he had to.

The Director sighed, then tapped his desk with a finger. In a moment, the windows behind him grew more opaque and the room was plunged into near-darkness. Only a moment later, lights activated,

though from where, Leon couldn't tell, the room simply became brighter, revealing the Director without his usual veil of shadow.

He looked about the same as Leon remembered, with his short gray hair, gracefully aged features, and burning yellow eyes, so like Leon's own.

"Let's not play games, Leon," the Director said with some exasperation. "You are of Thunderbird blood. That much we both know."

Leon smiled, though the expression didn't quite reach his eyes.

[Xaphan?] he whispered into his soul realm.

[Human,] came the response.

[Are you more of a mind to fight today?]

Xaphan's response took a moment, during which Leon felt the demon's attention concentrate on him and his surroundings. [If need be,] he replied.

His confidence thus boosted with the support of his demonic partner, Leon steadied himself.

"How many others know?" Leon wondered aloud.

"Consider that everyone knows, and you won't be disappointed."

"About what I expected," Leon replied. "Lord Protector Anastasios all-but admitted he knew who I was, and I had my suspicions about Princess Cassandra..." Leon paused a moment and glared at the Director. "You, however, I'm a little more surprised by. You've known all these ten years?"

"I've known longer than that."

"Then why haven't you acted upon that knowledge? Is my Clan not an enemy of all in Imperial lands?"

"Eighty thousand years ago, they were. But that was then; this is now. Much has changed in that time. With time, the stresses of Imperial unification, the settling of the status quo, and the pressures of other enemies, the hateful passions that once burned for your Clan have long since cooled. These days, the Emperors and their guardians are more concerned with each other than they are with one young man from the north. They're more concerned with what your blood might do for them, with what legacies it might unlock that yet lie in their lands."

"Legacies?"

"Old pieces of your Clan that haven't yet succumbed to the ravages of time. Weapons. Arks. *More.*"

Leon's smile, frozen for the past few exchanges, grew slightly as the Director's eyes narrowed, then widened as he gave his short definition of legacies.

"Which of these legacies do you hope to unlock with my blood?"

The Director leaned back in his chair, studying Leon for a long moment. "... Nothing that would cost me your cooperation," he said. "I would never throw away the relationship we've built just for a few Lances or other such petty things."

"And what relationship have we built? That of Lord and subject?"

"I'm not your Lord, Leon. Our contract is proof enough of that. No matter what, you can leave any time you wish."

"So if I walk out of that door and never return...?"

"That would be your prerogative. I would not pursue you."

Leon softly chuckled. "How long were you going to keep pretending that you didn't know about me? Was that task you gave me to find the tau pearl just an excuse?"

"The challenge was legitimate, I'd never send you off on a meaningless task."

"Some of the tasks you've sent me on this past decade might be proof to the contrary..."

"What has meaning to you and what has meaning to me don't have to line up. Know that I've never once wasted your talents. Know, too, that I've never once schemed against you, or to rob you of your blood or power. All I've ever wanted was to build a working relationship between the two of us. To get to know you and understand your character."

By this point, nearly all of Leon's anxiety had been replaced with a mix of anxiety and smoldering anger. The Director continued to sit behind his desk, looking more smug than anything, as if he were reveling in this, rubbing Leon's nose in the fact that he'd known this information for longer than Leon ever realized. And he wasn't giving him the answers he was asking for. "Then I'll ask again, and I hope you'll actually furnish me with an answer: *Why?*"

The Director paused again, staring at Leon. But his gaze softened after a moment. "I... hope that in the past ten years, you might have built up some kind of trust with me, Leon."

"*Some* trust," Leon admitted.

"Not enough to let this go, though?"

Leon slowly shook his head.

"That's... a shame. I'm not ready to reveal what I'm working on."

"But you're working on *something*. Something involving blood magic, something involving a great deal of resources that not even your daughter can trace."

"*Something* of that nature. Nothing that would place you in any danger. Nothing that would take anything from you without your consent, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant."

Leon glared at the Director, not sensing even a shred of killing intent from him. He couldn't pick up on any dishonesty, either, but he didn't for a moment think that that meant the Director was being completely honest. At the very least, the only thing he could say with certainty was that the Director wasn't currently overtly hostile.

"Trust... is a fragile thing," Leon said. "At least, it is for me. It's not given lightly, and it's quickly lost. I have to say, any trust I had for you built up over these past ten years has been shattered."

"I understand completely," the Director replied, appearing not at all fazed, though at least his smile had vanished.

"I'm going to need to reevaluate our relationship. Evaluate what it is that I want from you. What it is you can do for me. I'll be leaving the Ilian Empire soon for personal reasons. When I return, I hope you can find it in you to be a little more open and forthcoming, assuming you still want a 'relationship' with me."

"You're asking for trust without giving any of your own?" the Director asked teasingly.

"I'm not leaving completely," Leon growled. "I'll be returning. I'm not quitting. That's quite a bit of trust I'm showing in you, I think."

The Director's smile returned, though a little more subdued than before. "I'm looking forward to your return."

"As am I."

With that, Leon turned around and left the Director's office, not bothering to wait for a dismissal. He'd not learned much during the exchange, but what he had learned now had him relieved, nervous, and seething, the dominant among those changing with every heartbeat.

But, at the very least, he had a theory for what project the Director was working on. The Thunderbird Clan arsenal—and its arkyards—that was supposed to be here in Occulara that he'd never been able to find...

He was starting to suspect that maybe, *maybe*, they were in the Director's control.

Chapter 709: Attempted Return to Routine

When Leon left the Director's office, he spared only one quick polite nod of his head to Penelope before leaving. He met his family back in the atrium, and with them, departed for home. He didn't speak much, and he figured his mood must have been obvious, for none of his lovers spoke too much, either.

Once they reached home, however, Elise took only one quick moment to order their estate employees to ready a report for her and then dragged Leon into one of their small, private sitting rooms, joined only by Valeria and Maia.

The room was opulently comfortable, but was fairly dimly lit, and copious amounts of magic flowed through its walls, powering robust privacy wards to ensure that whatever was done or discussed within this room didn't leave it. Normally, this room was reserved for fun, but everyone knew that fun wasn't what brought them here this time.

"Husband," Elise sternly said, "sit with me."

She sat down in a two-seater sofa, Maia and Valeria sitting across from her. Leon, still feeling both worked up and incredibly distracted after his frustrating talk with the Director, stared at his wife for a long moment before joining her on the sofa. If he had his way, he would've gone directly to his workshop and buried himself in work—or tried to, at least—as he mulled over how to handle this new situation, but he supposed that this was a better use of his time. As soon as he sat down, Elise leaned into him, and with one hand on his cheek, brought his face down for a quick kiss.

That one intimate moment shook through Leon's fugue like a lightning bolt through the thickest of clouds, and Leon could feel himself relaxing, with all the certainty he'd had back in Vyrias returning.

With a deep sigh as he pulled back from Elise, he said, "Nothing's really changed, I suppose. Just had the Director confirm what we already knew..."

He quickly brought his ladies up to speed with everything that he and the Director had discussed, including his suspicion that the man controlled the old Thunderbird Clan arkyards—or at least that the arkyards were under his protection.

"Could he have some other uses for your blood?" Valeria wondered, remaining calm and rational in the face of this news.

"That's always possible," Leon conceded. "He did say that there are many legacies of my old Clan left behind on this plane that my blood could be useful in unlocking. Legacies I didn't realize before..."

Leon momentarily cast his gaze down into his soul realm and at Nestor's ruby. He blamed the dead man for much, but he couldn't blame him for this revelation; it wasn't necessarily Nestor's fault directly that most of the points on his map had been plundered already. Leon had just assumed that that meant all of the 'legacies' had already been claimed or put to use and weren't just sitting around in some Imperial warehouse just waiting for him or his blood.

"It seems that the Empires might have a much more practical reason to strike at us—or *me*, at least—than originally thought..."

"To strike at you is to strike at us all," Maia boldly declared out loud, her voice ringing like the clearest of bells. A smile broke out across Leon's face at hearing her voice, too rare a pleasure for his liking.

"Indeed," Valeria agreed, and while Elise didn't verbalize her agreement, she made it known anyway when she took Leon's hand and gave it a supportive squeeze.

"So," Maia said, "what should we do now?"

Leon sighed again. "Right now? Nothing, I suppose. Or just return to normalcy. Take some time to think. I'm not sure remaining with Heaven's Eye when the Director's so clearly planning something is the best thing for us, but..."

As Leon trailed off, Elise finished his thought. "... But without Heaven's Eye, then we're left vulnerable to the Empires."

Leon gravely nodded. "That could very well be why the Director was as forthcoming as he was today, and why he wasn't *more* forthcoming despite clearly being able to be. He's certain that we don't have many choices in the matter, and is confident that no matter what he does, we'll stay with him. And the worst thing... is that I can't immediately say he's wrong. We enjoy much freedom with Heaven's Eye, and too many benefits to count—most notably, a certain degree of protection and independence from Imperial matters. Could we maintain this level of independence without the Director's support?"

Valeria, frowning, asked, "Is there no way we could exploit this for *more* benefits?" Her icy blue eyes flitted around the room for a moment as she lost herself in thought, before darting right back to Leon.

"You mean," Leon said, "offering to work with the Director on whatever his project is in exchange for these benefits, or more?"

Valeria nodded.

Leon considered it, but Elise needed less time. "That would only work if we had more concrete information. We only *suspect* that the Director has the arkyards. We don't *know* what he has, and what benefits we might be able to reap from it. I say that nothing should be done until we get more information and some strong assurances from the Director himself or we gain strength enough to force the issue."

"I can agree with that," Leon said, and he saw Maia and Valeria agreeing, too. "For now, then," he continued, "how about we get some rest? I think at least a month back home would be good for us, and then we can start thinking about heading north. We can think about this during that time, but right now, I think I'm leaning towards working *with* the Director, not *under* him on whatever he's working on. Besides, we still have a few friends in high places, so I think we're safe from any threats within Heaven's Eye, at least for a little while."

"That sounds good to me," Valeria replied.

"Same here," Elise said.

Maia nodded her agreement.

"Fantastic," Leon said. He leaned back in the sofa and closed his eyes for a moment, feeling some relief at both coming to a provisional conclusion and kicking the can down the road a bit, while also feeling mentally tired after the flight and everything else.

However, as his mind drifted, he was immediately pulled back to the present when he felt Elise's hands slip under his shirt and start rubbing his abs.

When he sat up and glanced at his wife, he found her smiling lasciviously at him, heat and desire in her emerald eyes. As soon as his eyes met hers, Elise took ahold of his shirt and started pulling it up and over his head.

"Aaaand, I think that's my cue to go," Valeria said.

Elise paused a moment as Leon finished freeing himself of his shirt. "You don't have to, you know," she said, looking at her friend with much the same heat as when she'd looked at Leon.

Valeria just smiled and waved as she continued for the door, while Maia was already pulling all of her clothes back into her soul realm as she joined Leon and Elise.

"You don't have to stay, Val," Leon growled, causing her to pause as she reached for the doorknob, "but I'll be looking for you when we're done. I won't consider this day over until I've kissed every inch of your body..." She turned back just as Elise started working on Leon's pants and Maia started pressing her lips against Leon's built chest. Immediately, her cheeks flushed pink, and only grew even redder when she looked up and met his gaze, his eyes narrow from a mischievous smirk.

Valeria just smiled back, then winked invitingly before leaving Leon, Elise, and Maia alone to satisfy each other.

—

Leon sighed in contentment as he finally returned to his workshop. He and his family had spent plenty of time relaxing with each other over the past couple of days, but even that much time was a little too much for Leon to take off. So, he'd meandered down to his workshop, his mind already buzzing between so many different topics he wasn't sure what to do first.

He needed a new Lightning Lance, that much he knew. The first had, eventually, functioned well, even causing the black wyvern some pain. Now, Leon had just had to refine the design and build a new one.

More importantly, Leon had channeled his black fire again, and while he wasn't quite sure if what he could feel was accurate, he thought he was beginning to sense the fetters placed upon him by the Great Black Dragon, not to mention he had the advice of the Thunderbird to ponder. If he could finally get more of an idea of what his aloof Ancestor had done to him and how he was inadvertently holding himself back, then he would've taken the most important steps to freeing his suppressed power.

But he didn't know how long that might take, and in the meantime, he had in his soul realm a mountain of wyvern hide, scales, and bones—and even a fire core from a sixth-tier red wyvern—even after selling most of his materials to Heaven's Eye. The blood, mana, organs, eyes, and all the rest of the bits of wyvern corpses he'd taken that had some alchemical uses he'd already left in Helen's workshop, but the material that could possibly be used for forging he kept.

He had a couple of problems that all of this material would help solve. Firstly, he needed to equip his retinue with better gear since most of them weren't equipped with armor that was worthy of them as his retainers. Their weapons were a little more in line with what he thought appropriate given that he'd enchanted nearly all of them himself, but the armor was still a problem.

Secondly, he was a little concerned that he hadn't shown Sid the proper courtesies for teaching him so much about the art of smithing, and it was an easy thing for him to carve his hoard up a bit, reserving a fair amount of material as a gift for Sid.

'Should help smooth over my request for further instruction...' Leon thought to himself as he did so.

Finally, he had the golden apple seeds he'd taken from the wyvern hoard, though fortunately, this wasn't a problem that he needed to do much about. Elise and several of her assistants were out with Anzu and Helen surveying some new plots land that would, hopefully, become their orchard. Once appropriate land was found and purchased, Leon and Valeria would take the lead in designing security wards to ensure that no one screwed with their precious golden apples.

These weren't Leon's only problems, but they were the ones on his mind right now. He still needed to make more detailed plans for the visiting the Thunderbird lab in the Sacred Golden Empire, but that, in his opinion, was a problem for future Leon to deal with. Right now was the time for him to indulge in his own personal growth.

To that end, Leon retrieved his labor golems and had them set about returning his workshop to its usual state. The last time he'd been in here had been during the forging of his armor, and the process had demanded that he make room and move quite a few things around to protect his tools and instruments from being damaged by the cataclysmic heat that he'd needed. He'd managed to finish his armor in time to join the wyvern hunt, but he'd done so by a matter of hours, so his workshop was still a bit of a mess.

Fortunately, all he had to do was give instruction to the labor golems, and they began moving everything back into place while he laid down in his chaise lounge and closed his eyes. His consciousness was cast down into his soul realm, where he opened the eyes of his magic body as it sat upon his throne in his Mind Palace.

Leon sighed again as he stood up and stretched. He hadn't had much instruction either in magic or in enchantment during the hunt, so he was brimming with excitement to be back. Unfortunately, the one he most wanted to see, the Thunderbird, was not currently present, so instead, he made a bee line for Nestor.

"Hey there, dead man," Leon quipped as he strode up to Nestor's table.

"What's wrong?" Nestor immediately replied, his tone alarmed and even a little bit concerned.

"Nothing, why?"

"You sound happy. You never sound *happy* when you talk to me."

"Sounds like something that would prompt a little introspection on your part, don't you think? Then again, I'd be willing to bet that few people ever sound happy when they're talking to you, so why should I be any different?"

Nestor went quiet for a moment, and Leon smiled, thinking that maybe he'd struck a nerve. Generally speaking, he didn't enjoy verbal sparring, but when he managed to get a few jabs in on his distant clansman, especially since his memories of his brief possession were seared into his mind, he couldn't help but feel a little elated.

"What do you want?" Nestor demanded, not acknowledging Leon's insult.

"Arks," Leon said. "I want arks. Teach me to build them."

"Arks. You can barely forge decent armor and you're asking me for some of the most complicated miracles of magical engineering that exist in the universe? As if arks are things that I can just *teach* you to build."

"Can't you?" Leon asked, his smile widening into one of challenge. "You constantly boast about being one of the most knowledgeable enchanter's ever existed, so if anyone can teach me, surely you can?"

"I see you trying to flatter me," Nestor replied accusingly. "If you wanted to butter me up, maybe you shouldn't have thrown me to the floor as soon as you walked over here."

"Maybe you shouldn't have been such an arrogant tool when we first met," Leon countered. "Arks. What do I need? Give me a timetable."

Nestor deeply sighed, his ruby momentarily dimming as if the dead man were losing energy just from seriously contemplating Leon's demand.

"An ark is not something that is just *made*," Nestor carefully explained. "They are—and I don't use this term lightly—miraculous. They require extremely specific materials, not the least of which is an incredible amount of Titanstone. If you wanted an ark worth riding, one that can traverse even through

the Void, then you'd also need several tons of Lumenite. If you wanted this hypothetical ark to have weapons that can do more than singe a few eyebrows, then you'd need mountains of Aurichalcum. And good luck finding any of these materials in a place like *this*.

"Adding onto that, no one person can just assemble an ark, they need extremely specialized tools and knowledge to build, and likely the assistance of a strong and highly advanced supply chain. The relevant knowledge would take decades to teach, even if I could do it alone. Your tools aren't even close to being big or advanced enough. And good luck finding skilled enough labor to construct the thing. Building even just a sub-Void ark, for you right now, is a fantasy."

"What if we had access to an arkyard?" Leon asked. "Some of the states here have arkyards..."

"I'd have to see what they have, but even then, I'm an *enchanter*, not an arksmith."

"The Empires must have some arksmiths, maybe I could get some of them on board?" Leon wondered aloud.

"If you do that, you'd best be comfortable with some of your secrets getting out. You can't just give these sorts of things to people you don't know and expect them not to continue using this advanced knowledge."

"I'm well aware of that, dead man. But it's something to consider for the future. How about this: you start shoring up my enchanting foundations for building arks and leave the manufacturing to me to figure out. At the very least, there's still that Titanstone refinery that you pointed out in the south, right?"

"Yes," Nestor confirmed. "However, our Clan never built Lumenite or Aurichalcum refineries on this plane. And we only built a Titanstone refinery because we found Titanstone on this plane—and quite a bit of it, too."

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," Leon whispered, though he trailed off a bit when he noticed storm clouds in the distance. Recognizing what that meant, he simply turned away from Nestor and walked over to the perch he'd built for his favored Ancestor.

"All right," the dead man bemoaned, "just walk away. 'Goodbye' isn't for you, I suppose..."

From not far away, Xaphan shouted, "Goodbyes are reserved for those that don't eat shit!"

"What a wonderful mastery of words, you have, demon!" Nestor shouted back, but Leon had already tuned out their bickering.

The Thunderbird flew in, her avian form almost glowing with power. She didn't land on her perch, but instead landed in front of Leon, shifting into her human form at the last second. When she touched down, she wore a huge smile on her face.

"Did you have fun killing those lizards?" she asked Leon, speaking to him in a motherly tone.

"I did," Leon replied, returning her smile. "It was most illuminating."

Over the next few minutes, Leon, correctly assuming that she hadn't been paying too much attention, regaled the Thunderbird with tales of his and his retinue's victories in the Scorched Fields, her smile

growing wider with every tale. Her expression turned more contemplative and a little intrigued when he mentioned the golden apple seeds that he'd looted from the black wyvern's lair.

"Those seeds..." the Thunderbird whispered, "you're taking care of them?"

Leon nodded. "My wife and contracted alchemist are seeing to them right now."

"Good," the Thunderbird replied, saying no more about them, though she continued to stare off at nothing in the distance for a few more seconds, a muted look of glee on her face. "They'll serve you well. Help you grow faster than you would normally."

"I'm surprised you're so interested in them," Leon replied. "I would've thought something like this would've been fairly small compared to what you would concern yourself with."

"Don't underestimate these apples, Leon," the Thunderbird cautioned. "They're quite powerful, and they'll even aid you past Apotheosis. Having access to your own supply is something I would've advised once you reached the tenth-tier, but now that you've gotten them yourself, it's nothing I have to worry about, I suppose. But no matter where you go, be sure to bring those apples and their seeds with you. They're a good resource to have even in the Nexus."

"Our Honored Ancestor is correct!" Nestor shouted from where he languished on his table. "They won't inspire such jealousy that others would go to war for them, but they're still quite valuable!"

"Then, thank you," Leon said, nodding to the Thunderbird. "I'll be sure to follow your advice."

The Thunderbird nodded imperiously, and Leon then moved onto what he *really* wanted to talk about.

"Ancestor," he said, his tone turning graver and more serious, "I'd like to talk about my draconic blood. Would that be too much of a problem? For you or me?"

"You've hardly held back in that regard before," the Thunderbird replied as she cocked an eyebrow in surprise. "Why ask now?"

"Just wondering," Leon replied. "I feel like that power is almost within reach, and I just want to know what I should expect. Will the Great Black Dragon be enraged? Will he try to screw with me again once I unlock his power?"

"Surely he will," the Thunderbird said. "But though you've inherited it from him, the power is *yours*. The blood is *yours*. As much as he may deny it, those are the facts. He can't take your own blood away from you."

Leon smiled. "Good. I'd like to say that I welcome his attempt, but in truth, I don't. I'd rather he just write me off and never bothered me again."

The Thunderbird turned her gaze out to the Mists of Chaos, in the di

Chapter 710: Investigating Disappearances I

"Ahh, it's good to be home," Marcus said, only a hint of a drunken slur in his voice despite having been drinking with Alcander for hours.

Leon had released them that afternoon after they returned to Occulara, and the two had immediately gone out instead of returning home. After more than a month away from real civilization, they needed to get out and party for a little while before they went back home. Now, however, the sun had set hours ago, and they'd made their way back to their housing complex.

They each lived in separate houses off a main courtyard shared by eight other attached houses. It was a fancy and upscale place to live, and as a result, had pretty good security. Nothing that Leon would consider that good, Marcus was sure, but the complex was secure by any objective measure.

Alcander didn't immediately respond; the woman he was bringing home was practically sucking his face off as Marcus fiddled with the lock on the door of the vestibule, which lead into the main courtyard.

The woman was strikingly beautiful—hardly surprising in Marcus' mind. Alcander was handsome and confident, and he could practically point to any woman in a club and take her home, if he wanted. She was fairly pale, indicating that she didn't work outdoors that often. Her hair was the exact opposite, though, being as black as night, and with eyes to match. She looked like she would've been a cold and aloof beauty, but almost as soon as Alcander introduced himself, she was all over him.

'She must be hungry for a good shafting...' Marcus had mused. He'd been left nearly alone in the club as Alcander chatted this girl up, but it had been a fairly unproductive evening. Marcus hadn't seen anyone he particularly wanted to take home, and decided to get a bit liquored up, instead.

Now, however, as he got the doors open and strode in, his two nearly-oblivious companions stumbling in after him, doing their level best not to disentangle themselves from each other as they did, he found his thoughts turning to the cute girl who lived next door. He'd found her quite attractive almost as soon as he'd seen her, but she'd steadily declined all of his invitations to come over or even to go out. Still, she remained friendly, even taking the initiative to strike up conversations with him when she saw him first.

Wondering if she was home, Marcus walked into the courtyard.

"You two good?" he asked, smiling when Alcander, instead of responding verbally, which would've required him to pry his lips off his date, merely waved his hand to get Marcus to go away. "All right," Marcus responded and returned to his house.

As far as he could tell, his cute neighbor *was* home, if the lights in her house were anything to go by, but he resisted the temptation to knock on her door and see if she wanted to hang out for a while, even if it was just out in the courtyard. He'd drank some incredibly expensive alcohol, stuff that was affecting him despite his fifth-tier strength, and he didn't want to embarrass himself.

So, with some reluctance, he walked past her door and into his own house.

It was a fairly comfortable, if somewhat spartan residence. No over-the-top decorations, but just enough furniture to be comfortable.

With a deep, satisfied sigh, Marcus collapsed onto the nearest sofa, the thought of heading upstairs to his bedroom not appealing when he could just sleep right here. His eyes closed and he felt his mind darkening, sleep gradually clouding his thoughts...

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“Mmmm,” Alcander hummed in annoyance as he fished his keys out of his pocket and started working on the physical locks on his house, the magical locks already having been disengaged just by brushing his hand against the doorknob.

The lady pressing herself against him and refusing to let his lips go—he couldn’t remember her name—moaned in frustration as Alcander tried and failed to insert his keys into the lock without taking his attention away from her. However, Alcander summoned the titanic willpower to pull away from her cherry-red lips and intoxicatingly sweet taste to glance down at the door and get his keys into the lock, then open the door.

Almost immediately, the girl grabbed him, spun him around, pressed herself back against him, and pushed him inside.

Alcander was all-too happy to be led around a little bit, and he started backing further into his home as the girl kicked the door shut behind them. He wrapped his hands around her tiny, almost inhumanly thin waist and pulled her further into his house.

She broke their kiss and moved her face downward, licking his neck.

Alcander was about to do likewise when he saw the sheet of paper attached to the back of his door, something that most certainly hadn’t been there before the wyvern hunt. He froze, recognizing the runes writ upon that paper that formed an enchantment designed to insulate a space from light and sound. And then he saw that such spells had been pasted all over the interior of his house,

But just as his heart rate spiked in panic, he felt a sharp pain in his neck, and he felt all of his power uncontrollably stream out of him. He lost all strength and went limp, unable to do anything more than whimper in pain and shock. He would’ve hit the ground if the pale woman he’d brought home didn’t wrap her arms around him and hold him up so that she could continue to drain his body of magic power.

He realized just what she was, now: a vampire. Her appearance hadn’t been extreme enough to trigger his alarm, but now that he knew, it was almost painfully obvious what she was.

Terror lanced through his mind with the thought that he was mere seconds away from death, but after a moment, another thought raced through him. He needed backup, he needed Marcus. His friend might be enough to save him, and if they could get to Leon, safety was guaranteed.

Alcander whimpered again, his body devoid of strength, his arms hanging limply by his side.

The woman draining his body of mana pulled back for a moment and looked him in the eye, her black irises sparkling red.

“Now, now,” she whispered seductively. “You’re not going to die, so don’t go doing something stupid, stud. If I have to, I’ll make sure there are no witnesses...”

Alcander glared at her as hatefully as he could, but she just frowned and let him fall to the floor and crumple like a wet rag.

“Where is she?” the woman then said in frustration, glancing back at the door. “This shouldn’t take so long!”

Alcander didn't know what she was talking about, but summoning every ounce of grit he had, he clenched his jaw, called upon any and all sparks of power that remained in his body, and snapped his fingers. A burst of flame erupted from his hand, startling the vampire. Alcander grinned and tried to crawl backward, but his limbs were as heavy as lead.

"Don't..." he rasped, "come... any... closer..."

He could feel darkness pressing in on the edges of his vision and knew that he had mere moments left to do something, anything, that might attract attention to what was going on in his home before he passed out and was left at the mercy of his assailant.

The vampire just stared at him, pity in her eyes as if she were staring at a beaten stray dog. She didn't think he was a threat, but in the few seconds she allowed him, his soul realm released a few more sparks of power, rejuvenating him just enough to call on his power one more time.

He took a deep breath, banishing the darkness that threatened to take him, and let loose with an even bigger gout of flame than before.

The vampire didn't move, but he didn't care. She was probably stronger than him, anyway, if he hadn't been able to sense her power at all. He wasn't trying to hurt her. Instead, his aim was behind her.

She seemed to realize her mistake as his fire slid right past her, but she wasn't a light or lightning mage and couldn't move quickly enough to stop him. His fire hit the spell on the inside of his door, not quite powerful enough to break through, but more than enough to destroy the spell attached there.

"You!" the vampire shouted in anger, but she cut herself off from saying any more. Alcander grinned, his body falling limp once again with the expenditure of magic power, and she advanced.

The last thing Alcander saw before everything went dark was her foot smashing into the side of his head.

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Marcus had barely started to doze before his brief reverie was interrupted.

He felt a subdued pulse of magic power, a tiny disturbance in the ambient magic power that he thought he recognized as Alcander's fire magic...

Marcus sprang to his feet, but nearly fell over again as his fatigue and drink-addled mind struggled to keep up and maintain his balance. However, as he righted himself, he quickly moved to his door and looked out a window just adjacent to it, his panic cutting through his confusion and helping his mind to speed up to process what he just felt. He *thought* he felt Alcander's magic, but it was dampened and distant, like someone screaming into a pillow in another room. Still, Marcus' body moved before his mind could just write it off as nothing, his instinct to make sure his friend was all right taking over.

The courtyard was empty; everything seemed fine. There was no fire, and the lights in Alcander's house were dark. As far as he could tell, there wasn't a problem in his friend's house...

Except that the lights were off. Marcus furrowed his brow, knowing that Alcander wasn't one to have sex in the dark; he liked to keep the lights on even though he was more than powerful enough to see in the dark.

Marcus slowly opened his door while calling upon his magic power. He felt his light magic fill his body, and he prepared to summon his armor and weapons, just in case.

At the same time, he noticed his cute neighbor's door opening, and her head poking out, also looking to Alcander's door. She glanced at him, her long brown hair swaying, her bright blue eyes wide with anxiety.

"Marcus!" she whispered. "What's going on!"

"Kassia? You felt that, too?" Marcus whispered back as he glanced around at the other houses, wondering if anyone else had sensed anything. He was disappointed to see it was just the two of them.

"Yeah!" she replied. "Felt like some kind of magic being cast in Alcander's place!"

Marcus' heart dropped. "Stay inside!" he sternly whispered as he started moving across the courtyard, not wanting his third-tier neighbor to be in any danger. "Find help if I don't come out in a few minutes!" he added, watching as Kassia's expression fell even further and she ducked back inside, almost slamming her door shut.

He rapidly moved to Alcander's door, and when he tested the doorknob, he found that it was mercifully unlocked. With tremendous trepidation, he took a deep breath, and then slammed himself through the door, his eyes wide and searching.

He immediately saw Alcander lying on the ground, his date standing above him. Alcander seemed unconscious, but Marcus saw that he was bleeding from his throat.

Anger immediately took him, and he reached out with his own power at the pale woman above his friend. Searing light erupted from his fingers, but the aura-less woman turned and waved her hand, conjuring a small wave of dark red fire that should've been impossible for someone with her apparent lack of aura and magic power, but Marcus' light hit the fire and dissipated within.

And then Marcus felt pain in his neck, and his body went weak. With some surprise, he realized someone had attached themselves to his neck and was sucking out his mana... and he recognized her. Kassia had attached herself to his neck and was draining him of power, a few wisps of darkness still wrapped around her form that didn't match her aura at all. She was a vampire, he futilely realized as he collapsed.

Kassia then stood above him, grinning through blood-stained teeth, her hands smoking with dark power. She then crouched down and reached for him, covering his eyes with her smoking hand, and Marcus saw no more, the last thought in his head the vain hope that Leon could find them before they were killed, and the burning fury that his boss would bring upon these two vampires when they were found.

Marcus dearly hoped that he would live to see it.

—

Fury burned through Leon as he stood in the courtyard of Alcander and Marcus' housing complex, a small team of Heaven's Eye security forces going through their homes, looking for any clues at all as to where his retainers had gone. Joining them were Alix, Gaius, Anshu, and Anna, with Helen and Elise still busy looking for land for the golden apple orchard. Valeria and Maia, meanwhile, waited with him.

Talal, however, had chosen to speak with the heads of the security teams.

After being informed of his retainers' disappearance, Leon had assembled his retinue and immediately made his way to Marcus and Alcander's housing complex. Alix and Gaius had already checked the place on Valeria's instruction, as well as the places that the two most frequented, and found nothing. Even then, they searched around for several more hours before finally returning to Leon's villa and informing him of their disappearances.

This could all just be an overreaction, Leon knew, his retainers might still be in Occulara somewhere, drunk out of their mind or something like that, but he didn't think so. Marcus and Alcander were fairly hard partiers, but they'd always been relatively responsible. Not once had they ever missed a training session, not once had they ever been late or shirked a duty that Leon required of them. Besides, a couple days had passed since they'd returned to Occulara, so they should've gotten all of their hard partying done by now.

Leon, glaring at anyone who came too close to him, could feel it in his bones: someone had done something untoward to his people, and he would burn them alive when he found them. Fire simmered just below his skin, and he felt like the heat of his wrath was radiating out even farther than his chaotic aura. His hands shook with his need to find something to cathartically break, his frustration and current helplessness only serving to infuriate him even more.

He didn't feel in the best state of minds for searching for clues, which was why he also got in touch with Heaven's Eye. Occulara technically fell under the jurisdiction of the Ilian Empire, but Heaven's Eye ran the city like its own independent city-state, so as a Hand of the Director—at least, for the next few weeks—Leon was easily able to get a local security team out here to find his missing people.

Talal had taken over being the go-between for Leon and the team, and after a couple hours, the Samarid and the search team leader finally came over to let Leon know what they'd found.

"I think we've found just about everything that we can, Lord Hand," the team leader said, and Leon was so out of his mind with anger that he didn't even bother to correct the man's use of a title.

"Anything noteworthy?" Leon growled.

"Nothing much," the man replied. "No signs that things were packed, so the disappearance seems... unintentional, or at least, unplanned. We found no signs of violence, and none of the neighbors we spoke to reported anything suspicious."

Leon stole a quick look around, noting that a couple of the neighbors were out watching the investigation. A couple more were watching from their front windows. Most, however, didn't seem to be home.

Leon glanced at Talal. "Where were they last seen?"

"As far as I know," the Samarid replied, "the last place they can be definitively placed is at the street crossing where they parted ways with Alix and Gaius following your release upon our return to the city two days ago. We still need to trace their last steps, I'm sure they were out doing things in public before this."

Leon nodded in agreement. He wouldn't put it past his retainers to have gone out to party as soon as they returned.

"Then... if they were kidnapped or..." Leon paused, not wanting to admit the possibility that his people were dead. They'd been gone for as long as two days, and anything could've happened in that time. Leon finished his thought, "... then it seems likely they weren't attacked at home."

"That's my working theory right now," the team leader responded, momentarily glancing off to his right where one of his people was waving him over. "I'm intending on sending a few people out to their usual haunts by the end of the day, interview anyone who might've seen your people. Don't worry, Lord Hand, we'll find them." With that, the team leader turned around and walked toward his waiting subordinate.

Leon blinked, the title only working its way into his distracted head after the team leader had stepped away. "... Just 'Leon'," he whispered, though if the team leader heard him, he didn't show it.

Feeling just a little calmer, he stood up, and just as he did, he saw Alix ducking out of Alcander's house, look around for a moment, and then wave him over, too. She appeared a little anxious, so Leon hurried over.

"What is it?" he demanded.

"I... I'm not sure," Alix said. "Just something that I noticed and I don't know if it's relevant."

"Let me know anyway," Leon insisted.

Alix took a deep breath, then led Leon just inside, and then almost shut the door. Leon almost thought that she wanted some privacy until she pointed to a strange-looking light patch on the backside of the thick wooden door.

"This wasn't here the last time I was here."

"When was that?" Leon asked.

"Maybe a week before we left for the wyvern hunt. I don't know what this is, and I never heard Alcander talking about any repairs he had to do to his house."

"Is that something he'd mention?"

"Well, he tends to share everything else, up to and including how the women he manages to bring home like to fuck, so I'd assume that he'd complain some about having to do some work on his door."

Leon grimaced slightly, believing Alix completely; Alcander *did* tend to overshare, and if he had trouble with anything in his house, Leon believed he would've bitched about it at least a little bit.

Leon reached out to brush his fingers against the light spot on the door. It felt strange, almost a little wet, and yet Leon felt in his fingertip just a tiny hint of fire magic...

His eyes narrowed and he focused his magic senses on the door. Immediately, he found faint signs that the door had been struck with fire magic, and he guessed the light spot was just a result of a hasty fix.

'Possibly done while drunk...' Leon thought to himself, tempering his expectations.

However, it was evidence that magic had been cast in Alcander's house, and fairly recently. His eyes narrowed further, and he expanded the scope of his magic senses to the entire house, looking for even the tiniest residual traces of disturbances in the ambient magic.

He didn't expect to find anything in the air itself, given just how magically dense the air around the Central Empires was and how quickly any changes vanished into their surroundings, but he hoped if there were any other signs of fire magic being cast in the house, then he'd be able to pick up on it emanating off whatever the fire had hit.

What he hadn't been expecting was to pick up on a slight trace of strange fire magic, a familiar tinge to it that had his heart skipping a beat.

'Demonic magic!'