

Storm King 711

Chapter 711: Investigating Disappearances II

Demon magic... It was faint, but Leon could sense it.

[Xaphan...] Leon whispered into his soul realm. [Do you sense this, too?]

He felt his demonic partner's magic senses pulse out from his body, and a moment later, Xaphan replied, [Yes. It's faint, but an adherent of a demon has been here.]

[Can you tell which demon? Was it Amon?]

[I can't tell with that kind of accuracy, this power has decayed for too long. What's more, I can sense the power of *two* demons...]

Leon frowned, only able to sense the one. [Well, no matter who they are, we've got a problem...]

Without wasting another moment, Leon called his retinue together with the leader of the Heaven's Eye security team and told them of what he'd found.

"Fucking demons!" Alix vehemently spat. "Oh, umm, no offense, Xaphan, if you can hear me..."

[Fucking humans...] Xaphan whispered.

"If there are vampires active in the city," the security team leader said, "then we have to inform Heaven's Eye and the Empire. Blood sacrifices cannot be allowed under any circumstances."

Leon looked up to the team leader. "I'll do that personally."

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Leon stared at the Director, his golden eyes hard and stern.

The Director sat behind his desk, his hands folded in front of his shadowed face, quietly thinking.

Eventually, the Director said, "You have my support. Find these vermin and root them out completely. Demonic contracts are acceptable in general, but such attacks like these are beyond what is acceptable. As one of my Hands, I empower you to do whatever is necessary to burn this infestation out of my city."

Leon smiled. "It shouldn't take too long..."

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"'Whatever is necessary'?" Anna quoted as Leon led her and the rest of his retinue out of the Hexagon. "He really said that?"

"He did," Leon confirmed. To the rest of his retinue, he said, "We're heading to the city's central archives. I want to look into everything that has to do with demons and vampires in this city!"

"That might be a lot, boss!" Alix replied. "Given how accepting the people down here are of such things, I'm sure there are potentially thousands of people with demonic contracts, and each of them might have dozens or hundreds of records!"

“We’ll get some help, and we’ll narrow things down!” Gaius energetically responded. “We have to find our people!”

“Agreed!” Leon almost shouted, and he led his people to Occulara’s central records building, confident with the Director’s backing.

He was honestly a little surprised at the Director’s willingness to give him free reign to find Marcus and Alcander and ruin those who’d taken them, but the cynic in him claimed that the Director was just trying to curry some favor now that Leon had learned that the Director knew his identity and had some kind of plans that involved him.

But right now, he didn’t care. He just wanted to find these vampires or demon worshippers or whoever they were and set them aflame.

Perhaps it was because of this single-minded determination that he didn’t notice Anna’s mildly conflicted expression just behind him, or the murderous glint in *her* eyes, as well.

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As dozens of scribes and bureaucrats brought them hundreds and thousands of papers, Leon shouted orders not only to them, but to his retainers and the couple dozen paper-pushers that he’d enlisted for help in this investigation.

“Focus first on new arrivals in the city! If I were planning an attack on someone connected to a Hand of the Director, then I’d want outside muscle, not people who live in the city! Following that, look into anyone close to my people! Business partners, friends, neighbors, see if any of them have any known connections to demonic magic!”

It was a place to start, but Leon was gratified to see his orders being carried out. The Director, up to this point, had rarely sent him on any jobs that required interacting much with Heaven’s Eye on this scale, so he wasn’t used to seeing his status as a Hand being given quite so much weight. However, seeing not a single person question his order, and instead just jumping right into action to carry out his will, put a proud grin on his face.

An hour passed as his people searched through the records and collated data, but just as Leon resigned himself to waiting, Anna approached him, a frown on her face.

“What is it?” Leon growled, noticing that she came to him with empty hands.

“Mind if we speak in private?” Anna asked, casting a quick glance around the room. She didn’t, however, direct that glance at any of Leon’s other retainers.

“... Sure,” Leon said, getting to his feet and leading Anna to an office just off the conference room that was the locus of his look into the records.

Once there, and with the door shut and privacy wards engaged, Leon sat down with Anna just across from him, looking more than a little nervous. Leon didn’t push her, recognizing that she was wrestling with something in her own mind, though he did have to fight not to grow at least a little suspicious given the timing of her strange behavior.

"There... are things you have to know..." Anna eventually said. "I just... don't know how to explain them..."

Leon nodded, replying, "Is this about your parents?"

Anna froze a moment, then slowly nodded. "Yes. No. Yes, but tangentially, I guess."

Leon took a deep breath and waited further as Anna took another pause. He remembered her and Helen telling him that their parents had been killed by vampires, but he wasn't aware of any real particulars. Neither woman spoke much about the topic, something that Leon could readily empathize with, and he never pressed.

"Leon..." Anna finally said, "vampires... are within Heaven's Eye."

Leon blinked. "Vampires?" he asked. "Not just demon contractors, but full-blown vampires?"

Anna nodded again. "I told you that my mother worked for Heaven's eye, right?"

"You did."

"Well, I learned something about her death from her best friend..."

"Who is this friend?" Leon asked.

"The Sacred Golden Empire's current ambassador to the Ilian Empire," Anna responded, and Leon briefly remembered the woman, having met her briefly during his trip through Ilion ten years ago. His meeting with Anastasios had rather overshadowed all other meetings that he'd had that day, but he still remembered the ambassador quite well, as well as the heated conversation she'd had with Anna and Helen.

"What did she tell you?" Leon asked, his tone deepening and growing more menacing.

"That the vampires who killed my parents work for Heaven's Eye, too."

There was a loud knock at the door, but Leon kept his attention fixed squarely on Anna.

"Are you sure about this information?"

"I trust the ambassador with my life."

Leon nodded. "And I trust you."

Anna looked down for a moment, appeared to blink rapidly, and then looked back up to meet Leon's gaze. "Thank you. That means a lot."

"Did you get any more information that can be used?"

Leon didn't even entertain the possibility of not going after the killers of Anna's parents, especially not if they were now acting against him and his people.

"Just that they were working in the city of my birth around the same time as my parents' deaths, though whether that came before or after, I'm not sure."

There was another knock at the door, but softer this time, and Leon's eyes finally flickered over in the door's direction.

"Let's take care of this; maybe it's related. I think you're aware that I have my own issues with vampires?"

"Very aware..."

"Then let's take care of this, and then see if we can launch a bigger investigation into Heaven's Eye. I think the Director would be more than willing to indulge any request I can think of to keep me around, to be honest..."

"And are you planning on sticking around? I got the impression from that meeting you had with the Director that you were thinking of leaving Heaven's Eye..."

"I was, and still am. But no decisions have been made. That there're vampires infecting the guild even strengthens both sides, to leave or to stay..." Leon rose from his seat, and Anna followed suit. "We'll get these bastards. Burn them all alive."

Anna finally cracked a shallow smile. "Burn them all... I think I can live with that."

Leon smiled in turn, and finally opened the door. On the other side, he found himself looking at Gaius and Talal, both looking mildly impatient.

"Leon!" Gaius exclaimed. "We found something promising!"

"Show me!" Leon ordered, and Gaius and Talal led him and Anna over to the table where a Heaven's Eye scribe was arranging several papers.

"Over here is a report from Heaven's Eye in Argos," Gaius explained as he directed Leon's attention to a certain stack of papers. "A man was arrested, tried, and executed for the crime of making blood sacrifices to a shadow demon. This was five years ago."

Talal then took over the explanation, drawing Leon's attention over to another set of papers. "And over here is a report on Marcus and Alcander's neighbors. A woman named Kassia who lives directly next to Marcus happens to be the sister of that demon worshipper."

"That sounds like a lead," Leon growled, his simmering anger threatening to boil over now that he had a potential outlet, but he took a momentary pause. "The demonic power I found in Alcander's place was fire, though. I'm guessing Amon's, but neither I nor Xaphan can say for certain. I didn't sense any trace of darkness magic, though, whether human or demon."

"It's all we have, so far," Gaius said with a shrug.

Leon frowned, nodded, and then waved over one of the representatives of the local Heaven's Eye security forces. To him, he ordered, "Bring this woman in. We need to speak with her."

—

Leon glared at Kassia's door, his retinue just behind him and three Heaven's Eye security teams behind them. The sun was low in the sky, now, and a couple hours had passed since identifying Kassia as a

person of interest. Despite Leon's orders to bring her in, however, she remained at large, with the security teams unable to find her at her home or at her recorded place of employment.

It was with some mixed feelings that Leon learned she was missing, too. On the one hand, he couldn't deny the possibility that whatever had happened to his retainers had also happened to her, and that her brother being a known demon worshipper didn't necessarily mean she was one, too. On the other hand, it made him extremely suspicious that she couldn't be found.

Unfortunately, the security teams lacked the authority to simply knock her door down and search her residence, but Leon, as a Hand of the Director and specifically empowered by the Director to conduct this investigation, wasn't so restricted.

Standing before Kassia's door, Leon reached out with his magic power. He found that the defensive wards protecting Kassia's home were robust, relative to the houses around hers—including, he noted, wards against magic senses—but not for him. His power and knowledge of enchanting had all of her wards worth noting shattering after he struck the roof of the building with a single lightning strike, and his magic power enclosed around her door.

With the energy of a man who'd found even this small outlet for his wrath, Leon telekinetically tore Kassia's door right out of its frame and stormed inside, the rest of his people following suit.

He paused in the atrium, letting the security teams flood inside, shouting and demanding that anyone inside show themselves. But Leon could already sense that the building was empty. All of Kassia's wards were in ruins, and his magic senses flooded the place, revealing to him a home that was almost devoid of meaningful furnishings. A bed was still around, as were a few chairs and tables, but there were no decorations, no food in the kitchen, and no clothes in the closets. It looked almost like a house that was move-in ready rather than a house that was currently occupied.

"She's gone," Leon furiously growled to his retinue.

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"If I had to guess," said one of the highest ranking Heaven's Eye security officers that Leon had taken command of, "I'd say that our suspect fled sometime thirty-six to forty-eight hours ago. With the warding placed upon the house and her reported power, the ambient magic power indicates that no one had been in there for at least a day."

Leon nodded as he glanced around at the rest of his retinue and the leaders of his security teams and investigators. More than half a day had passed since he'd been informed of his retainers' disappearances, and his wrath was back to a low simmer rather than explosive heat. After investigating Kassia's house and locking it down in case she returned, Leon and most of his people made their way to Heaven's Eye's central archives.

"Find her," Leon growled. "Any known acquaintances, any additional properties she may have, *anything* at all. That she's missing too can't be a coincidence."

One of the other security team leaders immediately responded, "I have my team already chasing down her work colleagues and other professional acquaintances. We've gotten a short list of some of her personal friends, as well as some of her favorite haunts."

A third security team leader added, "She has no family to speak of, but she apparently dated a member of Heaven's Eye a couple years ago. I've called him in for an interview."

Leon nodded. "Anything suspicious about him?"

"Nothing that I can see," the third team leader replied. "Fairly squeaky-clean. Kind of plain and boring, if you ask me, but what interests me is that he had some access to our records department."

Leon's eyes narrowed and he briefly glanced at those investigators representing Heaven's Eye's records bureaucrats, none of whom met his gaze.

The third team leader continued, "He was too low-rank to have access to any particularly sensitive records, but he could've certainly given her fake IDs."

"Or," Gaius pointed out, "she could've used his credentials to get IDs of her own made."

"If she *does* have alternate identities," Talal added, "then she can do quite a bit to hide from us. Purchase property using those fake IDs, live in plain sight. Even have completely alternate lives if she wanted."

"No fake ID can be that perfect," Alix argued. "Heaven's Eye has scarily comprehensive records on pretty much everyone who lives in this city. Those can't just be faked, can they?"

"No," said one of the records investigators. "There would be some signs, and the file would likely be pretty sparse, depending on how often that particular ID is used. There are some filters we can use following the interview with the ex-boyfriend."

"Where are her favorite haunts?" Leon asked the second security team leader, drawing a few looks of surprise.

"We're still getting some lists," the team leader said, not fazed in the slightest by Leon's question, "but already we know that Kassia seemed to enjoy fishing and playing various sports. She was even a regular at a cardio-focused gym near her residence and seemed to prefer late-night exercise."

"That makes a degree of sense," Leon murmured.

"She's only third-tier," Gaius said, following Leon's train of thought without him having to explain too much, "but if she prefers to go out at night, then it might strengthen the idea that she's a contractor with a shadow demon."

"Doesn't rule out fire, though," Anna pointed out.

"No, it doesn't," Leon said. "She could be either, but right now, I'm more in agreement with Gaius. She might be a shadow demon contractor. So we should concentrate on recent IDs with little information, and possibly properties or other connections to places with easy access to escape routes that a mage with darkness magic might be able to exploit."

"What could distinguish such a place from anywhere else?" the youngest of the team leaders asked the room.

“Wide, open spaces,” Leon answered. “Places that might be dark even during the day. Anywhere with plentiful shadows and not many people.”

“We’ll get right on it,” one of the records investigators replied.

There wasn’t much left for them to say, so Leon let everyone return to hunting down any leads that they could possibly find. He mostly waited for information to come in, watching as the leaders of the various teams that he’d pressed into this investigation slowly narrowed the search down.

But night eventually came, and though he didn’t want to stop just yet, Leon recognized that not many leads would be coming in while most of the security teams rested. Even the bureaucrats had to have some time for shut-eye, so late in the evening, Leon finally left the central archives building and brought his retinue back to his villa. No one else was going to disappear on his watch.

He was a little surprised to find that the four retainers he still had with him—Anna, Anshu, Gaius, and Alix—didn’t once argue with his decision to have them live with him until all of this was over. He made sure they were settled in as comfortably as he could on such short notice, though.

Elise and Helen beat him home. They hadn’t been able to find a suitable place for the golden apples yet, but that wasn’t something that was even on his mind right now. The land was out there, he wasn’t even slightly worried about that. The only thing on his mind was finding his missing people and showing those who’d taken them just how foolish of a decision they’d made was.

It was a fitful night; Leon didn’t once try to sleep, despite Elise and Maia’s attempts to bring him to bed, and spent the entire night worried about Marcus and Alcander, hoping that when he found them, they wouldn’t be cold corpses drained of blood from some twisted demonic ritual.

Chapter 712: Investigating Disappearances III

“I think we have something,” one of the investigators informed Leon about an hour after he and his retinue arrived at the central archives.

“What is it?” Leon asked without hesitation, his heartrate already rising in anticipation of finally finding his missing retainers.

The investigator gestured toward a nearby map of Occulara.

“Here, here, and here,” he said, marking three different locations along the Scamander River. “And here, here, and here,” he continued, marking there more locations on the southern edge of the city, deeper in the suburbs and close to the fields south of the great urban sprawl along the Scamander.

“Why these?” Gaius asked from behind Leon.

“We managed to trace several possible IDs that Kassia might’ve used to purchase property,” the investigator replied. “These are all properties registered to the owners of these IDs. The three in the north along the river are within the warehouse district and provide ready access to escape via the river. Of the three remaining, two are far enough south that escape could be easy by fleeing into the fields. The last one is right alongside a private park, also effecting easy escape.”

“Any other ways to narrow this down?” Gaius asked.

“None that we can do from here,” the investigator replied as he turned his attention back to Leon. “With your permission, Lord Hand, we can send out teams to scout these areas and see if they’re currently inhabited.”

“Just ‘Leon’,” Leon corrected. “And don’t head out just yet, all of these locations I can see from here...”

He’d already projected his magic senses once the investigator had started pointing out the locations, though it took him several long minutes to pinpoint the exact buildings that had been identified. The three in the south were easier given the lesser density of buildings, so those he found first despite being further away.

Unfortunately, in the Ilian Empire, nearly every building had wards against magic senses, and these buildings were no exception, so Leon was unable to directly peer inside. However, he was able to see the area around the buildings and noted that all three seemed to be inhabited if the relatively well-kept lawns and gardens were anything to go by. That, of course, didn’t rule out the possibility that Kassia was staying within, but nothing immediately called out to him that she was at of them, either.

Turning his attention to the three riverside buildings, he immediately found them a little more promising. Firstly, they were in a district of the city that wasn’t residential, so when night fell, it would be devoid of people. Furthermore, two of the buildings were warehouses that didn’t appear to be in active use as there weren’t any people around them moving cargo, and the river dock each possessed was empty. The last one was quite busy, however, and had a large river barge docked that was loading cargo.

“If I have to guess,” Leon said, pointing to the two empty-seeming warehouses, “I’d focus on these two. However, the other warehouse is currently loading a barge, and I want that thing stopped from leaving immediately, just in case my people were surreptitiously loaded aboard. Do we have the manpower to secure and search all three at once?”

“It’ll stretch us a bit thin, but we can do that,” the investigator replied.

“Send most of your manpower to the occupied warehouse. I’ll split my retinue between the other two,” Leon ordered. “Send word to other local security teams to lock down the surrounding streets and send me reinforcements.”

“What about the three in the south?” Gaius asked.

“If we don’t find any of the people we’re looking for at these locations,” Leon replied, “then we’ll deal with those buildings. As it is, I think the warehouses are more promising, so let’s concentrate on those first.”

“Understood,” Gaius and the investigator said in unison.

Both then split off to relay Leon’s orders to everyone else, and within a quarter hour, everyone was trooping out of the central archives.

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Leon glared at the warehouse just down the street. He stood hidden in an alleyway with Alix, Gaius, Anzu, waiting for the rest of the local security personnel to finish locking the surroundings down. Half a

dozen teams of Heaven's Eye security had been called in to each of the two warehouses his retinue were going to raid, all led by either a fifth or sixth-tier mage.

The rest of his retinue, led by Valeria, were preparing to storm the other deserted warehouse. Maia was with them since Leon didn't want both eighth-tier mages on their side to be storming the same warehouse, just in case—and besides, if anything went horribly wrong, he knew that he always had Xaphan to fall back on. His demonic partner was in his soul realm, calmly watching everything and prepared to jump out if there were any signs of vampires loyal to Amon in the area.

As he waited, he kept his attention squarely focused on the warehouse, trying to see if anything at all that could be seen. The only windows he could see were small and high up, so they were just about useless. There were two doors—a large one in front for moving goods, and a smaller one on the side of the building for people—aside from the main doors on the river, all of which were closed. The warehouse had an attached concrete yard that doubled its footprint, which was surrounded by a fifteen-foot-high concrete wall. The wall wasn't enchanted, only the building was, and even then, aside from the wards against magic senses, there wasn't much within the warehouse that Leon felt could stand up against him. If he wanted, he could channel his lightning magic and get through the warehouse walls like they were made of wet paper.

As he watched the warehouse, he watched Valeria leading the rest of his retinue to get set up around a nearly identical warehouse about half a mile away. Like his group, they were waiting nearby as a number of security teams rushed about blocking adjacent streets.

As he waited, a sixth-tier security officer ran into the alley from the far side.

"We're set up!" he declared as soon as he reached Leon.

Leon nodded in response and turned to his retainers. "You three ready?"

"Ready," Gaius declared.

"Same here," Alix responded.

Anzu chirped and flexed his wings; he was ready.

"Good," Leon said. "Then we're going in." To the security officers, he said, "If anything comes out of there, take them into custody, but don't hesitate to use force if necessary."

"We'll, uh, do that, then," one of the officers replied a little awkwardly.

Without further ado, Leon burst out of the alley and ran for the warehouse, his armor summoned and his body inundated with lightning. In less than a second, he hit the warehouse's bigger doors, breaking them right off their rusty hinges. They hit the ground with a tremendous crash, revealing to his eyes exactly what was behind them.

And Leon saw an empty warehouse. No missing retainers, no hordes of vampires just waiting to use their demonic magics upon him and his, not even a stray eddy of demonic power in the air. No goods, not even empty shelves, either.

But Leon wasn't deterred. "Fan out!" he ordered as his retainers followed him in. Gaius went left and Alix right while Anzu backed Leon up directly. There were a few small offices just off the main floor, and Gaius burst in, his sword drawn and armor gleaming.

A moment later, he poked his head back out and shouted, "Nothing but dust!"

"No one's been here in a long time!" Alix responded as she kicked at the dust that caked the floor.

Leon frowned behind his helmet, his heart sinking. "Then we're at the wrong place..." he muttered.

As if on cue, he heard a distant explosion, and he turned his attention back to the rest of his retainers at the other seemingly-abandoned warehouse. He saw that they'd breached the place at almost the same time, but instead of finding nothing, the door they'd tried to breach had instead exploded in their faces. Anshu and Anna had been knocked to the ground while the rest of his people were suddenly under a great deal of fire—literal fire that poured from the warehouse as if one of Jormun's Flame Lances were within.

"We need to move!" Leon shouted, directing his people back outside. "The others hit the right place!"

Without a word, Alix, Gaius, and Anzu sprinted after Leon.

"Fly!" Leon ordered, and in a moment, both of his human retainers donned their flight gear and took off, Anzu just in front of them. Leon only took a moment to channel his darkness magic and order his security teams to move toward the other warehouse, and then he was rising into the air right after his retainers.

As he rose into the air, he blazed with lightning and accelerated hard. He could see his retainers in the distance answering the fire they received with their own magic, and one of Maia's water dragons even charged right into the door. Not a single spark of flame got past it into the warehouse yard.

Valeria and Helen then rushed forward and grabbed Anshu and Anna, helping them back to their feet. Leon was happy to see that his people were fine, if a little dazed.

Maia's water dragon continued to rampage within the warehouse, while Leon and his group bolted across the sky, the laws against flight utterly ignored.

Half a mile, at their power, was quickly crossed. Leon hit the yard like a lightning bolt, the concrete beneath his feet shattering and burning black from a few stray arcs of lightning that erupted from his legs once his feet contacted the concrete. Anzu, Alix, and Gaius made much more graceful landings a couple seconds later.

Now that he was closer, Leon could feel strong currents of demonic magic from within the warehouse, indicating at least a handful of vampires.

[Can you feel it, demon?] Leon asked Xaphan.

[Feels like Amon, along with at least one other demon of a different element,] Xaphan responded.

"Heads up!" Leon shouted, Valeria and her group falling in without question now that he was here. He informed them of what he and Xaphan could sense, and then started moving on the obliterated warehouse door.

Leon led the way, Maia just behind him. Her water dragon had ripped the place apart, but he treated the situation as if there were still many hostiles active within.

However, as his retinue spilled into the wrecked warehouse, broken boxes and various wares spilling out onto the ground, no magic was fired at them.

[In the back,] Maia whispered to the retinue, pointing to the offices on the far side of the warehouse. [I've found locked three vampires within.]

"Anshu, Anna, Helen, Gaius, Alix!" Leon shouted. "Secure the rest of the warehouse!"

Those five spread out among the stored wares as Leon, Valeria, Maia, and Anzu moved on to the offices, which Maia's water dragon had completely surrounded.

"Let us in," Leon said to Maia, and the water dragon dutifully contorted itself until the office door was accessible. However, no sooner did the water dragon do so than a shadow came peeling out and darted across the floor.

It moved with extreme speed, but to Leon's eyes, it may as well have been at the speed of a relaxed stroll. With a flash of lightning and boom of thunder that shook the warehouse down to its foundations, he intercepted the shadow and punched into the shadow. He felt the dark barrier resist, but lightning erupted from him and shattered it effortlessly. His hand continued on until he felt it come into contact with something: a human, as far as he could tell.

His fingers enclosed around this person's arm, and with a wrathful yank, he ripped the mage right out of their shadow, revealing them to be a young woman matching Kassia's description, her body radiating demonic power, inky black darkness rising from her form like smoke. She wore one of the most terrified expressions that Leon had ever seen on a person. But fury poured from Leon, and before the woman could even scream, he slammed her back down into the concrete floor as her shadow dispersed, cracks spiderwebbing from her point of impact.

She groaned, raised her hand, and tried to get up, but Leon just stomped her arm back down to the concrete, snapping bones in her forearm. He followed that up with gauntleted strike right across the woman's chin, and she fell back to the ground, unconscious.

At the same time, a blast of fire erupted from the office door, but Valeria simply raised an icy shield, and as soon as the fire dissipated, the shield shattered into countless razor sharp shards of ice that were flung with terrific force back into the office, hitting the wall only a few feet behind the doorway. No more fire followed.

Silence descended upon the warehouse for a moment, but Leon then charged into the office, expecting more hostile magic.

Instead, he was greeted with the sight of a ruined office room, Valeria's ice having torn everything around the door to pieces, including a rather pale woman dead on the ground just to the right of the door where she'd been trying to get some cover, Valeria's ice having cut her nearly to bloody ribbons.

Further into the offices to the right of the door, however, Leon finally saw who he was looking for: Marcus and Alcander, both chained to the floor, covered in blood, bruises, and dirt, and neither conscious.

Leon rushed over and called upon the power of his tau pearl, feeling its light rush through his armor and to his fallen retainers as they laid on the ground.

“Get these chains off!” Leon shouted, and Maia immediately severed those covering Alcander with a water blade. Anzu tore into the other, his sixth-tier claws making quick work of the cheap, only lightly-enchanted iron.

As the tau pearl healed up his people, Leon realized that while their more superficial injuries were healing quickly, his retainers had been rather systematically tortured, and there was a *lot* to fix. Their bones were broken in more than a hundred places, nearly all of their organs were bruised and battered, and they both showed signs of hasty healing that Leon guessed was just designed to keep them alive for a little while longer.

Even with the tau pearl, Leon didn’t think they were going to wake up any time soon.

“Building secure!” Gaius shouted from outside the offices, and Leon sighed as his anger left him.

“Let’s get them out of here,” he said.

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Several hours after the raid on the warehouse, Leon and his retinue found themselves in a Heaven’s Eye hospital with Marcus and Alcander being seen to by the guild’s best healers. Leon, Valeria, and Maia were in a small office meeting with the leaders of his investigators and security teams, but he’d stationed the rest of his retinue in Marcus and Alcander’s room, just in case any of the vampires returned.

And Leon *knew* that there were others still out there, for none of the vampires they’d dealt with in the warehouse were even remotely powerful enough to take on his retainers in a straight fight—or, as far as he was concerned, keep them imprisoned. They had to have some kind of support from other, more highly-placed demon worshippers.

“... and it seems like while they’re still unconscious, they’re not in any serious physical danger anymore,” a healer explained to Leon. “Whatever healing powers you used on them were thorough.”

Leon nodded in acknowledgement. “How much longer until they wake up?”

“We can’t say for certain,” the healer replied. “However, I’d estimate they could wake up anytime in the next couple of days. It seems like they fell unconscious from physical trauma, and it’ll take some hours before their bodies realize that they’re no longer injured and can stop trying to save themselves.”

“Thank you.”

The healer had nothing else to relay, so he quickly hurried out of the room.

“Now,” Leon said as he turned his attention to his investigators and team leaders, his voice tinged with still-simmering wrath, “what did we find in there?”

“The woman you took alive,” one of the team leaders immediately said, “has been confirmed to be Kassia. She’s in pretty bad condition, but as far as I know, she’ll make a full recovery.”

"If we *let* her..." Valeria whispered.

"If we let her, yes," the team leader agreed. "Given her crimes, the best she can hope for is a swift execution. She would've already been put to death if Lord Hand didn't want to take her in alive."

"Just 'Leon'," Leon responded, his tone a little tired at having repeated it so often in the past couple of days before growing much more passionate as he launched into what he was much more concerned about. "She knows more than we do. If we're to root out other vampires, then we need what's in her head. And she'll tell us, even if we have to rip it out of her."

One of the investigators then spoke up, "We know more now than we did a few hours ago, though. There were a few things that we found while searching that warehouse."

"Such as?" Leon asked.

"Most of the goods stored in that warehouse weren't marked," the investigator replied. "A few, however, *were*, indicating that they were imported from abroad. We're running down who marked them and who paid their import duties. That'll give us some leads as to who might be a part of their network."

When she paused, another investigator added, "We're also running IDs on the remains of the others in that warehouse. They don't seem to be particularly important, otherwise they wouldn't have been there keeping watch over just a warehouse or died as quickly as they did, but they'll give us more leads, as well."

Leon nodded. "Marcus and Alcander, when they wake up, will probably give us some information, too. But..."

He silently trailed off as he thought about what he considered the problem. Xaphan, in the wake of the raid, confirmed that some demonic power belonging to Amon was present in the warehouse. Given that Kassia was contracted with a shadow demon, that not only meant that they were now looking for followers of at least two different demons, but it also meant that Leon already had some information on their probable network.

"Where did those imported goods come from?" he asked. "Did they come from the northwestern Kingdoms?"

"They did," the first investigator replied.

Leon nodded again. "Keep your eyes open for anything, but focus on the Cortuban Alliance. This isn't my first run-in with vampires, but my most recent encounters were during and immediately after a visit to the Cortuban Alliance."

"Understood," the first investigator responded.

"Is there anything else?" Leon asked the assembled group. When no one spoke up, he said, "Then let's get to it. Run down these leads and keep me informed."

The group then disbanded, with Leon resigned to wait. He had his people back, at least, so his wrath was starting to calm down, but now came the worst part: waiting for others to do their jobs.

But when, or *if*, they found anything else, he was going to rain all the wrath of the heavens down upon these vampires.

Chapter 713: Inspiring Loyalty

For Marcus, unconsciousness was a sweet release from the past few days of torture. When his mind gave out, he could no longer feel the pain of the magical torments inflicted upon him, he couldn't feel the vampires periodically draining him of his mana, and he couldn't feel the plainer, more mundane beatings that he was given. In some ways, he was glad when Kassia beat him into unconsciousness if for no other reason than he wouldn't have to look at her anymore.

But most of all, the reason he was grateful for unconsciousness was because he was no longer questioned. Kassia and the woman that Alcander had brought home questioned them intensely about Leon. Personal things, like his power and capabilities as a fighter, to greater-scope concerns such as who he was allied with, who he was friends with, who might join him if he were to be suddenly attacked, or who might investigate it if he were to disappear.

Marcus was a little ashamed to know that he didn't remain as strong as he could have throughout the ordeal. He gave the vampires some information, though he didn't think anything he'd said couldn't have been found out anyway. Leon was known as a Hand of the Director, an eighth-tier mage, and an enchanter, after all.

However... Marcus now knew that Kassia, despite only being third-tier, possessed some control over darkness magic thanks to her contract with a shadow demon, and while she was the only one who questioned him, there were frequently other, much stronger vampires around, though some seemed overcareful and wore masks and other face-concealing garments. Marcus could be confident in only giving up information that was already public, but when it came to darkness mages and the power they had over the mind, he couldn't be sure if he'd betrayed Leon and the others or not even when he kept his mouth shut.

Still, he and Alcander remained as strong as they could, and for his part, Marcus did his best not to judge Alcander for his moments of weakness, just as he hoped Alcander did the same for him. The shame didn't go away while he conscious, however, and Marcus couldn't imagine how he would face Leon again. He was surly and extremely unfriendly to those he wasn't already familiar with, but Marcus still considered the man a friend—what was more, Leon had been quite generous to both him and Alcander, and whether he'd admit it or not, Marcus considered himself to be in debt to Leon for as long as that generosity continued. To give the vampires even the fact that Leon had forged new armor was something that brought Marcus deep shame.

As those hours and days passed, his hope began to die out, but he did his best to keep the fire lit. He wavered many times, especially when his blood was freshly spilled. Alcander wavered, too, and he did his best to encourage his friend, at least until they were gagged when the other was being interrogated.

Things came to a head when a massive explosion ripped through the warehouse, but before even the barest hint of relief could wash over him, Kassia rushed forward and hit him and Alcander with her demonic magic, and everything went dark once more.

—

Marcus didn't immediately recognize his surroundings. He stood in his father's palace back in the Bull Kingdom, but everything was dark and twisted, bearing little resemblance to what he remembered it looking like. But he knew unmistakably that it was his childhood home, and his father was there, tall and stern, looking like he had been carved of stone.

"Finally back from the brothels, are you, boy?" he growled as soon as Marcus became aware of his presence. "Done cavorting with women far beneath your station?"

Marcus couldn't respond. He couldn't remember what he'd been doing or why, but even these protests couldn't pass his lips. He could do nothing but stand there as his father glared at him, the knowledge that he was a disappointment to the Aeneas family crashing upon him like a tidal wave upon the shore.

"No, you're not done, are you?" Marquis Aeneas continued. "Worthless men like you are not fit to rule the lands of our Ancestors. Aventino deserves so much more than you, a man who would piss and fuck away all of this land's wealth and leave it with nothing. You are not worth even being acknowledged as my son. Begone."

The brutality of his father's rebuke seemed to echo in the space he found himself in, as the walls vanished in an oncoming wave of darkness. Marcus, feeling ashamed and hurt, couldn't even muster the strength to fight this wave. It washed over him, his father's words echoing in his ears, and when it receded, Marcus found that the scene had changed, though for some reason he couldn't fathom, he didn't even question it.

He found himself standing before Leon and all the rest of the retinue. Even Alcander stood opposite him, glaring at him for the mistakes he'd made.

"You have betrayed me," Leon intoned, his voice resonating in the darkness, pressing in on Marcus and nearly forcing him to his knees. "You have given away my secrets to my enemies. I brought you into my retinue thinking you a worthy addition, but it seems you aren't even fit to call yourself a son of House Aeneas. Get out of my retinue. I need the best, I need people I can trust. And that's not you."

Marcus finally *did* collapse to his knees in front of Leon, his mouth unmoving despite his desperation to explain himself, to say anything at all that might mitigate this rebuke.

But even then, despite his vain struggling, he knew in his heart of hearts that Leon spoke true. He was nothing, he deserved nothing. If he hadn't been born into a noble house, then he would have nothing at all. Everything he had had been bought by his Ancestors, and he'd squandered every advantage he'd ever had.

He was nothing, he deserved nothing. And now, he was losing everything. When he glanced to Alix, Gaius, Alcander, everyone in Leon's retinue, they all glared back at him, each and every one of them knowing that he was worthless, too, and Marcus went limp, his despair overwhelming him.

Slowly, Leon and his retinue disappeared as the dark closed in again, pressing in on Marcus until it enveloped him completely, leaving him alone with his thoughts.

But after a while, he felt a light shining through the darkness, breaking through the haze and reminding him of what he was doing and why he was here. He'd been hit with darkness magic, and this was some

kind of mental space. Relief flooded through him, though the terror didn't go away completely. It remained within him, banished only temporarily.

For now, though, Marcus was glad to simply slip into proper unconsciousness and leave this strange dark world behind.

—

"Back off, everyone!" Leon ordered as his retinue closed in on Marcus, his retainer lying back in the hospital bed. "If he wakes up only to find all of you staring back at him, I think that might freak him out even more than waking to an empty room!"

"But he's stirring!" Alix exclaimed, though she followed Leon's orders and stopped leaning over Marcus, watching his every move.

"Be that as it may, let the man breathe!" Leon responded.

Marcus slowly opened his eyes just as Leon's retinue pulled back a little, but Leon and Alix were both still fairly close. His eyes slowly, sluggishly flickered between them, and the mild look of pain that had been on his face ever since being brought in faded.

"Hey..." he weakly whispered.

"You're alive!" Alix exclaimed. "It's about time you woke up! It's been five years! Do you know how much money has been spent on your care! But don't worry, I'll be sure to—"

"Alix," Leon interrupted, cutting his former squire off with a reprimanding look and an amused smile.

"That's funny," Marcus replied, sounding quite winded but a little stronger than before now that he was starting to wake up. "I'd almost believe you... but I know you..."

"Hey!" Alix responded. "Are you saying I'm not trustworthy?!"

"To be fair," Helen interjected, "you *did* just try to tell him that he's been in a coma for five years."

Alix frowned, but backed off. "Just trying to have a little fun..." she murmured. Turning back to Marcus for moment, she said, "It's good to see you awake. Now let's see how quickly we can get you up and about."

"Hold on," Leon said. "Putting the cart before the horse a little, aren't you?"

Alix shrugged.

Leon sighed and focused on Marcus now that his retainer had had a minute or two to wake up and collect himself. "How are you doing, Marcus?"

"Better, I have to say," Marcus replied with as energetic a smile as he seemed capable of giving. "Alcander?"

Leon moved a bit, giving Marcus a glimpse of the still-unconscious Alcander in bed behind him.

"He's been out about as long as you've been, but he's showing signs of waking up soon."

"How long has it been? Really?"

"About two days since we hit the place where you were held."

Marcus weakly nodded, but before they could continue their conversation, a Heaven's Eye healer burst in.

"All of you, back off!" the ornery healer cried and started shooing them out of the room. "This man needs his rest and none of you need to be here for the tests we have to run! Out!"

Leon complied, letting the healer do his thing, but he wasn't going to leave the hospital just yet.

About three hours later, Leon, and only Leon, was allowed back in to see Marcus, and he was pleasantly surprised to find Alcander sitting up in bed, too.

"Leon!" the large man exclaimed as Leon walked back into the room.

"Alcander!" Leon replied with as much enthusiasm as he could summon. "Good to see you up, too!"

"Good to be up!" Alcander replied. "Hey, will you tell these bastards that I'm good to go? When you go after those piss-drinking demon-worshipping fuckboys, I need to be there so I can kick their asses hard enough to make them vomit out their spines!" Alcander gestured madly as he spoke, showing that he was effectively recovered as far as Leon could tell.

However, Leon looked first to the healer still giving him a check-up.

"He can go," the healer dismissively stated. "He's honestly not worth the attention."

Alcander then looked at the healer, a look of comical disbelief on his face that slowly transitioned to one that was more quietly impressed.

"Wow," Marcus whispered from the other bed. "Not worth the attention, huh? Buddy, I think you've got to work on that. Raise your worth. Be more attractive. You know. Now be quite so terrible at everything you do."

Alcander leaned back in his bed, his arms stretched far enough out over the back rest that everything below his elbows were hanging off. He looked unamused, but not particularly insulted.

"You two seem lively," Leon observed as he took a seat.

"I'm done here," the healer said. "They're healthy enough to leave by the end of the day."

"Thanks," Leon replied, and the healer swiftly made himself scarce. "Now, then, let's have a quick chat about these vampires that came after you."

"Yes, let's do that," Alcander growled. "Are they all dead? The ones from the warehouse?"

"Kassia's alive, but she's been captured."

"I can't believe she was a vampire," Marcus said, frowning. "I never even realized..."

"It's early," Leon responded, "but as far as we can tell, she's still *very* early into the transformation and can still cover it up fairly well. Her fangs aren't that pronounced, her skin is still capable of tanning, and

she's weak enough that she doesn't attract that much attention. And that's assuming she doesn't have any magical disguises to cover up even those tiny signs. Don't beat yourself up over this."

"I'm trying not to," Marcus said, though he had a strange look in his eye, and he seemed reluctant to look Leon in the eye.

"So," Leon continued, not wanting to challenge Marcus' strange behavior with Alcander present, "think the two of you can fill me in on what happened? We still have some holes in our timeline that need filling, and it's clear that there were more than just half a dozen vamps running this operation. If they didn't have friends, then there's no way they could've gone undetected for so long, or been as brazen as they were..."

"There *were* more than just half a dozen..." Alcander grumbled, and together, he and Marcus told Leon the story of their capture, from picking up the first vampire at a club, to bringing her home, and the subsequent ambush.

"They were in your house?" Leon asked in alarm.

"That seems to be the case," Alcander replied. "There were those concealing traps all over my house that I didn't even notice until my attention shifted off of *her*."

"Was there anything in your house?" Leon asked Marcus.

"I honestly didn't get much time to check," Marcus replied. "Even then, I don't remember anything. I just went home and started to pass out until I sensed the ambush being sprung on Al."

"So they could've only been targeting Alcander..." Leon mused. "But if that was the case, was Kassia just insurance against you? It seems kind of convenient that she just happened to be your neighbor if you weren't being targeted..."

"I can't answer that," Marcus replied. "When we came to in that warehouse, the vamps that had us didn't answer any of our questions unless it was for some sadistic purpose... Usually it was *them* questioning *us*, and beating us when we weren't forthcoming with the answers."

"What kind of questions were you asked?" Leon inquired.

"It was mostly taunting," Alcander gnashed, a few wisps of killing intent quickly snaking through his aura. "Trying to worm their way into our heads and lose all hope."

Ignoring his outburst, Marcus answered, "They wanted to know about you."

"Me?" Leon asked, not entirely surprised. "Just me? Xaphan didn't come up?"

"Just you," Alcander confirmed.

"The ones in charge *did* leave pretty hastily about half an hour before your raid," Marcus added. "They didn't seem done with us, either, so it's possible that Xaphan might've come up later if they'd had more time."

Leon nodded. "What did they ask you two, specifically?"

“Your strengths and weaknesses,” Marcus answered. “Your skills, your equipment, your contacts, allies, and family. The defenses at your villa, your usual schedule, your finances...”

Grumbling, Alcander sarcastically added, “Your shoe size, the color of your nose hairs, the precise length of your short and curls...”

“So, pretty much everything,” Leon said.

Marcus and Alcander both nodded in confirmation.

Leon sighed and asked the natural follow-up question, his face stoic and as unjudgmental as he could make it. “And how much did you two tell them?”

Both of his retainers went quiet, exchanging a quick, guilty glance before averting their eyes entirely.

“I won’t judge,” Leon continued after several long seconds of silence. “We all do what we have to do. You two were put into a terrible position because of your connections to me. I’m not going to get angry or punish you two for doing what you felt you had to do. But I need to know what you told them. I *need* to know.”

Leon alternated his gaze, his golden eyes practically burning holes in both of his retainers.

Marcus spoke first, his voice dripping with shame and guilt. “We told them your position, but I think they knew that already.”

“We... told them about Sid, too,” Alcander added, his furious, energetic demeanor dampening as he admitted it. “And the names of the team leaders working at your estate...”

Leon grimaced but didn’t interrupt.

“We told them that you don’t have a set schedule and rarely leave your villa,” Marcus said. “We told them that you don’t have many close friends outside of our usual group, too. We also gave them the names of the rest of the retinue, but not their addresses...”

“But we didn’t tell them about your enchantments,” Alcander pointed out, his voice almost pleading. “I mean, there’s really nothing we *can* tell them about that sort of thing...”

“Was that all you two told them?”

“Yes,” Marcus replied a little more confidently. “We gave up nothing more.”

Leon breathed a sigh of relief. If what they said was true—and he didn’t have much reason to think otherwise—then they didn’t give away any information that these vampires couldn’t have gotten by other means.

‘Hells, they probably already have that information,’ he cynically thought.

Leon sighed once more and said, “All of that’s good to know. We’re going to have to make preparations for any further attacks on us that may happen in the future—and there most certainly will be. I’m going to have warn everyone, make sure Heaven’s Eye gets its ass in gear with hunting these vamps down...”

"Why would that be needed?" Marcus asked, his eyes narrowing slightly. "I'd think that all that's needed would be the Director snapping his fingers and these guys would be brought in."

"I'm sure that can happen," Leon replied, "but Anna told me something while you two were gone: there are vampires *in* Heaven's Eye."

Marcus and Alcander both stared at Leon, utterly dumbfounded.

"You've got to be fucking kidding," Alcander growled. "I knew that demonic powers weren't illegal here, but fucking *vampires*?! Full-blown fucking blood-sucking demon-worshipping pasty-faced leeches?! How?! Why?!"

"I don't have the answers to those questions," Leon said. "At least, I don't *yet*."

Picking up on Leon's tone, Marcus asked, "Do you have an idea about what to do next?"

Leon took a deep breath. "For the moment, I think we'll be doing nothing."

"What?!" Alcander nearly bellowed, but before he could continue, Leon held up his hand, immediately silencing him.

"Did you two tell the vampires about my current relationship with Penelope?"

Marcus squinted for a moment, and then widened his eyes in surprise. "No, we didn't," he said, and Leon guessed he'd already realized what Leon was going to say. Alcander, however, still looked a little lost.

"If we're being targeted," Leon said, "then it's all the better that we're planning on leaving to the north. Get out of Occulara for a while and let others hunt down these rats for us. I intend to try and get on the Director about dealing with this, but since these vampires are already in Heaven's Eye, I have to assume that he already knew. And if he knew, then I can't trust that he'll deal with them. Hells, there are a lot of reasons I can't really trust him right now, but that's the most relevant, I think.

"But Penelope, I think I can trust a little more. She told me about the Director spying on me, and she told me that he's planning on something secret that involves *blood magic*..."

"You mean that the Director is working *with* the vampires?" Marcus exclaimed in disbelief, and Leon was glad that the hospital was well-warded against noise.

Leon grimly scowled, then shrugged. "All I'm saying is that there're many reasons not to trust the Director, and perhaps a reason or two to trust Penelope. I'll also have to inform Sid that her name got dropped in all of this, and I think that Heaven's Eye's best blacksmith might have clout enough to get the Director moving, too. Or at least to help to do so. I'll have to see Emilie, too, she ought to have more power in kicking things into gear. We'll have to see."

"I suppose we will," Marcus whispered as Alcander grumbled a series of threats and statements of disbelief about everything that Leon had just said.

"For now," Leon said, "the two of you should focus on your recovery. If that healer was right and you two can leave tonight, then I think moving into my villa at least for a little while might be warranted."

"Can't argue with that," Marcus responded.

"Good, because I don't think my patience would've borne that out," Leon said with a smile. "We c

Chapter 714: Seeking Support

Things calmed in Occulara after the raid on the vampire's warehouse. Leon knew that Kassia was being interrogated and that he'd eventually get a report on what she'd said, but for the next couple of days, he spent his time moving his retinue into his villa and exhaustively overhauling the security wards in their homes. He was still angry about how his people had been abducted, but now that Alcander and Marcus were safe and he didn't have an immediate target, his passionate wrath had largely subsided, just waiting for him to receive the next piece of actionable intelligence to rear its head.

Once Marcus, Alcander, and everyone else got settled into his villa, though, Elise made it known that she didn't want to put her entire schedule on hold for too long. Leon, not wanting to turtle up, agreed with her that continuing their business was for the best, so long as they maintained some stronger security.

To that end, when Elise and Helen left the next morning to continue surveying properties for a possible apple orchard, most of Leon's retinue went with her, including Maia. Leon had Xaphan with him who assured Leon that he'd fight if they encountered any vampires, so as far as he was concerned, he didn't need any more eighth-tier backup.

He kept Talal, Marcus, and Alcander with him, though, both to give himself some kind of entourage and to make sure the latter two weren't targeted again while he was out seeing to his own business.

And his first stop was Sid's workshop.

—

"Siiiiid!" Leon called out as he stepped out of the magic lift and into Sid's atrium, his three companions getting out just behind him. "I come bearing gifts!"

"What?!" he heard Sid shout from somewhere in her dense nest of various smithing tools, hidden from direct view. "Did I hear something about gifts?!"

Her head poked out from around an enormous furnace, her hair tied back, a doubtful look on her face.

"Leon!" she shouted as she saw him. "Is that you?!"

"Something wrong with your eyes that you can't recognize me?" Leon asked.

"More like something wrong with my ears," Sid replied as she stepped into the atrium, warmly smiling at him for a moment before her smile turned teasing. "I've never really known you to bring gifts, so I wasn't sure if it was really you..."

"I bring gifts all the time," Leon argued.

"Name one time," Sid smugly replied as she crossed her bare, heavily muscled arms over her smithing apron.

"There was..." Leon began before he cut himself off. "No, no, I suppose that was just going a little beyond with a job... But there was that other time... Eh, that probably doesn't count..."

"Anyway," Sid cut him off before he could continue too deeply down that rabbit hole, "what's this about bringing gifts?"

"Ah, right!"

With a theatrical flourish and an enormous smile on his face, Leon conjured from his soul realm a dozen huge boxes of wyvern hide, scales, and bones; everything Sid could possibly want for making weapons and armor with wyvern material.

Sid, obviously full of anticipation, skipped over to the nearest box and tore its lid clean off. When she saw the glittering golden scales within, her eyes went wide and she gasped in surprise. "Leon!" she exclaimed. "This is a gift?"

Leon nodded. "All of them are. Just my way of thanking you for all the lessons."

Sid paused as she made to open the second box and glanced at him. "You say that like you're not planning on coming to any more lessons..."

"That's not the case. Or at least, not *permanently* the case. I have some personal business that may take up quite a bit of time. I have an expedition into the Sacred Golden Empire to plan and execute, and I have no idea how long that might take. So, I think it'd be safe to assume that I won't be coming back in for at least six months. But I am by no means expressing that I want our lessons to end. Just... a temporary hiatus, you know?"

Sid frowned as she fully faced him. "You're not going to fall out of practice, are you?"

"No, absolutely not," Leon assured her. "This is just personal business that has to be taken care of."

Sid stared at him for a moment before her stern exterior dropped. She almost burst out laughing as she went back to the second box and opened it to reveal it was filled with blue wyvern scales.

"Lukas! Elias! Atticus! Get out here!"

Sid's three main apprentices poked their heads out from other corners of the huge, packed workshop.

"Take care of all of this for me," Sid ordered, and the three young men quickly stepped forward to deal with Leon's gift and leaving Sid able to face Leon without being distracted. "Thank you, Leon," she said. "Your gift is greatly appreciated."

"You're most welcome," Leon replied. "It's the least I could do as thanks for all your patience over these past ten years."

Sid nodded while waving dismissively. "It was nothing at all, don't mention it." Her eyes then narrowed and her demeanor grew more serious. "By the way, Leon, I heard a little something through the grapevine... what's been going on these past couple of days?"

Leon breathed a quick sigh of relief, having worried he'd have to broach this topic on his own, but she brought it up of her own accord without any prompting from him.

"Oh, you know, just dealing with a bunch of uppity vampires. They attacked Marcus and Alcander over there, and I had to hunt them down and kill them for it."

Sid looked a little uncomfortable with Leon's casual mention of killing vampires, but that was to be expected as far as Leon was concerned. She made weapons and armor, but whenever he'd brought up killing around her over the past decade, she'd usually reacted with discomfort. But she gave Marcus and Alcander a quick look.

"You boys are looking good for having been attacked by vampires just a few days ago."

"We had some good healers," Marcus replied.

"No puny vampires are going to put *us* down for long!" Alcander boasted, flexing his aura and his massive arms for emphasis.

Leon saw Sid smile appreciatively at his enormous retainer. "Say, Alcander," she said, "if you ever get tired of serving this surly boy over here, feel free to come on back here. I could certainly use someone with your... *talents* in here..."

Alcander just smiled back at her, but before he could verbally respond, Leon interjected.

"Can you not flirt with and try to steal my retainers in front of me?"

"I'll try, but I make no promises," Sid responded as she turned back toward Leon. "Anyway, these vampires, is the threat over with?"

"Unfortunately, no. A few of the larger bats seemed to have flown off before we could crush their nest, which is actually one of the reasons why I came here."

"Oh?"

Leon paused for a moment as he made sure he *really* wanted to say this, and when he was certain, he still hesitated for a moment longer.

"Listen," he said, "I have some reason to suspect that these vampires might have some connection with Heaven's Eye, and I have quite a few reasons to not trust the Director as far as I can spit. I'm not entirely sure that he'll let me hunt these bastards down, but that's not going to stop me. They fucked with my people, and I can't allow that."

"Understandable. If anyone went after my apprentices, I'd bury them alive..."

For the first time since he'd met her, Leon felt a few thin strands of killing intent waver through Sid's aura, lending her words quite a bit of weight.

"Well," Leon continued, "I was hoping that if push came to shove, then you would support me in hunting these vampires down and excising them from Heaven's Eye. I'd rather do this with the Director's blessing than without it, and if he doesn't want to give it, then I'm fine with trying to force it. However, I also don't want to make things too difficult for you, so if you say no, then I understand..."

"What? Say no? Like I'd ever do that!" Sid reached over and pulled Leon in for a brief, playful headlock. "I don't much like vampires. Honestly, they kind of terrify me. If you're worried about them infiltrating Heaven's Eye, then you have my support in rooting them out by hook or by crook... for however much my support's worth, which I can't imagine is a lot."

“Nonsense,” Leon responded as he pulled himself free of her gasp. “Given your skills, I’m sure you could get quite a bit moving in Heaven’s Eye—at least, within Production.”

“I think your mother-in-law might be able to get a little more done than what I can do,” Sid pointed out.

“And I’ll be speaking with her later, but every ally’s an ally, right?”

Sid chuckled. “I suppose that’s true.”

The two then went quiet for a moment, and after a while, Leon departed, though not before Sid managed to coax out one last promise from him not to let his blacksmithing skills wither from lack of practice. Leon thusly stepped back into the magic lift with thoughts of how to make his workshop portable filling his head.

—

When Leon arrived at Emilie’s office, he found that his mother-in-law was already in a meeting. As a Hand of the Director, he could, if he wanted to, force his way in, but instead he chose to wait. Fortunately, he didn’t have to wait long, though when the stream of men and women came filing out of her office, he noted that few of them seemed happy, and most were so absorbed in their own hurried whispers that they barely even realized he was there.

A couple did notice him, though, and instead of meeting his gaze or offering their greetings, they turned their gaze to the floor and hurried away from Emilie’s office as fast as dignity allowed. After all, if a Hand of the Director arrived, it rarely meant good things. Fortunately, he wasn’t here to be a harbinger of doom... or at least, he *hoped* he wasn’t.

Once everyone had left Emilie’s office, Emilie’s secretary showed him in right away. Emilie’s office wasn’t much to write home about—it was luxurious, but Leon already expected that from a member of Heaven’s Eye’s board. It had a conference table off to one side and a lounge area to the other, while directly across from the door was Emilie’s enormous desk. It wasn’t quite as big as the Director’s, but it was still big enough to be not only imposing, but to make Emilie look almost small from behind it.

He still thought her office from the Heaven’s Eye Tower back in the Bull Kingdom was far nicer.

When she saw Leon walk in, Emilie, who’d been frowning and glaring at a stack of papers like she wanted to incinerate them with her gaze, looked up and her expression immediately brightened.

“Leon!” she exclaimed. “Oh, good boy, have you come to rescue poor old me from all of this tedious paperwork?”

“For one, you’re not old,” Leon said with an amused smile as Emilie’s secretary exited the office and closed the door, sealing the two of them in total privacy. “For two, are you in need of rescuing? I’m sure someone as powerful as you could get herself out of this place if she really needed to.”

Emilie laughed as she rose from behind her desk, her papers seemingly forgotten. As she came around the desk, she gestured toward the brightly-lit lounge area, and Leon went and sat on one of the small sofas, while Emilie sat in an armchair directly across from him.

“So, Leon,” she said, “what brings you here today? And why don’t you come more often? You know that I love seeing you and Elise as much as possible!”

"I'm sorry we've been a little scarce lately," Leon replied with genuine sorrow. "I've been extremely busy with smithing work, then the wyvern hunt down south, and then there was some ugly business involving vampires in the city after we returned..."

"Ah, yes, I heard something about that. But you were involved?"

Leon hummed and nodded. "Do you remember the house-warming party we held back in the Bull Kingdom?"

"How could I not? That party was attacked by vampires, too. This is related?"

"I believe it is. The same faction of vampires has been hounding me for a long time, from the attack on our old house, to the attack in the Illumerian Wetlands, to now, when two of my retainers were snatched from their homes and tortured for days before I could find them."

"That's terrible! Who was it?! Are they all right?"

"Marcus and Alcander, and they're on the road to recovery if not already there thanks to Heaven's Eye healers. They're waiting for me down in this building's lobby, as a matter of fact."

"Pass on my well-wishes if you can."

"Will do."

"Is this why you're here? This vampire attack?"

"In a way..." Leon paused a moment, wondering just how to proceed. With Emilie patiently waiting and having already covered this topic with Sid, he was able to find his words again fairly easily. "This is more about the Director; the vampires are, in some ways, kind of more incidental..."

Leon then gave Emilie a brief rundown both of the vampire attack, and his current issues with Director.

"... so I think you can see why I'm having some problems trusting the Director right now."

Emilie, having listened in silence the entire time, stared at him in shock and disbelief, but in the long, quiet seconds that followed, her expression fell into something more contemplative.

"That... was quite the story," she said a little absent-mindedly. "I believe you, though. You're not one to lie, and when you do, you're honestly really bad at it..."

Leon wanted to argue, but he kept his mouth shut, knowing that she was right.

"So, what are you looking for from me?"

"I think you might already know."

"I have my theories, but I don't want to sit here and guess. You're my son-in-law, we don't have to stand on pretenses, do we? We should love and support each other as family."

Leon smiled. "Thanks for saying that. It's hard to keep that in mind; my family has never been that large, and trust can be hard to come by."

"Do you not trust me?" Emilie sounded almost offended, so Leon hurried to correct himself.

"It's not that! I do trust you, I do! I wouldn't have told you all of this if I didn't! I'm just trying to express my appreciation for this, all of this trust going around. That's all."

"Hmm," Emilie hummed as she gave Leon a teasing look.

Leon, his face turning a little red from embarrassment, decided to just push on to his point. "I'm going to be taking this matter to the Director. Naturally, given what I suspect about him, I'm not too optimistic that he's going to do anything. Maybe throw me a bone, but... If my doubts turn out to be accurate, then something has to change."

Emilie leaned forward, all trace of playfulness gone as the conversation turned in this extremely serious direction. "Are you asking me to support some kind of coup?"

"No!" Leon hurriedly exclaimed. "Nothing so drastic! All I want is some pressure from someone he can't just dismiss."

"He *can* just dismiss me if he wants," Emilie pointed out.

"He wouldn't have put you in this position if he didn't value your skills and abilities. He has to have some kind of trust in you, and Heaven's Eye wouldn't be nearly as large and powerful as it is if he did nothing but appoint into powerful positions people who only tell him what he wants to hear."

"All this, and you say you don't trust him?"

"I suppose there're different degrees of trust, isn't there? I don't trust his intentions towards me, but I trust his abilities. He's shrewd and manipulative. He appointed you to a position of power, so his judgment is pretty solid, but still, I'm just trying to cover my ass here."

"Then what?"

"I need him to crack down on vampirism in Heaven's Eye. If you can apply any pressure at all to him on this, it would be appreciated. Naturally, if you don't think you can, then I won't push, it's just... I *need* to do whatever I can to make sure my people remain safe. I can't allow them to be targeted by anyone, especially not my own personal enemies. I'm not trying to launch a coup against him, and I'm not trying to subvert his power in any way. Not *yet*, anyway."

Leon paused, having said his piece. He felt like he could qualify and argue for this for hours, but he believed his point had been made.

Emilie gave him a hard stare for a long moment, and then burst out laughing. When she managed to draw in a breath and steady herself, she said, "Ooh, not *yet*, hmm? I was starting to wonder if that card of yours had burned a hole in your pocket and got lost!"

Leon grimaced. He still had his platinum Heaven's Eye card, the ID card of his Ancestor Demetrios, the son of Jason Keraunos. With it, he could theoretically take control of Heaven's Eye, but he doubted that would work at all. For now, he wasn't interested in directly moving against the Director. *For now*.

"I still have it, and it's not the right time to use it. But we can talk about that matter another time. For now, will you support me in this? Do you agree with me that we need to do something about the vampiric menace in this guild?"

Emilie, seemingly without hesitation, replied, "Yes, these vampires need to be scraped off our boot before they start to smell. Are you going to see the Director soon?"

"Yes," Leon said.

"I'll do what I can to make sure he knows that you and I are in agreement," she said.

"That's all I ask," Leon responded. "Thank you. Really, I feel like I should say something stronger, but nothing's coming to mind..."

"Don't worry about it, we're family!" Emilie cried as she rose from her seat, pulled Leon off the sofa, and then pulled him into a tight hug. "Just do me one favor in return?"

"Anything."

"Maybe get Elise to come by a little more often? And I wouldn't say no to grandkids..."

Leon's blood ran cold for a moment at the mention of children. "That first one is definitely doable," he murmured. "That second... we'll... um... probably not."

"Ah, well," Emilie sighed as she released Leon. "It'll happen someday, I'm sure."

"Someday," Leon promised. "Just not soon."

"Don't keep me waiting too long! I *am* getting old, you know!"

Leon smiled and nodded, and soon enough, he was back in the building's magic lift, heading from near the top floor back down to the atrium. When he walked out the back, Marcus, Talal, and Alcander at his back, he knew that he'd be staring up at the Hexagon, where the Director was.

He supposed he could go to Penelope first, but he honestly didn't know where she was or if she would say yes. So, instead of hunting around for her, he decided to just head right for the Director. With Sid and Emilie on his side, he hoped that the Director would see things his way. If he didn't, then Leon supposed he'd have to make other plans. Whether those plans involved the platinum card or not, he hadn't yet decided...

Chapter 715: Pressure From His Own Hands

Leon stared at the Director, having just finished his report on the past couple of days, waiting for the shadowy figure to respond.

After a moment, the Director simply said, "Well done, Leon. You've eliminated a dire threat to this city and the guild, and saved your retainers."

Leon blinked, unsure how exactly to respond. However, as anger rose from within, he asked, "Is that it?"

"Is there more you want?" the Director asked.

"Weren't you listening? Those vampires weren't working alone! And from what I can tell, they were working with the full cooperation of elements within Heaven's Eye!"

Leon had told the Director of his conclusions, but he hadn't told him about the source of his suspicions: that the ambassador from the Sacred Golden Empire to the Ilian Empire had told Anna that there were vampires within Heaven's Eye.

The Director sighed and leaned back in his chair. "I'm aware of that," he admitted.

Leon finally felt some surprise. "You already know?" he asked, almost in disbelief that the man had just admitted it.

"Yes, I already knew," the Director replied. "It's incredibly difficult to keep an organization as large as ours completely free of such threats."

"That's hardly an excuse not to try! To just... are you just letting it happen?" Leon protested, almost unable to conceive of running an organization and allowing vampires to infest it.

"I keep a close eye on them," the Director replied. "They're useful tools, if used properly."

"They're monsters, not tools!"

"Let's not be naïve, Leon. In the world we live in, with monsters around every corner, Imperial ambitions and prerogatives to contend with, and the Sky Devils constantly looking for weakness regardless of our pedigree, we need every edge we can get. And turning away vampires just because of what they are—"

"They're not 'what they are' because of circumstance! They chose to sacrifice to demons! Drinking the blood of innocents until their bodies mutated into monstrous forms!"

The Director went quiet, his eyes barely more than hints of reflected light in his usual shadows.

"You would not use this power?" he asked. "You are contracted to a demon, yourself, aren't you?"

"My contracted partner doesn't demand sacrifices in his name!"

[I wouldn't say no to a few sacrifices made to me, though, depending on what they are...] Xaphan murmured from within his soul realm. [A nice vat of heated Void Leviathan wine... you can sacrifice that to me any day!]

"You're lucky, then," the Director continued. "Not all who make those same choices come out as well as you have."

"There're always choices when it comes to sacrifice," Leon countered. "Even if my contracted demon had demanded live human sacrifices—or, honestly, blood sacrifices of any kind—I'd have refused out of hand! There is no middle ground with this, as far as I'm concerned! Blood sacrifices are without merit at all, and they shouldn't be tolerated!"

The Director sighed again. "Let's be specific, here, then. What is it that you want, Leon?"

Leon went quiet a moment as he composed himself. "I want many things," he replied. "I want to see a few certain people dead at my feet. I want to venture to the Nexus and rebuild my Clan. I want these vampires that have been nipping at my heels for years *dealt with*! Permanently!"

When he was finished with his spiel, Leon stared at the Director, fiery challenge in his eyes. Left unsaid was what he would do if the Director refused him any of his desires. However, for as fiery and confident

as his demeanor suggested, Leon was still wracked with some anxiety, knowing that the Director didn't necessarily have to lift a finger to help him with any of these things.

The Director sighed. "So, you're telling me to choose between you and any vampires that might exist in this institution?"

Leon schooled his expression into something quietly furious and said, "Yes, I suppose you can boil it all down to that."

The Director leaned back in his chair, looking as if he were thinking hard on the topic. Leon was almost insulted, for knowing his bloodline and all the benefits that it might carry—especially if he were right and the Director was in possession of his Clan's old arsenal—he thought this might be an easy decision to make. Though, as he pondered the issue, he thought that it might be just a show put on by the Director to make it *seem* like he wasn't that interested in Leon, which only angered Leon even more.

'Just playing games, aren't you?' he contemptuously thought as he stared back at the Director. *'Trying to get the best deal? Trying to make me give concessions? Make me nervous?'*

Leon waited for several long seconds before he just turned around and began walking toward the door.

"Where are you going Leon?" the Director asked, his aura starting to emanate with greater energy. With the security wards obscuring most of the room's enchantments from his senses, Leon thought he sensed the door lock.

He paused and turned, noting that the Director hadn't budged an inch. Without acknowledging the door, Leon said, "I'm leaving. You clearly need some time to think. Are you going to stop me?"

The Director leaned forward again and said, "No."

Leon thought he might be lying, but he felt the Director's aura recede. He didn't feel anything change in the door, though.

[Xaphan,] he breathed into his soul realm. [I think I'm being disrespected here, and doesn't that disrespect *you* by proxy?]

[Are you looking to have someone killed, boy?] the demon asked, his crackling tone deadly serious.

[Maybe. Maybe just standby?]

[If it's this one, then I'd be more than willing to set him ablaze...] Leon could almost feel the anticipation roiling off of the demon, and the feeling spilling over through their contract was infectious. He found himself almost wishing the Director would make a move against them despite knowing just how bad that would be for them.

Out loud, he asked, "What's taking so long, then? What are you getting from those vampires that this is even remotely a hard decision?"

"That's not for you to know," the Director replied, his tone even and restrained. "You are one of my Hands, knowing only what I choose to tell you."

"If I decide to stick around, we're going to have to alter that arrangement," Leon growled.

"If you stick around," the Director emphasized.

"And *if* I stick around, there are going to have to be concession on your part. If I'm going to help you with *whatever* it is you're planning, then I'm in on it, too."

The door suddenly swung open despite the Director remaining motionless. "Have a safe trip north, Leon Raime," he said a little frostily. "When you return, hopefully we'll all have cooler heads and can negotiate in good faith. Until then, feel free to enjoy the benefits of your position."

Leon stared at the Director, quietly wondering if he should say something just to have the last word. His thoughts seemed to be echoed in his demonic partner.

[Are you just going to stand there and take that? Leave like a scolded dog?]

[Not like that,] Leon whispered. [But he's not worth it. I think this pissing match has gone on long enough. Best to just leave and see what I can do outside of the Director.]

Without a word, Leon smirked at the Director, then turned and left the office, both quietly relieved that he'd gotten out without any violence, and quietly furious that he'd gotten out without any violence.

However, he knew just what he needed to do, now. He needed to find Penelope, for if *anyone* could put any greater pressure on the Director than even Emilie might, it would be her.

—

"That sounds like a disaster, Leon," Penelope scolded. "You couldn't have gone in with a slightly more diplomatic attitude? Maybe it would've gotten you what you wanted a little easier. This is exactly the sort of behavior that I was afraid of when you joined Heaven's Eye!"

Leon bitterly scowled. "When I joined Heaven's Eye, I was unproven in your eyes. I've now been here ten years and have given you no cause to doubt my intentions. But after the past few days involving vampires abducting two of my retainers and your father keeping secrets from me, I've quite lost my patience."

"You're one of my father's Hands, is it your place to know all of his plans?"

"No, but that doesn't mean I have to take his shit! He's harboring *vampires*, Penelope! And vampires that follow a demon that has been trying to have me killed for years! I think it's pretty fair to not only be just a *little* irate, but to also leave if I want. I don't have to be here, and if he wants to keep his secrets, then so be it, but I also have the right to demand that his plans involve me no longer!"

Penelope sighed and glanced out of her window.

Leon had managed to locate her fairly easily: Talal had already known where she lived—a penthouse apartment that sprawled over the top five floors of one of Occulara's many massive golden towers—and fortunately, she was home when Leon came calling. Upon his arrival, he was a little gratified that she didn't just dismiss him out of hand and had brought him further into her home for a private discussion, leaving his companions in her opulent atrium.

Once they arrived, Leon informed her of everything that had happened over the past couple days, from the conflicts with these vampires to the conflict with her father. To say that she was a little overwhelmed and torn was to be quite gentle, Leon could tell, but he pressed on anyway.

“Look,” Leon said, “try and put yourself in my shoes. *You* told me that he was planning on something, and that it corresponded with an uptick in other concerning happenings in Heaven’s Eye. Including blood magic. And now we find that your father has been harboring *vampires*! Vampires that are connected, at least tangentially, to those who’ve tried to kill me multiple times already! Are you going to try and tell me to keep my nose out of this? To just accept that your father has my best interests in mind and to continue to treat him with respect? I can’t do that. Maybe I’d get further if I tried to play his game, but it’s not a game I’m good at. I’m a terrible liar, and to look him in the eye knowing all of this without getting angry... I can’t do that. Could you?”

Penelope glanced at him, but then stared back out of the nearby window, her eyes glazed and unfocused. “I suppose not...” she whispered. “He’s my father, so I have to acknowledge that I have a somewhat warped view of him. I’ve never known him to get his hands this dirty...”

She paused, and this time, Leon gave her the time to think.

After a long, worrisome moment, she turned to him and asked, “Leon, why is my father so interested in you?”

Leon stared back at her, wrestling with himself about how to respond. He knew damn well why, but he wasn’t sure what Penelope’s reaction might be. That being said, he could see it in her expression that if he chose not to answer Penelope’s question—his already established terrible ability to lie ruling out the possibility of deception—then she would probably not support him in this endeavor.

Taking a deep breath, Leon answered her question with one of his own. “Do you know what the Thunderbird Clan was?”

Penelope’s eyes went wide, and she leaned away from him a little bit. But after that moment of panicked realization, she mastered herself again and nodded.

“Then you should understand what I mean when I say that your father isn’t really interested in *me*; he’s interested in my blood. I am the last living descendant of the Thunderbird, and that means that any valuable magical legacies my Clan left behind on this plane could *potentially* be unlocked with my blood.”

Penelope continued to look in his direction, though it seemed to him that she was more looking through him than at him. She didn’t move a muscle, she just sat there processing this revelation.

After a moment, she asked, “Why... did you tell me that?”

Leon scowled briefly, then with a self-deprecating smile said, “Enough people know that it’s hardly a secret. Not that I have much interest in keeping it secret, anyway. Besides, after that hunt, I think I can trust you... to a degree.”

Penelope abandoned decorum and crossed her legs in her chair, then hunched over in thought, resting her head in her hands and her elbows on her knees.

"Why did you tell me that...?" she repeated. "Now I have to deal with this information, too!"

"Deal with what?" Leon asked. "It makes no difference, does it?"

Penelope went worryingly quiet, and Leon thought he'd just made a grave mistake. By the time Penelope responded, he was already measuring the distance to her window and wondering—not too seriously, but the idea was in his mind—if he was able to smash through it as a means of escape.

"It can make some difference," Penelope replied when she looked up, pulling Leon out of his thoughts. "But not, I think, any immediate difference. I stand by my assessment of you, this doesn't really change that, I suppose."

"That's good to hear."

"As for the vampires, I'll... talk to my father, see if I can get him to see reason. I tentatively agree with you that we're better off without them in Heaven's Eye, but my father might have some information that I don't."

"That's... reasonable, I guess. Though the Director doesn't seem like a man who shares all that often..."

"He's not, so I'm not going to hold my breath."

Leon nodded. "I also have Emilie and the blacksmith Sid on my side for this, if that means anything."

Penelope glanced at him, then gave him a shaky smile. "It's good to know that I'll have some support, even if it's not there with me."

She then got to her feet, and Leon followed suit.

"No time like the present, I guess."

Leon grimly smiled. "Thank you, Penelope."

Penelope just gave him a quick, almost regretful smile. "Don't thank me just yet, I haven't actually done anything."

Leon could only smile, not feeling quite familiar enough with her to do anything else and not wanting to accidentally talk her out of this. So, he let her escort him back to her atrium and his waiting retainers, and he took his leave. She then promised to follow up with him later that night.

Leon just hoped that she'd bring good news.

—

Penelope took a deep breath as she walked into her father's office. They'd never been particularly 'close', and ever since her mother had passed, they'd grown even further apart. It had been more than half a century since she'd last seen the Director outside of his office, and even longer since she'd last seen him in a context that wasn't related to work.

She could feel the bitterness welling up from within her, and for just a moment, she was tempted to give her father the same ultimatum that Leon had given him: reveal his plans, or lose her.

But the cynical side of her restrained that urge. She'd had a long time to reflect upon their relationship, and objectively, she didn't think the Director would choose her over the guild. Absolutely nothing in their history suggested that he valued her over his position.

Still, she shared Leon's concerns, and she quietly relished in the chance to call her father out for something, and the excuse to dig into his affairs without guilt.

"Penelope," he said as she strode into his room, trying to project more confidence than she felt. She always felt small in his presence, like he was a towering giant and she barely more than an ant. He always had to look down and focus hard to see her, while to her, he was completely out of reach, encompassing the entire horizon.

"Father," she said, her tone respectful, but devoid of filial warmth.

"Have you come on behalf of Leon Raime?" he asked, cutting right to the chase.

Penelope wasn't surprised, Leon had hardly been subtle when he made straight for her residence after leaving the Director's office. She'd even expected that her father already knew that Leon had visited her, and why.

So, without missing a beat, she responded with the same directness that her father was employing.

"Yes. I share his concerns. Vampires within Heaven's Eye present a clear danger to both our image and our operational efficiency. Vampires connected to those employed by the guild—"

"—*Allegedly*," the Director corrected.

"*Allegedly* connected to those employed by the guild," Penelope conceded with an eyeroll, "have made moves against the subordinates of one of your Hands. This is something that not only deserves investigation, but also punishment of the highest severity. I want to know what your plans are for dealing with this problem."

"Is it your place to know my plans?" the Director asked.

Penelope paused a moment and summoned all her courage. She didn't know quite how this was going to go, but she needed to press this issue, not only for Leon but for herself, too.

"As your daughter and as one of your Hands," she said, "yes, it *is* my place. You're clearly unwilling to follow through on the warranted punishment, and I think I should know why."

The Director stared at her for a long moment, his shadowed face giving nothing away. He didn't move an inch, though Penelope took that as a good sign. It meant that he was at least pondering *something*, for if he wanted to flatly refuse her, then he would've immediately done so.

He could still do that, of course, but with his pause, he was at least tacitly stating that it required consideration, first.

More than a minute passed in ever-more uncomfortable silence before the Director finally responded. And he began by rising out of his chair. Penelope's stomach dropped in sudden, instinctive fear at this unexpected response, her body practically interpreting this as a threat.

“Very well,” the Director rumbled. “If you wish to know why this is a difficult decision, I will *show* you. Come with me, it isn’t far. And everything should hopefully become clear once we reach it.”

Chapter 716: Relics

Penelope’s blood roared in her ears, and she could feel her heart beating like a hammer within her chest. She glanced over at her father, feeling no small amount of anxiety and even a small amount of fear at where she was being taken.

After the revelations that Leon shared, Penelope had started to wonder if her father was more actively involved with the vampires and their demonic overlord than she ever might’ve imagined. At the very least, though, she could take comfort in knowing that her father wasn’t a vampire—his skin, while pale from spending most of his days inside, wasn’t quite as sickly as that of a vampire. What spoke more to his humanity was his heavily muscled body, which, combined with the grace with which the Director moved, showed Penelope that he was just as physically capable now as he was in her memory. He’d rarely felt the need to express his power, she knew, but in the decades since the last time his hand had been forced, he had clearly not let himself go soft. Besides, she knew that he wasn’t the sort to give up even the tiniest amount of his authority to another being, let alone a demon.

So, he wasn’t a vampire. Her worries were slightly mollified, but not entirely banished, for as Leon showed, someone with a demonic contract wasn’t necessarily a vampire.

These thoughts, and many more besides, raced through her mind as the Director opened an otherwise imperceptible door on the wall of his office and led her through several private hallways. Eventually, he led her into a large chamber, empty save for a small, extremely sleek ark. It was long and narrow, and lacked the flat, angular wings that most other arks possessed. Its size would only allow a handful of people within, but Penelope knew from personal experience that there were only four or five arks elsewhere in the world that could possibly compete with it for speed and privacy.

Its entire exterior was shiny and almost perfectly reflective, made from a material that Penelope couldn’t identify. Even more notable, however, was that it didn’t require a pilot.

A door slid open on the side of the ark, which, much like the door in the Director’s office, had been entirely imperceptible until that moment. Without missing a step, the Director walked into the ark, and Penelope closely followed, her curiosity even more piqued at what exactly her father was going to show her.

The interior of the ark was quite small, with Penelope almost able to touch both walls if she outstretched her arms. There were only seven seats, with three on either side of the ark and a granite table between. The final seat was in the back, looking almost like a plush throne.

The Director made directly for that big seat, and when he sat within it, thousands of runes flashed out from the chair and covered the surface of the ark’s walls, vanishing less than a second later.

“Please, Penny, sit,” the Director said, indicating the seat directly on his right. In stark contrast to his usual commanding tone, he now sounded almost tired, and Penelope found herself relaxing a little more. As she took her seat, the ark’s door slid shut, sealing them within and creating an environment that was, for all intents and purposes, impossible to spy upon.

"Where are we going, father?" Penelope stiffly asked, still a little on-guard despite most of her fears being allayed.

"Not far," the Director whispered. A runic circle on the arm of his chair flashed, and a strange, androgynous, highly resonant voice sounded throughout the ark.

"Destination?"

The Director answered, "The Arkyard. Pad seven."

Penelope's eyebrows immediately shot up; she *knew* that Heaven's Eye had no arkyards!

Before she could say anything, however, the strange voice responded, "Shall the yard master be informed of your arrival?"

"No, let's make this a surprise inspection."

"Understood. Preparing for launch."

The Director responded, "Engage all stealth systems. I don't want a single person catching so much as a glimpse of us on our way."

"Acknowledged," the voice responded, and Penelope felt the slightest of shudders pass through the ark's frame as its enchantments blazed to life. She knew from her few previous experiences flying in her father's personal ark that the reflective exterior had just been covered in light magic, rendering the ark completely invisible.

This ark was a marvel of magical engineering. It wasn't as old as the Thunderbird Clan, but from what she knew, it had been built from pieces of a Thunderbird ark during the wars that eventually formed the Empires, when the organization that would one day call itself Heaven's Eye still possessed arkyards—or, she supposed, still *officially* possessed arkyards, if she were to believe what her father had just said.

The ark soon took to the sky, its magic engines engaging and seemingly propelling them toward the wall of the chamber. However, instead of crashing, the ark passed right through. The wall was nothing more than an illusion—an extremely powerful and convincing illusion protected from invasion by tremendously powerful wards, but an illusion, nonetheless. Combined with the ark's own stealth capabilities, Penelope doubted anyone could possibly notice that she and the Director had left his office, let alone the Hexagon.

Once out of the Hexagon, the ark flew swiftly and silently, its robust enchantments ensuring that not a single soul outside of it could detect it. But the interior of the ark was somehow even quieter, with Penelope simply going along for the ride, her anxiety and curiosity warring within her and keeping her from asking questions.

The ark quickly built up speed, but it didn't even reach as fast as it could go before it started to decelerate. There were no windows and the walls weren't transparent, so Penelope was unable to say where they were. When the ark came to a smooth stop and the door opened several minutes later, however, she could say unequivocally that what was awaiting them was not what she'd been expecting.

They were underground, on a large magic lift that was slowly descending even further into the earth. But what they were descending into was hardly just a cave—the walls were certainly stone, but there

were several long steel beams supporting the magic lift, and Penelope could sense an immense amount of magic power running through the walls.

Finally finding her tongue, she asked her father, “Where are we?”

The Director replied, “The project that has consumed most of my attention for the past few decades... Something that the Empires would kill for. Something that Lord Protector Anastasios would likely seize, if he knew about it, and quite possibly kill us all to ensure that no one else knew of its existence...”

Left unsaid were his orders to keep everything that she saw here a secret, but he didn’t need to say that part aloud.

After more than five minutes of descent, some of the walls in the circular lift finally fell away, revealing a much larger cavern greatly illuminated with bright white magical light. It took another half minute for the lift to reach the bottom of the cavern, and when it did, Penelope had to stifle a gasp.

They were on only one arktop of seven, and the other six—three on either side of the rectangular cavern—all had arks of their own, and all of these arks were much larger than the Director’s. If she had to guess, the smallest of these other arks could hold several hundred people quite comfortably, depending on how spacious its interior was. The largest of the arks looked like it could hold many times more than that, and was so big, in fact, that it barely fit into the cavern. It was at least two thousand feet long, and shaped, Penelope thought, rather like that of a bird of prey—its prow was long and curved slightly downward, like a sharp beak, while its wings were slightly lifted and angled, giving off the impression of a sleek eagle in the midst of a dive.

She could see multiple closed ports on every side of the thing, many of which she could only assume were weapon ports. The rear of the ark, meanwhile, had some of the largest magical engines that she had ever seen.

This monster of an ark captured her attention, but as she took in the sheer scale of the cavern and all the other arks, she was rendered completely speechless, not only at the fact that it was here, but that such a massive facility even existed at all and that she’d never even heard of it.

It wasn’t until the Director rose to his feet and gently shook her shoulder that she came back to reality.

“I understand,” he said, his voice finally softening into something that was almost fatherly. “Most people who I reveal this to have similar reactions. I, myself, couldn’t help but stare when I first saw what my engineering teams had managed to achieve down here, too.”

“What...” Penelope murmured, stammering slightly as she tried to wrap her head around what her senses were telling her, “... what... what *is* all this?”

“Come with me,” the Director said, and he led Penelope out of his ark at a rather relaxed pace, letting her take in the sheer scale of the cavern and marvel at the feat of magical engineering that it demanded.

As they walked down the cavern’s central corridor toward a series of buildings on the opposite side, Penelope noticed that there weren’t that many people around. A few were scurrying about here and there, but for the most part, the cavern was almost creepily still and silent. She counted at the most only ten people per ark, not even one percent of the minimum she’d have thought such large arks would demand for maintenance crews.

“Father, what *is* all this?” she asked again as they passed the first pair of arks, which also happened to be the smallest at only about three or four hundred feet long.

“The keys to our future,” he replied. “Our means of getting off Aeterna.”

—

Penelope stared out at the cavern from the window of the conference room she found herself in. There were a number of buildings on the opposite side of the cavern from her father’s arypad, and the one she now found herself in was the biggest, rising more than five stories off the floor of the cavern, yet not even reaching halfway to the ceiling. Still, it had an incredible view of the immense arkyard.

She and her father had been there for several hours already, and she’d been taken around to see all of the massive arks parked here, with the leaders of the teams assigned to maintain each ark as best as they could giving her and her father short updates on the progress of their restoration. It was during those talks that Penelope learned that this wasn’t a proper arkyard—at least, it wasn’t one where arks could be constructed. There also weren’t any more of these caverns stashed anywhere, these six arks were all that they had.

Or, at least, that was all her father admitted to having, but she trusted him in this.

All six of these arks were confirmed to be ancient, dating back to the reign of the Thunderbird Clan. They were not in usable condition, and in fact, while their interiors were largely accessible to the Heaven’s Eye teams, the arks’ critical systems were still sealed and inaccessible. Weapons, engines, main power, all were locked so tightly that even Heaven’s Eye, even in all the time that they’d had these arks, hadn’t been able to open the doors to those critical compartments.

The noncritical systems were under their control, however, so while they couldn’t get the *heavily* armed arks to fly or shoot things, they could at least turn on climate controls, ventilation, and the lights.

Throughout this tour, Penelope remained quiet, the sheer scale of what she was seeing preventing her from asking any of the countless questions that came to her mind.

Now, however, that she’d had several hours to process the existence of this place, she felt ready to start asking some of those questions.

Her father was sitting at the head of the conference table, patiently waiting for her. No one else was in the conference room, not even the yard master, for speaking with them wasn’t the Director’s reason for coming here.

With a deep sigh, Penelope turned from the window and finally joined her father at the table.

“Ready to talk?” he asked, a light smile on his gracefully-aged face.

Penelope didn’t bother responding directly and simply jumped right in. “How long has all of this been here?”

“Some sixty years,” the Director answered.

“Only that long?”

“Only that long.”

Penelope took her father at his word. “How did they get here, then? Were they found here?”

“No. They’ve moved around a lot, but this is a place I built to house them. They are our greatest secret, one that the Empires can never learn about. It’s a secret that Heaven’s Eye has guarded for a *long* time. Do you remember my lessons about the Thunderbird Clan?”

“How could I forget?”

“Good. Do you remember what happened with most of their infrastructure?”

“Destroyed or appropriated by the Empires.”

“Indeed. However, most of the infrastructure built by that Clan was destroyed during the chaos of its fall. Some of the most valuable and practical structures, such as their massive arsenal, were completely obliterated by the Thunderbird forces that fled this plane when things became hopeless for them. Their arsenal happened to stand where Occulara does now.”

Penelope’s eyes widened in surprise, and she stared at her father in awe and wonder, which rapidly turned to bitterness and resentment.

“Have you already guessed what happened?”

Penelope nodded. “I have a guess, though if it’s right... The arsenal included the Thunderbird Clan’s arkyards?”

“Its primary arkyard, yes, and what a place it was, from what I understand. Massive arks capable of transporting tens or hundreds of thousands through the empty void between planes, and nearly all docked at their arkyards. It was completely ruined, as were almost all of the arks left there.”

“*Almost*,” Penelope emphasized as she jerked her head back toward the window.

“*Almost*,” the Director repeated with a smile. “The armies of Aeterna under the Brilliant Eleven took everything that they could salvage, but Heaven’s Eye—before it was Heaven’s Eye—managed to salvage these six arks and hide them away. We salvaged more, as I understand it, but all of that wound up being eventually discovered and confiscated by the Brilliant Eleven or their successors. All of those magical machines were either taken apart and reverse-engineered, were destroyed in the chaos of the wars that brought about the four Empires, or couldn’t be used and were squirreled away in places that not even I can find. These arks are all that we were able to hold onto throughout the countless years.”

Penelope frowned. “They’ve never been reactivated in all that time?”

“Most of the time, they’ve languished wherever they were stashed, quietly gathering dust, largely forgotten about. Some attempts to reactivate them have to have been made, but I couldn’t find any direct references to them—which, given how under wraps they were kept, makes sense to me. But in recent millennia, no attempts were made.”

“That clearly changed when you came to power...”

“Yes. I discovered these magnificent machines rotting away in several different hidden locations and began to expend my resources in ensuring that their secrecy was kept—I don’t want to get into it, but my predecessor didn’t know about these things, and I don’t think *his* predecessor did, either. I’m probably the first Director in a long time to actually pull these things out of their ancient storage.”

“Why? Wouldn’t they have been safer if never touched?”

The Director scowled; an expression that Penelope had rarely ever seen her father wear. It was an expression of deep resentment, regret, and even a bit of hatred.

“I don’t want to get into it, but the events that led me to the rediscovery of these arks very nearly exposed them to Imperial eyes. They had to be moved even if I had no personal desire to do so. So I began construction of this place, and moved these arks around until it was completed.”

“And you did all that without this place or these arks being exposed?”

The Director shrewdly smiled. “This place was built slowly, over the course of almost a century. Still, I’m sure the Empires had some inkling that I was up to *something*, but if they knew exactly *what*, they would’ve stormed in here and taken the arks without even a courtesy call to me, likely adding them to the Ilian collection of broken or ‘useless’ pieces they’ve retained from when they looted the Thunderbird arsenal for all that it was worth.”

Penelope studied her father, noting possible holes in his story that she wanted filled. “This place was finished sixty years ago,” she stated.

“Yes,” her father confirmed.

“The arks have been here all that time.”

“Yes.”

Penelope momentarily wondered just how the mammoth constructs had gotten here, but she guessed that a ninth or tenth-tier mage might’ve been able to move them, though if her ninth-tier father had done so, it couldn’t have been comfortable. Still, that issue was one she quickly put out of her mind.

She inquired, “What kind of resources did you direct to them?”

She guessed that her father knew where she was leading the conversation, and said, “Not many, in the beginning. I didn’t trust that many people. Even now, I could probably make much more headway in understanding just how to take control of these machines if I recruited more Heaven’s Eye enchanters, but the more people know, the most likely the secret is to get out.”

“But that changed recently...”

“Yes. Leon Raimé’s arrival represents a great deal of potential not only for us, but for the Empires, as well. No one’s been able to activate these arks, not completely, not in any way that would matter. None of the dormant legacies that the Empires possess have been activated, either, which means they face similar issues that we do.”

“So you’ve been staffing up because Leon arrived down here? And looking into blood magic? Is that where the vampires come in?” Penelope’s voice slowly grew louder and more accusatory as she rapidly asked these questions, but she cut herself off before she was truly yelling.

The Director smiled bitterly. “There are no greater masters of blood magic than demons, and the vampires that serve them. I don’t know Leon that well, not even now. And he isn’t loyal enough to me to inspire much trust. But I want to reactivate these arks, and for that to happen, I’m positive that I need Leon’s blood, and to control the power within it.”

“But those vampires have to have been with us for longer than Leon has! I noticed that you were up to *something* before he even arrived!”

“I’ve been looking into this for a long time, child, as have the Empires. And we’ve all known about Leon for years, and that Leon would eventually make his way down here from those insignificant Kingdoms in the north. We all want to use what we have, and we’ve all prepared ways to do so.”

“So, what, you’re all going to fight over Leon? Just to activate your arks and whatever else you have? And even then, the question remains—at least, for you, father... *Why?* It can’t be political power, it can’t be a desire to dominate and build an Empire of your own... is it?”

The Director paused a moment. “No,” he answered. “I’ve never felt the need to be an Emperor. My dreams have always lain... outside of Aeterna, among the wonderous stars and the mysteries they represent. As an Emperor, I would have nothing that I don’t already have. It is beyond the edge of this plane that novelty lies, and that is what I want to see.

“As for Leon, I like him well enough, but I don’t want to fight over him. The vampires and their expertise were meant to allow me the ability to use these arks without Leon’s direct assistance, to take a little bit of blood and possibly use that as the key to reactivate these arks. Failing that, the vampires’ demons promised to teach me how to bypass those bloodline locks, if need be. This is what I want, child. To reactivate these arks and get away from Aeterna. Leave them to their pe

Chapter 717: Simmering Conflict

Leon stared at Penelope sitting across the table from him. Elise, Maia, and Valeria were with him, though only Elise sat next to him—Valeria leaned against the wall behind them while Maia had lain down on a lounge pushed up against the wall. They wanted to hear this conversation too, but made it clear enough from their postures that they weren’t that interested in actively participating.

Penelope had just arrived at the estate barely ten minutes prior, and it had been about eight hours since Leon had met with her in her residence. It was late in the evening, but no one even once thought about sleep now that she was here.

“So,” Leon said as soon as they all sat down and got comfortable, “what’s the word? What did the Director say to you?”

“He... said many things,” Penelope replied, her expression guarded and almost distant. “I’m not sure how much *I* can say, or even *want* to say... but I can say unequivocally that my father is deeply torn between choosing to side with you, or the vampires.”

"How is that even possible?" Elise exclaimed in anger and frustration. "They're *vampires*! They're probably feeding on and sacrificing members of Heaven's Eye and he just *allows* that?! That's like inviting a werewolf into your nursery! It doesn't matter what 'benefits' they promise, you're still inevitably going to end up with dead kids!"

"What did he tell you?" Leon asked, agreeing with but also wanting to move on from Elise's statement. He was angry, too, but he just wanted the information before he started venting that anger. "What benefit is he getting that makes this such a difficult decision?"

Penelope deeply frowned in thought. "He's found... Or, I suppose, *Heaven's Eye* has some things from your old Clan that he hopes to reactivate and take control of. The vampires have promised to aid him in this, while your blood may also be a key."

Leon's eyes narrowed as his demeanor became even more serious. "What sort of 'things' are we talking about? They have to be powerful..."

"Yes," Penelope replied. "Powerful enough that if word that Heaven's Eye possessed them, it could very well be destroyed by greedy Imperials. Please, don't press me for details..."

"To the hells with that!" Leon almost shouted. "What is it that he's hiding?"

"I'm not going to say," Penelope shot back, her expression turning severe.

Leon scowled, but settled down into a mild glare. It wasn't like he could make her talk if she didn't want to, so there was no point in losing his cool. But his anger still simmered in his core, speeding up his heartrate and making him restless.

Elise then stated, "Whatever it is, and whatever he's been promised is powerful enough that he tolerates vampires in his institution, even as they attack his own people."

Leon added, "That doesn't sound like the sort of person who should be making any calls within Heaven's Eye."

"What are you saying?" Penelope inquired, her tone remaining neutral even as her demeanor hardened.

Leon leaned back, his arm around Elise and one leg crossed over the other, looking like he was as relaxed as he could be. He smiled, though there was little warmth in the expression. "I'm saying exactly what it sounds like I'm saying. In my opinion, allowing this shows the Director's incompetence, or at least catastrophic callousness. The vampires are targeting me and mine, and if the Director won't act against them despite having the power to do so, then in my mind, he tacitly endorses them. And that makes him my enemy."

"Are you planning on attacking him?" Penelope asked. "Even with *your own demon*, that won't go the way you want it to."

"No, we're not at that stage, yet. But what I *am* suggesting is that maybe the Director shouldn't *be* the Director anymore."

"And who would you replace him with? Emilie? Yourself?"

Leon shrugged. "It's just a thought. How many others on the board or in other high-ranking positions would continue to support your father knowing that he allows such a rot to fester within Heaven's Eye? I know that he's powerful and controls Heaven's Eye with an iron grip, but how many friends does he truly have? How solid is his support? How many people just have to agree with me before he's forced to step down?"

"My father won't ever step down."

"Maybe he won't have a choice."

Penelope darkly chuckled. "You know, this is exactly what I feared you would do when you joined. Insisting on doing what you want when that might come at the expense of Heaven's Eye."

"You've said that before, and as I said earlier today, I wouldn't be acting like this if your father didn't insist on harboring vampires that are intent on doing me harm. Have I ever expressed doubt in his leadership before this moment? Have you ever been given real cause to doubt me before?"

Penelope's demeanor softened slightly. "No," she admitted.

"Then I hope you can appreciate how seriously I'm treating this. I was hopeful when your father empowered me to do whatever I needed to do to find my retainers, but all of that hope vanished when he revealed that he was *protecting* those who took them!"

Leon sighed, then took one of Elise's hands in his. He called upon his middling skill in darkness magic and whispered into her mind, [I'm thinking of showing her my platinum card. I don't think it'll make much difference, but at this point, I'm kind of grasping at straws...]

Elise glanced at him and cocked her head. She couldn't respond without speaking aloud, but Leon still had no trouble understanding what she was saying: she was asking if he was sure.

[I'm sure,] he replied.

Elise took on a thoughtful expression for a moment, and then squeezed his hand in support. He smiled, then turned his attention back to the conversation.

"Do *you* support his position, Penelope?" Leon asked.

Penelope frowned and averted her gaze. "What he showed me... wasn't something I'll ever forget. What he *told* me... I... I can understand why he thinks the way he does. I can understand why he thinks the vampires—or rather, their demons—are such an attractive option for him, especially after hearing your thoughts on the matter. He doesn't trust you, and while he doesn't trust the vampires, they've at least shown that they're capable of delivering on their promises. I want him to succeed without bloodshed, without anything backfiring."

"But do you support *this*?" Leon repeated, sitting up a little straighter as he did so he could impress upon her his seriousness. "Vampires. Blood sacrifice. Attacking members of Heaven's Eye. Is whatever he's working on with the bloodsuckers worth this in your eyes?"

Penelope went quiet, and neither Leon nor Elise said anything for a long moment. They just let her think.

Leon was just about ready to continue when Penelope finally broke her silence.

"I don't know. Honestly. I hate that I don't, but that's the truth. He's my father and I trust his judgment. What he showed me... is profound. I don't like vampires, but this... He hasn't yet made his decision, but I'll understand if he decides to stay the course."

Leon stared at her, his expression falling from muted anger to deep disappointment. He sighed, then said, "You put me in a terrible position. If I can answer your honesty with my own, I'll say that I'd be perfectly happy with the Director retaining control over Heaven's Eye were it not for this one deal-breaker. Until these past few days, I've had no real cause to doubt his leadership. But these have been some pretty shitty few days, and they demand some kind of change. If the Director is unable or unwilling to implement that change, then I, for my own safety and security, and for that of my friends and family, will have to seek that change elsewhere.

"I also understand that this is... somewhat in line with the impression you had of me before we met. And I assure you that I take no pleasure in this. I don't *want* to act against the Director. I just want to see to myself and my people grow strong, and then depart from this plane. I want to discover who I am, what I am, and my place in the world. And I want everyone I love to be there with me. I would... be *very* upset if I lost anyone along the way. Murderously so, I'd say.

"But you have to act in your best interests, just as I will act in mine."

Penelope just sat there, listening to Leon's spiel, and by the time he was finished, she looked several inches shorter, as if Leon had just laden her with a rucksack full of rocks.

"You wouldn't win any confrontation between the two of you," she quietly said.

In response, Leon just conjured his platinum card, the ID card of his Ancestor, Demetrios, son of Jason Keraunos, the last Storm King, and laid it on the table. Then, as a few bolts of harmless silver-blue lightning danced up his body, he stared at Penelope, his golden eyes seeming to darken to a bright orange.

"I have plenty of options open to me, I think. But I also think that conflict would not be in our best interests. Regardless, as I said, I'll do what I have to do to ensure that my people are taken care of, and that my *enemies* are taken care of. You and your father will look out for your own best interests as you see fit. If we could come to some kind of arrangement, some kind of alliance, then that would be ideal, I think. But you're free to continue to ally yourselves to vampires who engage in kidnapping, torture, and blood sacrifice. Even if they weren't targeting me, I wouldn't stoop so low, and let me tell you: I don't have many standards, but this is one."

Penelope stared at Leon's platinum card throughout his entire monologue. Leon knew from Elise and Emilie that there were legends within Heaven's Eye that whoever possessed a platinum card was bound by ancient custom to take control of the guild. However, after ten years, Leon knew those to be just legends. He couldn't just show up to the Hexagon brandishing the platinum card and expect everyone to kiss his ring. The people in charge wouldn't just allow that to happen, their powers were too entrenched for that.

But he thought it a good symbol of intent, anyway. If the Director continued to work with his enemies, then he'd have no choice but to fall back on one of his original intents for joining Heaven's Eye: taking it over. He already knew that he had Emilie's support, and while he wasn't particularly familiar with the

other board members, he had at least been introduced to them during his time, and he felt confident in bringing them to his side.

"You've got the ball," he said as Penelope's silence continued. "Whatever happens next is up to you and the Director; I'm perfectly fine with waiting until my return from the Sacred Golden Empire. Out of respect for the relationship we've had for the past ten years, I won't be acting against you, and if we have to part ways, then I hope that the two of us, at least, can do so as friends. And I hope you can understand that what I'm doing—what I *have* to do—is not motivated by arrogance or narcissism. Two of my people were kidnapped and tortured by vampires associated with Heaven's Eye, and that *can't stand*."

Penelope finally responded, "I understand that much, Leon Raime. I'll convey your... message to my father."

With that, she took one last look at Leon's platinum card, stood up, and made for the door. Leon and Elise politely saw her to the exit, and away she went back into Occulara. The two then returned to the private meeting room where Valeria and Maia waited for them.

"So," Valeria said as they walked back in, "that was kind of a shitshow, wasn't it?"

"It was," Leon responded. "I expected as much, though. I don't think anyone willingly allies themselves with vampires without at least some cause and commitment."

"This is still *very* troubling, husband," Elise said. "They're choosing vampires over us! They might as well be saying that we're... *enemies*..."

Her emerald eyes began to water up, and she stared unfocused at the wall in front of her. Leon responded by pulling his wife into his arms. "We're still here, though. No matter what, we have each other, don't we?"

He glanced at Valeria, who nodded and walked over, laying a hand on Elise's shoulder in support. Maia then embraced her from behind.

"I'm of a mind to kill them all," the river nymph said aloud, "but I suppose we can wait a little longer for that."

Leon smiled bitterly at her, but appreciated the sentiment, nonetheless. Still, Elise shuddered in his arms, and he heard a stifled, choking sob and felt some dampness on his shirt where Elise had pressed her face. She was crying, and he couldn't blame her; Heaven's Eye was her home, she'd known nothing but its protection, and having the guild practically throw them out in favor of vampires couldn't be easy to take.

"Hey, let's all get some rest," Leon offered. "We can continue this in the morning once we've all had some sleep."

"Right," Valeria responded. "We need to discuss our options."

Leon nodded, and the four of them went to bed. Elise remained as close as she could be to Leon for the rest of the night, clinging to him in what he thought was almost desperation. She was terrified of losing Heaven's Eye, and didn't want to lose him, too.

He just hoped with all his heart that she wouldn't have to lose anything.

—

"So, one of the Empires?" Valeria asked as the four met back up in their private meeting room. "If we signed on with, say, the Ilians, then we'd be safe from any Heaven's Eye retaliation..."

"That's assuming we're even scared of retaliation," Leon pointed out. "And I'm not so keen on joining Ilion... I don't know what Anastasios might want out of me for that kind of commitment. They have legacies from my old Clan, but without knowing what they might have and what they might do to get it worries me."

He glanced around the room, taking note that while Elise was certainly looking a lot better than she was the night before, she still didn't seem entirely up to offering any suggestions. He just kept her close, trying to reassure her that he wasn't going anywhere without repeating it ad nauseum.

"What about the one north of here?" Maia asked as she cuddled in on Elise's other side. "That Princess couldn't keep her eyes off you, she'd probably do things to get you on their side."

"What kind of 'things', though?" Valeria asked. "Would she offer herself in marriage? Expect you to set the rest of us aside? Debase yourself or the rest of us to secure her support?"

"Not an option," Leon declared. "We can talk to her if we run into her during the expedition, but I don't want to give up on Heaven's Eye quite so easily. I have Emilie's support, I have Sid on my side, and even though I don't have Penelope, I have the platinum card. I have *some* leverage here, and I don't just want to give all of that up without a fight."

"But how much of a fight are you looking for?" Valeria asked. She leaned in a little bit and locked her gaze upon him. "You know that I'm with you all the way. If you want to stay with Heaven's Eye, then I'm with you. If you want to try and find greener pastures, then I'm with you, too."

Maia's agreement pulsed through their connection, and Leon sent his love back. Elise, meanwhile, just leaned into him a little more and offered him a weak, sad smile.

"If it's possible to make this work, then we will," he assured her, and she squeezed his hand.

"We still need some kind of contingency," Valeria repeated.

In a snap decision, Leon said, "How about south? The Sunlit Empire supposedly has many lightning mages, they might have the Titanstone refinery on Nestor's map, and... they're closer to the Sky Devils..."

"Are you thinking of going to them for help?" Valeria asked, doubt almost dripping from her tone.

"Not so much," Leon responded with a frown. "But of all the Empires, they'll probably have the most information on them. We might even be in a better position to meet a Sky Devil down there. No matter what, though, I don't want to leave this plane without at least a cursory look at what they might be able to offer us. If they're the remnants of my Clan's vassals, then there might still be some people within it who could be loyal to me. And even after we get through this, we could use all the allies we can get our hands on for whatever comes next."

"I'd be willing to go south," Valeria said with a smile. "I've heard that the Sunlit Empire is a beautiful place."

To that, Elise finally spoke. "It can be, but there are some restrictions... at least, for the three of us." She nodded to Valeria and Maia.

"What kind of restrictions?" Valeria warily asked.

"Curfews, a lot of places we can't go without a male family member, restrictions on what we can wear while out in public, that sort of thing."

Valeria frowned. "Maybe it's not such a great place."

Leon hummed in agreement. "Maybe just a short visit, then."

"A short visit should be fine," Valeria conceded.

"If they try to tell me what to wear..." Maia murmured in furious challenge, and Leon had to resist the urge to break out laughing. It had been more than a decade since he met her, and while she was typically dressed these days, she still reveled in nudity. As soon as they were in their bedrooms, Maia's clothes came off, not to be seen again until the following morning. During the day, she was often in the pools and ponds of the estate, sans clothes—though merged with the water and effectively invisible. Still, she had a very particular relationship with clothes, and he could still vividly remember when she first arrived at his home in the Bull Kingdom—coincidentally saving them from vampires, then, too—and was extremely reluctant to wear anything.

He pitied anyone who tried to force her into anything she didn't want to wear. Even now, she only ever took fashion advice from Elise and Valeria, but never orders, and anyone else who tried to comment on her attire was utterly ignored.

"For now, though, let's see what the Director says," Leon said. "Until then, we have an expedition to plan, gear to prepare, and a whole host of other things to take care of between now and then."

"We're going to have to see to our security," Valeria pointed out.

"That's part of what I'm going to focus on, for now," Leon said. "I have a ton of wyvern parts. I'm going to try and rope Sid into helping me with armor and weapons for everyone." He squeezed Elise's hand. "Including you, love."

She looked at him with some confusion in her eyes, which soon morphed into acceptance.

"I'm not going to take any chances with the vampires targeting you, next," Leon continued.

"When do you want to get underway?" Valeria asked.

Leon sighed, then thought about the problem. Armor at least, and weapons if he could get them, for everyone in his retinue, even if Sid decided to help him out, would probably take weeks at best, and the preparations for their expedition would take quite a while, too.

"Three months?" he guessed. "It might take longer, and if it does, then so be it. But I think that's the time frame we should shoot for. We might even get done sooner than that."

Valeria nodded, and after a few more relaxing minutes where the four just sat with each other, they got to work preparing themselves for this expedition.

Chapter 718: Overthinking

Leon stared at his retinue assembled around him.

“... and so that’s where we stand,” he finished, having just caught them all up on the events of the past couple of days and where they now stood in regard to the Director: still technically a part of Heaven’s Eye, but in a relatively precarious position and liable to leave in only a matter of months.

Looking around, he could see that his news had left most of his people rather introspective, but Anshu seemed almost annoyed, if anything. The Indradian muttered something in his native language that no one else could understand, though his tone was quite vitriolic.

Once everyone had had some time to process the information he shared, Leon continued, “I just want all of you to know that I don’t do this lightly. Heaven’s Eye, up to this point, has been good to us. But if it’s harboring a threat, then we have to respond. I have to respond. I won’t blame any of you if you want to bail now; being a part of Heaven’s Eye was a big reason that some of you joined, I’m sure. But know that if you stay, then I will always choose you over the guild. I will choose you over anyone else. I value each and every one of you, and if any of you are ever hurt, I will tear those that dared to lay a hand upon you limb from bloody limb.”

Alix was the first to respond. “I think I can speak for everyone in saying that we appreciate that sentiment, Leon. We’ve seen it several times already, and it’s not something we’ll ever take for granted.”

“You can, though,” Leon replied. “You’re my people. There are certain expectations that I hope I can live up to. And ensuring that all of you are safe, healthy, and strong is one of my responsibilities. I won’t ever abandon any of you for the sake of convenience—or anything else. But I also won’t force you to follow me. If you stay, though, I can assure all of you that these vampires are going to die screaming if I have anything to say on the matter. I won’t allow these threats to continue without answer.”

Surprising Leon, Anshu was the next to speak his piece. “Throwing in with vampires is vile. Those creatures should be exterminated! I’ll not have anything to do with any organization that endorses, directly or indirectly, blood sacrifice. If you’d advocated us to ignore these past couple of days, Leon, then I *would* leave. But I agree with your decision.”

“Thank you,” Leon replied.

“Same here,” Alcander loudly declared. “Just promise me one thing, Leon: when you find those vampires that are most responsible, save at least a little bit of the fun for us!” He clapped Marcus’ shoulder, but Leon noted that Marcus, while smiling, was a little less enthusiastic.

Helen and Anna remained with him, too, as did Alix, but during the entire meeting, Marcus barely said a word. In fact, he’d been remarkably taciturn since he’d been released from the hospital.

The meeting continued for a little while longer, with Leon shifting topics first to the preparations for their expedition to the Sacred Golden Empire, and for that, he needed quite a bit of assistance. First, he charged Anshu and Talal with procuring a yacht to take them north, and impressed upon them the need

to remain together and in public at all times, to minimize the chances of being attacked on the street. Then, he told his retainers that they were each going to be receiving some new gear soon, and to get their measurements done for armor.

When they were finished with that, he dismissed them to see to their daily training, but before he could take off for Sid's place, he was stopped by Marcus.

"Think I can have a moment, Leon?" the former nobleman asked.

"Sure thing," Leon replied, and the two stayed in the dining room until everyone else had left.

Leon waited for Marcus to speak first, so he waited for a long moment. He didn't rush the man, though, for Marcus sat in his chair, his eyes staring without focus at the table, his brow furled from intense thought.

Finally, Marcus turned to Leon and said, "I need to thank you again, but... just saying it doesn't feel sufficient. I can't overstate the relief I felt when I woke up in that hospital, knowing that you'd pulled me out of that place... Being attacked and kidnapped was humiliating, and that it was Kassia who'd done it makes it so much worse. And then... what they did to me and Alcander... Leon, thank you. This is a debt that can't ever be repaid, but I'll try anyway."

Marcus spoke with some hesitation as he searched for the right words, but his final statement came with conviction. Leon had no cause to think that he was just saying the words for their own sake; he meant every single one.

But while Leon appreciated his words, he didn't agree at all. "There's no debt at all," he said with a smile and a wave of his hand. "Those vampires were trying to strike at me through you. If you weren't with me, then they never would've targeted you."

Marcus just shook his head. "That doesn't matter. I chose to follow you south despite you telling me of the powers arrayed against you. I continued to follow you after that vampire attack in the Wetlands. I've followed you for ten years, and while I can't say that I've ever *really* felt that I would follow you forever, I have never been given cause to doubt my decision. But that's changed; I *do* feel like I can follow you forever after this whole thing. I saw what you did for Asiya's family back in Samar, but it's another thing entirely to have you come after I was taken..."

"Leon, I don't blame you for what those vampires did. They're responsible for their own actions, and you for yours. And you saved us. That's not something I will ever forget. As long as you'll have me, I'm yours. My sword, my bow, anything you need, you just have to say the word."

Leon sat and stared at Marcus for an almost painfully long moment when the former nobleman finished. Finally, he just said, "I... don't really know how to respond to that."

"That's fine," Marcus replied. "I think in your position, I would just dismiss this entirely. I never thought I'd be where I am now, saying these words to you. I don't expect a response, honestly. I just want you to know that I'm your man for the long haul. Whatever you need."

Leon just awkwardly smiled and said, "Thank you, Marcus." He didn't know what else to say, and it seemed that Marcus understood, for he just nodded at Leon, then stood up.

The two didn't exchange any more words, and Marcus went to the training room while Leon slowly walked out to his front courtyard, took flight, and meandered his way down to Sid's workshop, Marcus' words on his mind the entire way.

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"Siid!" Leon called out in a sing-song tone as he walked into her workshop, half in familiar playfulness and half in a forced attempt to drive out the thoughts that had occupied him the entire journey into the city. "You here?"

"Who is that? Who is that?!" he heard her shout from deep within her workshop where he could see some active furnaces and hear the sound of hammers on anvils.

"It's Leon!"

A moment later, Sid came around to the front, her blacksmith apron on and covered in soot from the forge. "Ah! Leon!" she said, a joyous smile breaking out across her face. "I didn't think I'd see you again so soon... especially not after what you told me yesterday..."

"Ah, right," Leon replied. "I hope I didn't put you in too bad of a situation."

"It's fine. I agree with you: vampires shouldn't be in Heaven's Eye. Still, I'd rather be left out of this, but if push comes to shove, I'm on your side."

"Thank you, it means a lot."

"Anytime. So, I don't suppose you came all the way here just to talk about some blood-suckers?"

"No, I didn't." As he started to speak, Leon walked over to one of Sid's tables and conjured a few sketches for armor and weapons he'd been toying with over the past year or so. "I need arms and armor for my retinue, and I was hoping you could provide me some critique, if not outright assistance."

Sid frowned in thought as she examined the papers, but then shrugged and said, "I can squeeze in a little extra forging. I'm mostly just supervising my apprentices, but they're all getting good enough that they don't need me to do that anymore..." She punctuated her statement by lightly socking Leon in the shoulder.

"Fantastic," Leon said with a smile, ignoring the friendly hit and gesturing to his sketches. None of them were complete or finished in any conceivable way, but they still served to illustrate—literally—what he was going for when it came to his retinue's new gear. So, without further ado, he jumped right into the technical discussion with his smithing teacher. "Now, then, I was thinking of using the wyvern bits I took from the hunt..."

—

Leon left Sid's workshop feeling quite pleased. After talking with her for several hours and making many more detailed sketches, he felt like he was ready to start some real work on the suits of armor he'd need. And he didn't just need to design the metal and scales of the suit, he also needed to devise detailed enchantment schemes for each suit, to bring them if not all the way up to par with his own pseudo-Adamant armor, then at least somewhat comparable in utility.

He had a lot of work ahead of him still, but before he'd left Sid's workshop, she'd told him that after their talk, she wasn't going to 'just' give him advice and critique, she also wanted to help with the actual forging, too, her interest and spark of creativity having been enflamed during their long exchange. With her help, Leon estimated that the three months he'd allotted for them to prepare for the northern expedition might not even be entirely needed.

When he got home, though, he found that his retinue was still training, so he decided to follow suit. He rather reluctantly set aside all thoughts about enchantments and the weapons he could create—especially his musings about a new Lightning Lance—and refocused on his own personal power. It had been a long time since he'd gotten stronger, magically speaking, and it was time to change that.

To that end, Leon checked up on his retinue first, and then headed straight for his personal meditation chamber. Once there, he cast himself into his soul realm, waking on his humble black throne. Without a word, though, he took flight and made for the deep pit where his transformation enchantment had been carved by the Thunderbird.

When he arrived, he found the place much the same as it had looked when the Thunderbird had finished it. The pit was tremendously deep, its sides covered in millions of glowing runes. Floating in the air throughout the pit were even more runes made of polychromatic light.

Leon drifted down the pit, his eyes flitting from one rune to the next, taking in the entirety of the enchantment. In the past ten years, he'd studied this thing many times, and his growing skill in the art allowed him to identify more and more of the enchantment as a whole. He still wasn't even close to being able to replicate it without just directly copying it, but he could at least follow it reasonably well.

When he reached the bottom of the pit, he sat down in the center of the enchantment, the pit lit only by the glow of the runes around and above him. With the pressure of the stone around him and with how far from the surface of his soul realm he was, the bottom of the pit was almost oppressively quiet, and that was exactly what Leon was looking for.

But he could find such quiet in other places, of course, but what those other places didn't have was this enchantment.

The most important part of the enchantment were the parts that now directly surrounded him. The floating runes forming long, swirling bands of light were, themselves, mostly light runes designed to interact with his body. It was this part of the enchantment that anchored the entire thing on his bloodline.

They weren't only light runes; he could see a few lightning runes in there, too. The Thunderbird had made some alterations to the enchantment in making it fit for his use, but there wasn't a single fire enchantment to be seen in there. She had revised the enchantment to effectively target only the power that he had inherited from her.

He wasn't upset by this, she could hardly be expected to know enough about the Great Black Dragon's power to target it for stimulation. Leon didn't, either, of course, but that wasn't why he was here.

He sat down in the center of this great enchantment that allowed him to transform his shape into that of the Thunderbird, and watched the floating runes drift about, forming new glyphs, before separating again to form other glyphs. Almost absent-mindedly, he opened his palm and conjured a few arcs of

lightning between his fingers. He didn't have to push, he barely even had to summon it. The lightning was a part of him, as inextricably attached to him as his own hand. Hells, he could lose his hand, but his power wasn't so easily lost—he knew that from personal experience, as the slight tingling in his left arm reminded him.

It took some concentration, but the silver-blue lightning that sparked and flashed around in his hand began to change in color, turning gold: the standard color of lightning mages. He hadn't hidden his power like this in many years, not since the civil war in the Bull Kingdom. Back then, he'd enchanted part of the gauntlets of his Magmic Steel armor to aid him in hiding his power, but even then, it still took some amount of effort and concentration to do.

It wasn't natural. Golden lightning, the standard for all lightning mages, the lightning naturally produced by nearly all creatures with power over the element, was something that he had to work to produce. But the Thunderbird's lightning, that which could protect his mind from attack, came to him as naturally as breathing.

Leon closed his palm and his lightning vanished. A moment later, he opened his palm again, and therein burned a small orange flame.

This flame was the standard for all fire mages, indistinguishable by sight alone from the flame of a mundane candle or campfire. And yet, it was all that Leon could consciously conjure. The black flame of the Great Black Dragon was, despite being 'his', outside of his control, only ever showing itself when he felt found himself feeling extreme emotion.

Leon sat quietly in the center of that enchantment, wondering just what it was that he was missing. He alternated between fire and lightning, paying attention as much as he could to the way he was able to summon the Thunderbird's lightning as opposed to golden lightning in an effort to compare to his fire magic, but no matter what he did, the answer eluded him; he just couldn't conjure black fire.

He'd spent quite a bit of time working on this issue over the past ten years. His musings rarely lasted for longer than a few hours, but now, he had much more experience with black fire. He'd been conscious when he'd used it during the hunt for the black wyvern, though it had still been instinctual.

Leon sat there for three hours, lost in thought, before he finally realized: he was thinking *too much*.

The Thunderbird's lightning came to him instinctually, and he had to work for the golden lightning. The same, he reasoned, should be true of his black fire.

He smothered the orange flame in his hand and forced himself to empty his mind. He kept his palm open, but no magic appeared within. But he called for his black fire anyway. He didn't exactly expect it to answer or to dutifully come trotting out like a loyal dog, but he called all the same.

Nothing responded.

Leon paid extra attention to what was going on within his body. He quietly turned his element-less mana into fire mana, letting it inundate his body and fill him with its heat. But he summoned no fire.

For hours more he sat there, trying to copy with calmness and serenity what he'd done with anger and passion...

... only to realize that he was doing exactly what he'd been doing for years. He was still overthinking, trying to force it.

So, once again, he cleared his mind, and moreover, his body. He stopped transforming his mana into fire mana. He stopped thinking about fire. He just sat there, searching around within him for that burning feeling, that righteous heat that had demanded to be released when he saw Maia vanish into the black wyvern's maw.

And, for just a moment, he felt *something* respond. It was like a coiled dragon slept in the pit of his stomach, and, in response to his probing, its sleeping head had twitched.

Leon held onto that feeling for as long as he could, and when he called upon his fire, he saw for such a brief amount of time that he almost thought he'd imagined it a tiny black fire in his palm. But he blinked and the candle-sized flame in his hand was again orange.

Leon closed his fist and tried to recapture that feeling, his heart madly beating with joy, but this time, he was unable to turn his mind off enough. He was elated, he felt like literally jumping for joy, but the hour after dampened his spirits. Nothing he could do roused that dragon, and the time came for him to stop before he saw another lick of black fire.

Chapter 719: Avian Jealousy

When Leon levitated out of his transformation enchantment's pit, he found the Thunderbird waiting for him, perched on a nearby cliff. He slowly hovered toward her, then set down at her side and waited for her to speak first.

He stared out at his soul realm for a long time as he waited, enjoying how the omnipresent light that emanated from the Mists of Chaos so far away softly illuminated this mountain vale. It felt like the mountains around the vale were themselves surrounded by a misty storm, and Leon couldn't help but relax whenever he took the time to quietly look out over the place.

Finally, the Thunderbird spoke. "Your soul realm has healed nicely. You need to focus on growing it again."

"I was thinking the same thing," Leon replied, his tone neutral and unemotive. He knew that this wasn't why the Thunderbird was here—or at least, not the only reason.

"Continue to build up power within yourself," the Thunderbird instructed, her yellow avian eyes remaining trained on the distant mists. "Exert some pressure on the boundaries of your soul realm and build up the land around this vale. Like a muscle, you can't overdo it, but the more you exercise, the faster you'll grow."

"I'll keep that in mind. Will the enchantment I made for Xaphan to absorb the Mists of Chaos work for me?"

"I suppose it will, but it would require quite a bit of tweaking. If you pull in too much of the mist, you'll cause your soul realm to implode, or worse."

'What's worse than a soul realm implosion?' Leon wondered, but he didn't ask it aloud. He wanted the Thunderbird to get to the point.

Because of that desire, the conversation died down for a moment.

After that moment of silence, the Thunderbird said, "I felt something shift in here, like the tiniest of earthquakes. An immense amount of force, but not easily seen on the surface. What did you do?"

"Is it not obvious?" Leon asked. He'd been tremendously excited when he first saw that quick burst of black fire, but his excitement had died down as the hours passed without a repeat performance. But now that he was speaking with his Ancestor, all of the excitement came roaring back. "I finally managed to consciously channel some of the Great Black Dragon's power! I called upon my fire magic and was answered by black fire!"

The Thunderbird finally glanced down at him as he beamed up at her, his face alight with delight. Her avian face, however, might as well have been carved from stone for all the emotion it showed.

"I thought so..." she whispered. "That certainly felt like some kind of shift within your blood, some tiny little thing, like a pebble falling down a mountainside that starts an avalanche..."

"Is this a bad thing?" Leon wondered, his tone shifting to anxious wariness. "I don't really feel any different, stronger or otherwise. It was just a moment, a quick pulse of power that I wasn't able to reproduce."

The Thunderbird replied, "Channeling such powers is like flying; when done once, you always remember how. It's just a matter of getting comfortable with using that ability. That momentary summoning of black fire was but the first of many summonings, I think. How did it feel at the time?"

Leon smiled, relaxing with her lack of concern. "It was... kind of... well, I don't really know how to put it into words. It felt *liberating*, though even that isn't quite the best way to phrase it. It felt like there was something deep within me, in the core of my being, that slept, but for just a moment, it stirred, its eyes flickering open, and its power was released. But after that, this 'sleeping dragon', I'll call it, passed right out again, and didn't stir no matter how much I poked and prodded."

"Interesting," the Thunderbird whispered. "I don't think I've ever really heard it described like that before. Maybe because of his suppression...?" She trailed off, leading Leon to think that she was mostly just talking to herself as she pondered what he'd said, so he decided to add a little bit more context.

"It was just a feeling I got, I don't actually think there's a real dragon in me. It's just... another aspect of me, another *part* of me that I don't have conscious control over. Maybe it would be better to say that I managed to flex a muscle I didn't know I had, but I'm still not quite in control enough to do it again—though, obviously, this is far more complicated than just a muscle."

"Indeed," the Thunderbird agreed. "But have you finally figured out why you haven't been able to conjure black fire until now?"

"I think I have," Leon said, pride filling his voice. "It was the simplest thing, honestly. I kept calling for the black fire, imaging that it would be the hardest thing ever to do since I have to actually try to conjure fire when I want to. But that same effort isn't needed for your lightning, it just comes naturally. To oversimplify, I'd say I was trying too hard, and had to let it come as naturally as your power does when I call upon it."

"That makes sense," the Thunderbird said, though her tone was somewhat subdued and almost morose.

Leon's eyes narrowed and he felt suddenly awkward at her relative lack of expression. "Is that... all right?" he asked, feeling almost like a child asking an adult if he'd done something bad.

"It's quite all right," the Thunderbird immediately responded. "Objectively, this is something to celebrate, but..." As she trailed off, her body shifted and in a flash of light, she was standing beside Leon in her human form, her bronze face not looking all that thrilled. "But I can't help but feel some jealousy at all of this. It's a good thing that you have such power in your blood, especially since you're finally starting to come into it. This is a good thing."

"You're not saying that to me," Leon observed.

"No, I'm not," the Thunderbird replied with a mysterious smile. "It often requires me to repeat it to myself." She turned to face him completely, then laid both hands down on his shoulders. "You are my last living descendant, the last person who carries my power. If you were to die without ever having children, then my power and legacy will vanish from the universe. I will die my final death, and there would be no one left who could carry on my memory."

"Because of this, I think I've grown kind of possessive of you, Leon, and protective. You are all I have, while the Great Black Dragon has so many descendants that he can afford to ignore you completely. I've put much effort into training you, and it brings me no small amount of joy to see how far you've come in the past decade-and-a-half. Your command over my power would've made you a rising star in my Clan just a universal cycle ago, before the Clan fell from grace. All sorts of rewards and resources would've been thrown at your feet to encourage your growth, and power and position within the Clan would've been yours for the taking; whatever position you might've wanted would've been yours."

"But this isn't a universal cycle ago, and my Clan has been reduced to just you. You, and some long-forgotten and long-abandoned ruins, picked clean or fought over by carrion. And you have often professed your lack of desire to reclaim through birthright what once belonged to your ancestors—to me and my descendants—while simultaneously striving hard to claim the power that the Great Black Dragon has denied you. It... makes me happy to see you starting to succeed, but I also can't help but wish you had the same willingness to invoke your blood claims on what used to belong to my Clan."

Leon went quiet for a long time when she finished, though while he wanted to step away from her to think for a moment, her hands remained on his shoulders, keeping him right there in front of her.

"I... get what you're saying," Leon replied. "It's not an indictment of you—far from it, actually. I value your power and your lessons beyond measure."

"But you don't seem to value what my Clan left behind. You moralize over it and reject what should be yours by right."

Leon grimly smiled and said in a self-deprecating tone, "What right do I have to do that, hm?"

"You have all the right to do so, it's up to you what help or resources to make use of. The claims are yours to press, and if you don't want to, then so be it."

Leon's smile thinned. "If I had to say why in any objective sense, I suppose I just don't like being handed things."

"A foolish attitude for someone in your position to have."

“Maybe, but it’s just how I’m wired. Something that’s held away from me, that’s been denied to me, I will exert great effort to unlock. But if it’s handed to me, well... I don’t know, really. I know that I’ve been harsh on the Clan in the past. For good reason, I think, but I won’t reject it outright—I’m still trying to rebuild it, after all, for however much I might not be naturally inclined to do such things. But the Great Black Dragon just kinds of pisses me off, and taking his power that he’s tried to deny me gives me such a visceral feeling of pleasure that it’s hard to compare it with anything else.

“But give it time, Ancestor. When I get this thing figured out and use it to the point of nausea, when it no longer becomes *new*, when it no longer becomes something that has been denied to me, then I think my fascination with it will ebb. It’s just behind a big, locked door with an irritating sign on it that says, ‘No Leons allowed’. Honestly, fuck what’s actually behind that door, I just want to get in there because I’m not supposed to!”

The Thunderbird finally cracked a smile and chuckled under her breath. “Maybe I should’ve been more aloof, then?”

“I think you were plenty aloof,” Leon disagreed. “Only appearing to me when I finally reached the sixth-tier isn’t the sort of behavior I’d like to encourage. If anything, I would like it if you were a little more open and ‘around’, so to speak.”

She chuckled again, but louder this time. “Are you saying that you want me to appear more often in your soul realm?”

“I’m saying that I’m hoping when I finally do get around to having children, that you won’t be quite as aloof as you were with me. I can’t imagine I’ll make a good father, and they’ll need a better example than I can give them. I’m sure you’ll prove a greater mentor than I could ever be.”

“Don’t sell yourself short, boy, and don’t make assumptions about how you’ll fare as a parent until you have some experience as a parent under your belt,” the Thunderbird said as she finally took her hands from Leon’s shoulders. “Speaking of children, what kind of timetable are you looking at? Building the Clan isn’t just retaking all of our former holdings, you know...”

Leon’s smile dimmed slightly into something that more resembled a grimace. “Honestly, I don’t know. All of this recent business with Amon’s vampires has shown me that things still aren’t safe for me and mine on this plane yet, and if I were to have kids, I wouldn’t want to leave this plane until they were adults who could accompany me. And what if they were to marry before we left and started having kids down here? I would worry incessantly about them when we reached the Nexus! I... I don’t know.”

“You’re overthinking things. I’m sure your mates would like to have children someday, perhaps even soon. That water girl of yours has even researched it quite a bit, hasn’t she?”

Leon quietly nodded; Maia had memorized every single book from his family’s archives that contained even the slightest trace of information about typical reproduction rituals that his Clan partook in. Having even a single Inherited Bloodline made it harder to have children, and Leon had two, so he’d long made his peace with not having kids for a while, yet, but Maia had done all she could to figure out how his more immediate ancestors had gone about solving this issue.

“I’ll talk it over with my... *mates*, then,” Leon said. “In the meantime, there’s a certain research facility north of here that needs my attention, so I should head out and start planning that out.” He gave the

Thunderbird a beatific smile. "After all, I need to show you that I value your—*our*—Clan, and that I'll strive to take what's been left behind, don't I?"

The Thunderbird just smiled back him. "You don't have to show anything to me. I'm just an old bird who's proud of what you are, already. But... I suppose I *would* like to see a little more effort on your part to reclaim what was once mine..."

Leon laughed and said his goodbyes. It was time to compound his success with the black fire with planning out his expedition to the Sacred Golden Empire.

—

"All right, tell me about this place in detail," Leon said, gesturing to the map of the Sacred Golden Empire on the table in front of him. His only company was Anna, whose extensive hunting and traveling experience, and childhood spent in the Sacred Golden Empire more than qualified her to tell him about the region they were about to venture to.

"First off, the most important feature of the Sacred Golden Empire is the Neilos River, running down the entire length of the Empire from north to south, right into the Central Sea. Nearly all of our most important cities are located along the river."

"That makes sense," Leon replied, staring at the map. The Neilos River was dotted with settlements, whereas more outlying areas of the Empire were somewhat more sparsely populated. "It's a lot like the Ilian Empire, in that respect, isn't it?"

"It is," Anna hesitantly agreed, averting her gaze for a moment. "However, maybe don't say that to anyone in the Empire? They don't much appreciate being compared..."

"Ah, I don't mean any offense..."

Anna furiously shook her head. "No, it's fine for me, I don't much associate myself with them anymore. But there are quite a few people who take their citizenship in the Sacred Golden Empire *very* seriously, and even insinuating that the Ilians are anything like, or anywhere close to them, can be enough to provoke a fight."

"Consider that duly noted," Leon whispered with a thoughtful look. "What else can you tell me about your people that you think I should know?"

"You, specifically?" Anna asked with a cheeky smile. "I'd recommend staying away from most of our leaders, but I think you're already going to be doing that..."

"Without a doubt."

"Good. Our city administrators are known as 'druids', and aside from administration, their most important duties are to tend to our sacred trees that form the core of our civilization. They're an often depressing, and usually utterly boring sort, who won't even give us the time of day when we pass through, I think."

"Your people didn't seem quite so dour back in the Scorched Fields," Leon mused aloud.

“Those were courtiers around the Imperial Princess, not druids,” Anna explained. “There are other public offices other than druids, but since druids are both political and spiritual positions, they tend to have more than enough concerns as it is. Best not to add to their headaches, else they’ll add to ours in return.”

“All right, I got it: leave the druids alone.”

Anna smiled and nodded. “Now that we’ve gotten that out of the way, I think we should talk a little about where you want to be going.”

“I’m all ears.”

“How many maps of my homeland have you seen?”

Leon frowned and thought about it for a moment. “Many, I suppose,” he replied.

Anna hummed in thought. “This ‘lab’ you’re looking for is located in the middle of a deep forest, the Protia Forest, you know that?”

“I did,” Leon said, having to contain his excitement. “I was actually looking forward to getting back into wooded lands, if I can be honest.”

“Maybe temper that excitement a bit.”

Leon sighed. “I’m guessing this forest is haunted? Or infested with dark and dangerous creatures? Or just really rough and hard to move through?”

“Yes.”

Leon fell silent, his smile frozen on his face, neither growing nor shrinking.

Almost every single point on Nestor’s map had turned into a city. If he had to guess, it was because the infrastructure left behind by his Clan made settlement in these areas much easier than they would otherwise be.

‘Or maybe they just built their facilities in already settled locations...’ Leon theorized.

Regardless, only a small handful of the most important sites established by the Thunderbird Clan on Aeterna hadn’t become cities in the millennia since, and the lab that Nestor had told him about was one of those few.

“What sort of dangers exist in this forest?” Leon asked. “Is this map accurate for scale?”

“The map’s reasonably accurate, yes,” Anna replied.

Leon lightly frowned. The forest that contained the lab was quite large, being perhaps as big as the Bull Kingdom’s Central Territories. While it was only a small portion of the Sacred Golden Empire, it was still a large region by nearly any other metric.

“Many creatures call this forest home,” Anna explained. “It’s the one place other than the uninhabited regions in the far northeast of the plane where manticores still freely roam. Other than that, there are

numerous species of venomous snake of varying sizes, owls and other birds large and powerful enough to threaten arks, and protan foxes, incredibly intelligent creatures with great power over fire.

“And all of that’s not even getting into the more exotic dangers.”

Leon cocked an eyebrow in interest. “Exotic?” he echoed, his tone packed with intrigue.

“This region is infested with tree sprites, tribes of goat men, and green, man-eating giants.”

Leon blinked in surprise. “All right. I know what tree sprites are, we had those where I grew up. But what in the hells are goat men and these giants?”

“Myths, mostly,” Anna admitted. “However, no one’s ever been able to settle in that forest, and all attempts to clear it out have been met with failure and death. Often, entire work crews sent to try and clear out portions on the periphery, or try to set fires to burn the forest, are attacked and killed by *something*. There are occasionally survivors, telling of men with the legs and horns of mountain goats, and of giants four or five times the height of men made of leaf, vine, and wood.”

Leon’s eyes widened in understanding, and then narrowed in greed.

“Have you heard of the stone giants in the north?” he asked.

“I’ve heard a few things,” she said. “Mostly from you and your people from the north. I admit some curiosity, but I’ve never really given them much thought.”

“What may not have been shared,” Leon responded, “is that those stone giants—yes, they’re real—are very similar to these ‘green giants’ you describe. Maybe they’re related? Some kind of golem?”

Anna smiled and shrugged. “You’re the expert here, not me. Just because no one lives there doesn’t mean that the forest hasn’t been explored, though. It’s just that no one’s ever found any lab, or any other man-made structure, really. Just a lot of things that are really fucking powerful and really fucking hate humans sticking their noses in their woods.”

Leon nodded and turned his attention inward. He knew from Nestor that the Thunderbird Clan hadn’t thought much about the local resources of Aeterna when they arrived, but established this research facility to study the local flora and fauna anyway. It didn’t have any golem manufactu

Chapter 720: Seeking Allies

Leon was quite subdued when he arrived at Emilie’s residence at the top of her tower, just below the magical spire that helped to hold the Hexagon in the air. After some thinking done on the flight over, he decided that losing Kassia wasn’t quite the blow that he’d originally thought, as she was probably not that connected to the vampires that were chasing him since her contracted demon wasn’t Amon.

Still, it enraged him that his witness had been murdered while in custody.

He’d calmed down by the time he arrived, and when he stepped off the magic lift and into Emilie’s penthouse, he was back to his usual rather unemotive self. He was greeted by one of Emilie’s servants and was shown to his mother-in-law’s formal dining room, to his surprise. He’d arranged this late lunch with her to get her advice and assistance in shoring up his support against the Director, hoping she could back him up when he dealt with other board members and powerful members of the guild, but it was to

be just the two of them in the meeting since Elise was still out hunting down land for the golden apple orchard. This meeting shouldn't have warranted the formal dining room...

As he was escorted through the penthouse, he noticed Jordan, Elise's father and Emilie's first husband, walking the opposite direction with several other gorgeous or ruggedly handsome men that Leon found vaguely familiar—several of Emilie's concubines, he figured—and Leon called out a greeting.

"Hey there, Leon," Jordan responded, a huge grin on his face appearing after seeing Leon in the hallway. He paused as they drew closer and leaned in, whispering to Leon, "Heads up, kid, someone quite important showed up unannounced today."

"I kind of figured that much," Leon replied. "We'd just be in a solar or something otherwise, wouldn't we? Who should I prepare myself for? A board member?"

"No one so high up," Jordan replied, "but still influential. Narses the Black, a high-ranking inspector that keeps an eye on the Tower Lords of the south."

Leon cocked his head at that name. He hadn't heard it before, but judging by the epithet, he knew a couple things about Narses already: he wasn't from a prominent family, and he was more than likely from a place that didn't have family names for commoners. The Bull Kingdom was one such Kingdom, but as far as he knew, the Ilian and Sacred Golden Empires were two more, as was the city of Argos, among many other places. Narses certainly wasn't from the Bull Kingdom, though, not with that epithet.

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

"No problem. Be sure to give Elise my love, will you?"

"Of course."

Leon continued, and his escort soon showed him into Emilie's formal dining room, announcing him at the door with his full name and rank within Heaven's Eye.

Sitting at the head of the table was Emilie, her emerald eyes narrow from the strength of her smile, her red hair gleaming in the light shining in from the floor-to-ceiling window behind her. On her left was a man with quite striking looks: hair as dark as the moonless night sky, green eyes so dark that they were almost black, strong masculine features, the pale skin of a man who rarely left the indoors, and an eighth-tier aura. He was tall, rather lithe, and though he smiled toothily when Leon walked in, the smile didn't quite reach his eyes.

"Leon," Emilie warmly said as Leon walked in. She rose to greet him, with Narses rather lethargically doing likewise, making it clear that this small respect was only out of obligation.

"Emilie," Leon responded in kind, and he quickly stepped forward to give his mother-in-law a hug. When they parted, he looked to her guest and asked, "Narses the Black, I presume?"

The man didn't look even slightly surprised, though he said, "It seems my name has preceded me, though I have no idea how; I'm no one special..."

"I'm sure you're just being humble," Leon politely responded. Looking to Emilie, he said, "I hope I'm not interrupting anything, am I?" He glanced at a clock on the wall, noting that he was perfectly on time for their lunch meeting.

"Of course not," Emilie replied. "Narses just found himself in town and had some business to conduct with me. It seems we've carried on a bit longer than expected, though..."

"There're always fires that need putting out for the board members," Narses bemoaned. "Fortunately, you, My Lady, are quite adept at extinguishing them."

"You flatter me," Emilie replied. She then turned to Leon and said, "Leon, you're quite good at dealing with problems, aren't you?"

Unsure exactly where she was going with this, but having at least some idea, Leon replied, "I'm quite good at manipulating fire as needed, if I do say so myself..."

"That's spectacular," Narses said. "There have been quite a few pirate raids on cities in the Pegasi States recently, and we're thinking the Sky Devils have had something to do with it. We're having to scramble a lot of security forces south to deal with the growing threat, and if one of the Hands of the Director could find his way down there, I'm sure there would be no end to the problems they might be able to fix..."

"I'll see what I can do," Leon politely responded.

Narses and Emilie then continued to discuss what exactly the problems down south were, but Leon found himself only half-paying attention. The longer he stared at the man, the more he found that was something familiar about him, but he just couldn't put his finger on it. He was quite certain he'd never met the man before, and when he thought hard enough about it, he thought he'd heard the name come up once or twice in the past decade...

But it was just something about the man's general aura that had Leon squinting, trying desperately to see what it was that seemed so damned familiar about him. Given recent events and the paleness of his skin, Leon's first thought was that the man was a vampire. However, Narses' skin wasn't quite that deathly pale, his body wasn't nearly so thin as a typical vampire's was, and he didn't shy away from politely laughing at any jokes Emilie made, showing his teeth to be quite unfanged. Leon also couldn't detect so much as a trace of demonic magic in his aura.

That certainly put him somewhat at ease, as he didn't want to even think about having an eighth-tier vampire coming after him—the previous seventh-tier blood-suckers had been problem enough. Still, he couldn't quite place why the man seemed so familiar.

After about fifteen minutes, Narses excused himself and departed, his business with Emilie done.

"So, what was your impression of him?" Emilie asked once they were alone.

Leon stared at the door through which Narses had departed and stayed silent for a moment as he turned her question over, wondering how to answer. Finally, he said, "I'm unsure. He's certainly powerful enough that I'm surprised he isn't more widely talked about in the Hexagon, but... I don't know, why do you ask?"

"My own curiosity," Emilie replied. "Well, that and the fact that you need supporters right now, don't you?"

"I do," Leon agreed, turning his eyes back toward Emilie.

“Narses would be a good place to start. There aren’t many eighth-tier mages in Heaven’s Eye that aren’t either on the board or serving as one of the Director’s Hands or Eyes, and having one of those few on your side would mean quite a bit of clout with the rest of Heaven’s Eye.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Leon said as he glanced at the door again, only to almost jump out of his skin when it opened a moment later. However, it was just some of Emilie’s wait staff bringing in the first course of their lunch.

The two politely chatted for several minutes as the food was laid out, but once the servants had left the dining room, they were back to business.

“Aside from Narses,” Leon said, “are there any other people you might be able to recommend to me? As you said, I need support.”

“I can certainly give you some names, and more besides,” Emilie replied. “First, though, answer me something: are you only looking for support *within* Heaven’s Eye?”

Leon shook his head. “If someone can advance my cause from without, then I have no problems with bringing them in.”

“That’s good to hear.” Emilie set aside her food for a moment and retrieved from her soul realm two sheets of paper, upon each were written a list of names and a short sentence or two giving their positions and relative worth for Leon’s goals.

The first sheet had names of those within Heaven’s Eye, and with no more than a cursory glance, Leon realized that he knew just about everyone listed on it, even if only in passing. The other five members of the board were on it, as were the names of their vice-chiefs. There were also several others like Narses who were in high positions of power within the guild, though not sitting on the board.

The second sheet was filled with far more unknowns. About three dozen people were listed, and only a bare few had Leon ever heard of before, and only then because they operated relatively small businesses that were affiliated with Heaven’s Eye, filling in some of the few gaps in the guild’s expertise that existed.

“I can help with those on the first list,” Emilie said as Leon looked them over, “but my aid with those on the second can only be limited.”

Leon nodded in understanding. “All of these people could be useful, but are there any you might recommend more than the others?”

Emilie smiled and nodded. “I can do you one better, Leon; I can even tell you about a few people to avoid. Rufus, for example—Chief of Magical Research and Development here in Heaven’s Eye—is on the list only because he’s a board member. But he’s also one of the Director’s oldest and most trusted allies, so the chances of him supporting you over the Director are slim.”

Leon frowned. “Not even if we reveal that the Director is working with vampires?”

“It might be good to keep that information in reserve. I’m guessing you haven’t interacted with many of these people before?”

"I've spoken with all of them in my capacity as a Hand. But I've never invited them over for dinner or spoken with them about anything other than business."

Emilie shrugged. "It might be best to avoid talking about the vampires, then. Save that for an ace in the hole. For now, I'd recommend just talking with these people and getting to know them, and only bringing up your need for support against the Director if the Director proves that he's acting against you and your interests."

Leon lightly scowled, but he understood what she was saying. "You want them to get to know me instead of having me, barely more than a stranger, try and force them into acting against their leader of centuries?"

Emilie responded with a grave nod.

"Would that advice track with those on the second list?"

"I can't recommend anything from those on the second list," Emilie said. "I just don't know most of them. I only know 'of' them."

"Then of those you know of, who do you think I should start with?"

Emilie looked at the list in Leon's hand and pointed to one name roughly halfway down the list. "It might be risky, but in this situation, I think he might prove most useful—assuming you can get him to cooperate."

Leon glanced at the name and his eyebrows rose in curiosity and he grinned at Emilie. The name simply read: 'Stelios. Officially, a vigneron operating six vineyards south of Occulara. Strong links to the Saltwater Road smuggling organization.'

"I wouldn't have expected you to send me after criminals," Leon said.

Emilie gave him a deadly serious look and replied, "Vampires are outcasts. They become criminals the instant they become what they are. It's only natural that their allies and most of their enemies are also criminals. So if you want to track down and fight some vampires, then you need someone who knows the business. And Stelios would be the man for that conversation."

"Still, asking a guy like that for help..."

"It's risky," Emilie admitted. "I certainly wouldn't go outright asking Stelios for help. But you asked for anyone who might be able to provide you with support, and Stelios can. Whether or not you make contact with him is your business."

Leon nodded. "I'll look into these other names first, then, and make my decision later. At the very least, there aren't going to be any serious talks of opposing the Director until after my expedition to the north."

"You're still going to be meeting with some of these people, though, right?"

"Of course. I have a bad feeling that the Director is already making his own moves, and I'm already behind just from virtue of our positions."

"Then how about you meet with some of the board members soon?"

Leon hummed in agreement.

"The Chief of Public Relations is an attractive place to start, but..."

Emilie smiled in understanding and finished his statement for him, "... But she's an obvious place to start."

Leon knew that five of the six Chiefs sitting on Heaven's Eye's board had been placed there by the current Director; only the Chief of Public relations hadn't, being the oldest and longest-serving Chief in all of Heaven's Eye. Since she didn't owe her position to the Director, she had less reason to be loyal—though, Leon fully admitted, not *no* reason, for the Director had managed Heaven's Eye quite successfully for a *long* time.

Still, if he had to rebel against the Director, then the Chief of Public Relations was an obvious woman to get on his side. Unfortunately, that also made it predictable.

"We can shelve that idea for now," Leon continued. "I was also thinking the Chief of Security, if possible. If push comes to shove, then I'd prefer to have those with the weapons in my corner."

"A good choice." Emilie then pointed to one of the names highest on the first list. "Narses the White is the current Chief of Security."

Leon nodded, remembering the huge blond, boisterous man he'd spoken to a couple of times. "Any advice for dealing with this guy?"

"Narses the White is a heavy drinker and loves a good brawl. Get him drunk, challenge him to a fight, and win. He's also eighth-tier, though, so it won't be an easy win."

"That can't be all I have to do..."

"You won't get him on your side with that alone, especially since the Director is ninth-tier, but it should be enough for him to pay attention to what you have to say. You could also appeal to his sense of duty; I think rooting out the vampire menace will be an attractive thing for the Chief of Security."

"Then I'll make some time for him."

"Are you at all trying to be subtle?"

Leon smiled, but his lips were thin and his eyes flashed with scorn at the idea. "The Director, as far as I'm aware, will already know that I've been here. He'll know exactly where I go and who I talk to within hours of my visit, if not sooner. It won't matter how secretive I try to be, it honestly won't help. So there's no point. Hells, if I'm more upfront about this, then it might better sell how seriously I'm taking this issue and make him more likely to side with me over the vamps."

"Or it might provoke him into acting against you more directly. Are you ready for that kind of heat?"

Emilie's tone took on a deadly tone, and Leon knew that she was asking after more than just him.

"I'm ready," he responded. "All of us are. Elise hasn't forgotten about that vampire attack on our home back in the Bull Kingdom; she wants these creatures who've been harassing us for years dealt with, as much as is possible."

One of Emilie's perfectly trimmed eyebrow's rose in curiosity. "You say that as if you don't expect this problem will go away."

With a deep scowl, Leon said, "I don't. The demon that's most involved in these matters is an old rival of Xaphan—my demon. And he's had eighty-thousand years to grow his network on this plane. His power here seems to be limited, thank the Ancestors, otherwise the entire plane probably would've been his a long time ago, but his followers are dangerous enough. Even if we kill all of his people, though, not only will it not affect that much since he's not physical on this plane, but he's also undoubtedly far more powerful than any of us can deal with right now. Probably at a level that only after a long time in the Nexus will we have strength enough to face him directly and have a chance to win.

"So, no, I don't think that anything we do here will permanently end this problem. But that's no reason to lay back and let it happen, is it?"

"A healthy attitude to have, I think."

The two sat there for a few more minutes, quietly picking at the food that had been brought out. After it became clear that neither had any more real business to bring up, Leon asked, "So, I was thinking of hosting a party at my villa—"

"—A party?!" Emilie cried out, almost choking on a piece of fruit in her shock.

Leon nodded, unfazed by her shock. In the ten years since he'd arrived in Occulara, he'd never once hosted a party at his home. "I'm thinking of using it as a pretext for meeting Narses the White. And I was hoping you'd be there too; lend this thing a little air of dignity and legitimacy, right?"

"Of course!" Emilie cried out, reaching over and doing her best to pull Leon into a hug without pushing them both down into her food. "Oh, this is going to be incredible! I need to plan out what to wear and who to bring!"

"I can't speak to the first, or even really to the second—bring whoever you like, as far as I'm concerned—but I know Elise would be beyond thrilled if Jordan were to come. They don't see each other enough."

"Neither does she see *me* enough," Emilie replied in a slight huff. But she brightened up a moment later and said, "That's still a wonderful idea! Just send Talal with the details and I'll be sure to clear my schedule for the day! Oh, this is going to be so much fun!"

Leon grimly smiled, wondering just what he was getting himself into with this idea. He couldn't very well take it back, at this point...