

Storm King 721

Chapter 721: Symposium

Leon stood just outside his front door, Elise at his side, just about his entire household with him, ready to welcome their guests into their home.

They were throwing a party. A small party, to be sure, but given their statuses, and the statuses of those who'd been invited, they had to pull out all the stops. Emilie was coming, as was Sid. Leon had sent Penelope an invitation despite their relatively rocky relationship, and, taking Emilie's advice, had invited several others in high positions within Heaven's Eye, including Damien Makedon, the Hand of the Director who'd escorted his group from the Bull Kingdom to Occulara.

However, for all those highly-ranked guests, none were as important in his mind as Narses the White, the current Chief of Security for all of Heaven's Eye. The guild didn't have a military of its own, but it did have considerable security forces that were about comparable to an army. And leading them all was Narses the White, as close to a general as Heaven's Eye had.

From what Leon had known before and had been able to dig up since his initial meeting with Emilie to discuss their position and strategy, Narses the White was an old appointee—the first person who the current Director had appointed to his position, in fact. It seemed that the previous Chief of Security had been one of the Director's rivals on his rise through the ranks, and once he'd assumed the title of Director, he'd forced that man into retirement, replacing him with one of his other supporters: Narses the White.

Under normal conditions, Leon might've immediately written Narses off as a man who he couldn't sway, for he had been given his position by the current Director and had served ably and loyally for many years. However, after consulting with Elise, Valeria, Maia, and the rest of his retinue, Leon decided to proceed. Opinions on that course of action had been mixed, but Gaius and Marcus had both been of the mind that the appointment had been to try and secure Narses' loyalty with an appeasing position, or possibly to fulfill a promise the Director had made him for his support. In other words, Marcus had said, Narses had been one of the people who'd 'made' the current Director, and as such couldn't necessarily be assumed to be on his side. After all, if he made one Director, there was no reason to think he wouldn't be of a mind to make another.

And so, Leon, Elise, and several others of their household stood outside the villa, welcoming their guests into their home and to their modest party. It wasn't anything special—just some food and a chance to socialize—but it was an important opportunity for Leon to get in good with these people and sound out who might make a good ally against the Director, should push come to shove.

Emilie arrived with great splendor, though bringing only Jordan along, to Elise's delight. Leon was happy, too, knowing that Elise wasn't overfond of most of Emilie's other husbands and concubines, but she loved her father, and her father adored her. Naturally, Emilie and Jordan had the longest and warmest greeting, only heading inside once a high-ranking Heaven's Eye lawyer arrived, not wanting to create a line in front of the villa as more and more guests arrived.

But soon enough, Leon saw coming down the somewhat rural road, passing by the other villas in the distance, then passing by the fields on Leon's property, a gilded chariot that shone like a fallen star in

the darkness of the early evening. Pulling it were two majestic Saternan horses, one dark red and the other bright gold in color.

Proudly standing in the chariot were three men. One was the driver, the reins he held looking they were made of spun gold. The second man was fairly well-dressed, though not particularly impressively, and he radiated only a fourth-tier aura. The last man was far more eye-catching, being almost seven feet tall, with muscles so built he looked about one careless flex away from tearing right out of his tightly-fitted clothes. He was dressed primarily in white, with intricate black embroidery covering his vest and trousers in flowing organic patterns. He was fairly handsome, with rough, rugged looks, piercing blue eyes, and a strong jawline. His most striking feature, however, was his shoulder-length platinum-blond hair that streamed behind him as the chariot barreled on.

This was Narses the White. Leon had, in his capacity as a Hand of the Director, spoken to him before, but they'd never exchanged more than pleasantries. But he had a reputation that, after spending ten years in Heaven's Eye and doing a bit of research following his meeting with Emilie, Leon was familiar with: he was fair in his dealings, prioritized the safety of Heaven's Eye above all, and he was quick to anger, though he didn't let it affect his judgment.

When Narses' chariot pulled up into Leon's courtyard, the eighth-tier Narses leaped out of the vehicle and landed before the stairs leading up to Leon's front door. Several of Leon's servants quickly ran forward to help valet the chariot, while Leon and Elise strode forward a little more leisurely, meeting Narses about halfway down the stairs.

"Leon Raime!" the giant man shouted as they neared, extending an arm.

"Narses!" Leon replied with equal, though perhaps not as honest enthusiasm. He extended his free arm and grasped Narses' wrist, while Elise, grasping his other arm, politely nodded.

"Narses," she said with considerably less volume, and considerably more formality.

Narses vigorously shook Leon's arm, a wide smile on his face. He beamed first at Leon, then to Elise, joyous energy radiating from him almost more than his aura. "Lady Elise," he responded. "It brings me such joy that you two would think to invite me to your party! I have to admit that I wasn't expecting such a thing, but my delight knows no bounds!"

"The pleasure is ours," Leon replied. "Please, come inside, get a drink, I'm sure there's much we can talk about!"

"Ah! Indeed!" Narses finally released Leon's arm, and Leon and Elise then escorted him inside. He was the last guest to arrive, so there wasn't much need to remain outside.

Once inside, just as Leon had ordered, Narses was greeted with the most expensive bottle of wine that Leon had been able to procure in the past couple of days. Elise had had to pick it out for his knowledge of such things was abysmal at best, but he had faith that her choice was wise.

That faith was immediately vindicated when Narses exclaimed, "Oh! Is this for me! What generosity!" Narses' smile grew even wider, and he gladly accepted the offered bottle.

"Just a token of respect," Leon replied, trying not to lay it on too thickly. He wanted Narses to get drunk, but at the eighth-tier that was nearly impossible. At the very least, though, if he were to drink enough,

then he should get a little tipsy, and maybe even get into a fighting mood. "Where I'm from, drinking with people is a sacred tradition, and many parties went through casks of drinks of all sorts. However, I was told that quantity should be tempered a bit with quality. What do you think?"

Narses held the bottle like it was a precious, but fragile, artifact. "A wonderful tradition!" he boomed. "Such a gift as this deserves reciprocation! I hope you won't turn down an invitation to my own villa later!"

"Of course not," Elise responded for them both.

"Well then, Narses," Leon said, "if you wouldn't mind, I'd love to have a chance to speak with you for a while."

"And I would love a chance to speak with you, Leon Raime," Narses responded with intensity, his demeanor shifting slightly to something more business-like. "The recent lawlessness in this city concerns me, but even before all of this unpleasantness, I was hoping to break words."

"Then please, join me over here," Leon said, escorting Narses into an inner courtyard where the rest of the party was taking place. As he did, Elise released his arm and separated from them to mingle with their other guests and to ensure that their household servants were doing their jobs. Leon saw the rest of his retinue doing their best to mingle with the retainers brought by other guests, though Maia had decided to spend her night in one of the private pools rather than in the party. Penelope also hadn't shown up, though Leon wasn't quite sure how to feel about that.

Leon led Narses over to a standing table in the courtyard filled with various finger foods and more drinks, chatting all the while. Narses was quite complimentary about the villa, and Leon wasn't shy about bragging about the accomplishments that he'd made in its security, that Elise had made in its interior design, or that she and Helen had made in their fields, though he never got too detailed.

"I might ask for some advice when planning our new security protocols, then," Narses said when they finally reached the table.

"New security protocols?" Leon asked.

"Yes. These problems that have cropped up in the past couple of weeks have convinced me to allocate more of our budget to upgrading the wards in our security stations. This assassination of that vampire woman you brought in is unacceptable! I've already disciplined those whose lax attentions and lack of adherence to protocol led to this embarrassment, and when I get my hands on those who were responsible for breaching our defenses like that, I will... well, do things that aren't exactly appropriate talk for a party."

Narses punctuated his statement with a wide smile, which Leon returned.

"That's something I would support, I think," Leon replied. "It frustrates me greatly that Kassia was murdered before we could get any more information out of her. This vampire threat isn't something that can be taken lightly..."

"Indeed not!" Narses resolutely agreed.

Encouraged, Leon asked, "Have there been many problems with vampires in this city in your experience?"

"Ha! As if! Vampirism is outlawed in the Empires, and so it is in Occulara! And for good reason! Only werewolves are more vile, and that disgusting curse was eradicated from Imperial lands many centuries ago!"

"That seems strange to me, especially in a region where demonic contracts are allowed."

"Ah, yes, I remember hearing something about you having a demonic contract, isn't that right?"

"Yes, though he doesn't demand blood sacrifices, thank the Ancestors. Even if he did, though, I'd refuse."

"Always heartening to hear! But just because such powers are tolerated doesn't mean that they're encouraged! Generally speaking, those with known demonic contracts are watched to ensure they don't succumb to the baser desires that demons are known for!"

"Am I being watched?" Leon stared at Narses with a wry smile, knowing that even if he didn't have a contract with Xaphan, he would probably still be monitored, to some extent.

"I think you know the answer to that question," Narses responded with a knowing smile of his own. Then he glanced around at the rest of the party, and his smile died.

For the most part, it was a low-key affair, with only a couple dozen guests, and all from distinguished enough backgrounds that getting wild wasn't done often, if at all. However, that didn't seem to be the vibe that Narses wanted, as he'd already sucked down half of the bottle of wine that Leon had given him at the entrance, while Leon had only taken tiny sips from his own cup.

"Interesting music," the Chief of Security eventually said, his tone sounding genuinely appreciative.

Leon nodded politely and glanced at the musicians that Elise had arranged. She'd chosen a harp and singer duo for soft, gentle background music to set the initial tone they were going for, but they had drums and heavier strings ready for if the party needed a change in atmosphere.

To that end, Leon didn't even need to push Narses to start letting loose—the man took another swig of his wine bottle and said, "Say, Leon, are you experienced in drinking games?"

"Can't say that I am..."

"Wonderful! Come now, let's get a little more experience under your belt!"

Narses threw his arm around Leon and steered him to the center of the courtyard where, with a wave of his hand, he conjured a large mixing bowl larger than most cooking pots in Leon's kitchen. It appeared to be made of dark bronze; the outer surface was covered in many runes of varying sizes and decorative geometric patterns. Set into the bowl's foot-tall stand was a large emerald that glowed with arcane light.

"I love this thing," Narses whispered to Leon. "This krater will fill itself with any liquid that's added to it. So, if I were to pour a little of this wine into the bowl..."

Narses then allowed a drop of wine from his bottle to drip into the krater, and the bowl shuddered as it hit the polished bottom. The runes covering the krater then illuminated with blue and white light, the glowing emerald flickered, and Leon watched as wine seemed to appear from nowhere and slowly started filling the krater.

“By the Ancestors...” Leon whispered. “I’ll admit, I’ve never seen anything like this.”

“Ha! That’s something to hear from an enchanter!”

Leon bashfully smiled and shrugged. “I’m a little specialized, I have to say. Mostly weapons, armor, and other such things to enhance my personal magic. I don’t think I would’ve ever thought of something like this simply because I’ve never really needed one...”

“If it weren’t so damned expensive, I’d say that *everyone* needs one!” Narses responded.

As they spoke, the krater had filled up about to about two-thirds capacity and stopped.

“It’s fun, but something that can only be used for parties,” Narses explained. “The emerald stores enough magic to do this about ten times, and can take quite a bit of time to recharge from the surrounding magic—even when a mage is trying to recharge it can be time-consuming. The thing itself cost me more than a hundred million silvers to commission.”

Leon’s eyes almost sprang out of their sockets. Quietly, he said, “I respect that commitment. People have spent greater fortunes on things with far less value, in my experience.”

Narses beamed at him, then grabbed an empty cup and filled it from the krater. Without hesitation, he tossed it back and drained it in a single draft.

He smacked his lips when he pulled the cup away, then bemoaned, “The quality isn’t nearly as good as the original stuff, but it’s still better than most of the swill that people have the nerve to sell!”

A few of Leon’s curious guests noticed what was happening, including Marcus and Alcander, and they wandered over, fascinated as they were by Narses’ mixing bowl. Acting as if he were the host, Narses then invited everyone to partake in the wine within, which Alcander, at least, did with enthusiasm, to Narses’ delight. Soon enough, most of Leon’s guests had taken at least a cupful, and the krater was mostly drained.

But that wouldn’t do, in Narses’ mind, and he managed to get a drinking game started. Leon felt like he might’ve been insulted had getting Narses drunk and in a bit of a fighting mood not been one of the goals of the party.

Still, he didn’t partake that much in the game, which consisted of elevating the krater and trying to toss wine dregs from a drained cup into it from several dozen feet away. Those who failed had to drink, while those who managed to get a few drops in and activate the duplication enchantment also had to drink. Then, the game would pause as the krater was drained by the game’s participants, and they began again.

Hours passed, and given the general strength of those that Leon had invited, it was only then that people started to get a little red in the cheeks.

“Don’t think... I don’t see what you’re doing, Leon!” Narses exclaimed, his words a little slurred as he walked over, looking a little unsteady on his feet.

Leon’s heart skipped a beat, but he simply turned to the tipsy Heaven’s Eye board member and said, “What do you mean?”

“You’re nnnnot drinkiiiiing!” he shouted. “You can’t shjust stay out of it! Come on! Toss some wine!”

“Yeah!” a much drunker Alcander called out. “Tossh shome wine!”

“You sshee! He gets it!” Narses responded, and he and Alcander laughed and clasped wrists, the two seemingly kicking off a good friendship from the moment the drinking game began.

Leon just smiled, tossed back his drink—only the second one he’d had since the party had begun—and then took careful aim. His guests—those who were sober enough to notice what was happening, anyway—paused to watch as he whipped his cup, sending those last few drops of wine hurtling out toward the krater.

And they fell a little short, landing on the outside of the bowl rather than falling into it.

“Damn!” Leon exclaimed, his frustration more genuine than he realized. Then, with a sigh, he turned back to Narses and said, “I’m not so good at these sorts of things, I’m afraid.”

“Aargh!” Narses responded as he shook his head. “Then we shjut... shust... *just* need to find the right game!”

Leon nodded and asked, “Do you know any that are a little more... physically intense? I’ve always been more of a fighter than a drinker...”

Leon let his aura expand a bit, making it clear that he was speaking of a contest of strength of fighting prowess.

“I do, I do!” Narses said. “Come on over here, let me ssshow you!”

Narses led Leon over to one of the tables, and with the eyes of the other guests on them, propped up his arm on the table.

“Sso, we grasp each other’s hands like this, and then we pussh. The one whose hand touches the table loses! And they drink!”

“I like this one,” Leon said as he stood opposite Narses and propped his elbow up on the table. “What do I have to do when I win?”

Narses grinned at him and clasped his hand. With his drunken slur, he explained, “*If* you win, you drink!”

Leon chuckled as Marcus, Alcander, and Alix appeared at his shoulder, whispering and shouting encouragements as the other guests started crowding around. Elise took a position next to him, as did Valeria, and Emilie, her cheeks a little red, stepped forward and placed her hands on Leon and Narses’ clasped hands.

“You boys ready?” she asked in a tone that Leon guessed was supposed to come out a little seductively, but was ruined by her inebriation.

Leon smiled and assumed a strong position, while Narses did likewise. He was a little drunk, but he was still an eighth-tier mage, and Leon wasn't going to underestimate his strength.

"Begin!" Emilie shouted, and she pulled her hands back.

Leon and Narses immediately began to push at each other, and Leon gritted his teeth and dug deep. Taking this seriously was the right call, for as much wine as Narses had drank, he was still much more muscular than Leon was, and almost a foot taller, to boot.

Still, Leon wasn't in this to lose. Emilie had told him that Narses respected strength, and Leon wanted Narses on his side. So he pushed as hard as he could, letting his body fill with the Thunderbird's lightning. Narses likewise called upon his magic, and to Leon's relief, it wasn't earth. If it had been, he guessed he would've lost this contest, but instead, Narses' eyes began to glow with light magic, an element not typically associated with huge strength enhancements.

They pushed for several long seconds, the other guests cheering louder and louder with every passing second, and Leon almost felt like his arm was going to shatter. But he was slowly pushing Narses down, until finally, the larger m

Chapter 722: Almost Unified Aesthetic

Leon could hardly believe what he was seeing. Eleven suits of armor were in front of him, each one tailored specifically to a member of his retinue. And only a little over a month had passed since he'd convinced Sid to help him with their forging.

"So," Sid asked as Leon stood there, staring in bewilderment, "what do you think?"

Leon slowly blinked as his mind processed what he was seeing. He then looked up at her, and a wide smile broke out across his face. "I can't believe it," he said. "I could never have done this on my own—at least, not so quickly!"

Sid walked over and lightly socked him in the shoulder. "Get better with earth magic and you'll get faster! Hammering and casting aren't quite so time-intensive when you can use magic to manipulate the metal as is needed!"

Leon nodded, understanding what she was saying without her even needing to say the words. "I won't neglect my practice," he assured her. "Being able to wave my hand and make a suit of armor is the dream."

Sid sighed, then turned back to the armor before them. "So, what do you think?" she repeated.

Leon glanced back at the armor. Each one was primarily made of extremely high-quality steel personally smelted by Sid. With her knowledge of magical forging techniques, this steel was extremely receptive to any kind of magic that Leon might've wanted to enchant the suits with. Making each suit even sturdier were the wyvern scales that each was adorned with; Leon had used a significant number of the scales he'd acquired during the wyvern hunt in the creation of these suits, especially those from the black wyvern.

A wyvern's scales had certain anti-magic properties, which was one of the reasons why the beasts were so tough. However, most of these properties were lost when the wyvern was killed and the scales

removed. Even then, they were still extremely hard, tough, and receptive to enchantment. They were also extremely stylish, glittering in the light of Sid's workshop.

Leon had spent more than a week with Sid designing these suits. While he'd left much of the more practical armor features to her given her expertise, he'd used his own skill in enchanting to optimize each suit for his purposes. As a result, he had more than enough room on each suit to work his enchantments.

"They're perfect," he said, meaning every word. The suits wouldn't quite stand up to his pseudo-Adamant, but in every objective sense, they were of extremely high-quality.

"That's wonderful!" Sid exclaimed as she held up a breastplate for him to inspect. It glittered mostly with black wyvern scales in a roughly hyper-masculine shape, with red wyvern scales interspersed throughout to outline where muscles would be. Even if he hadn't sat down with his retinue to go over their specific desired styles, Leon wouldn't have had to guess to know that this was Alcander's suit.

Leon took the breastplate and looked it over. It was huge, but perfectly tailored to his tallest and most heavily muscled retainer. He could find no flaw within it.

Sid did likewise for every piece of armor she'd forged, not letting him get away with a mere cursory inspection. But what he was unable to find on his quicker inspections eluded him still in closer inspections; these suits were, as far as he could tell, without flaw.

When he was done, he pulled all of the suits into his soul realm, already looking forward to the process of enchanting every piece. It would be strange, but when he was finished, his retinue would have something of a unified style amongst them, clearly identifiable as belonging to the same faction. They'd also be as heavily protected as he could possibly make them, alleviating some of his anxieties when it came to their protection.

"Thank you, Sid," Leon said once the inspection was finished. There was nothing else he felt like he could say.

"You want to thank me?" Sid rhetorically asked. "You can do so by showing me that you can at least use the basics of earth magic when you get back."

"I *can* use the basics, though!" Leon protested. As proof, he extended his hand and called on his meager mastery of earth magic and causing some of the stone floor to vibrate. "See?"

Sid smiled condescendingly at him. "Keep working on it, kid. Keep working on it."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah."

As Leon turned around to leave, Sid stopped him.

"By the way," she said, "what's going on with the vampire situation?"

Leon frowned. "Not much, honestly. I'm keeping my people on guard, but unless I decide to go to the Director personally, I'm unsure what he might be doing. So, I'm content to make connections within Heaven's Eye and confront him when I return from the north."

Sid nodded, her smile falling into a light frown. "Well, when push comes to shove, I'll be there for you, Leon. Just say the word."

"Thank you, Sid. I'll talk to you soon."

"Yeah."

With that, Leon left her workshop and set out for home.

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"So this is our new armor?" Valeria asked as Leon showed her the work he and Sid had done.

"It is," Leon said.

Valeria couldn't stop grinning as she went over the suits, stopping once she reached the armor that had been made for her. It was a little slendrer than most of the other suits, but no less protective. She hadn't gone with a complex design for her armor as Alcander had done with the muscle pattern, but instead asked simply that her armor be split between black and blue wyvern scales. The right half of her armor was blue, while the left half was black.

"What do you want to start with?" she asked, indicating the enchantments that the two had spent the past month or so laboring over.

There were strengthening enchantments, some designed to increase speed, others to try and use Leon's newfound experience in anti-magic to add additional protection against hostile magic. On more offensive notes, while he wasn't planning on adding any weapons into his retainers' armor, he did have quite a few potent enchantments designed to amplify their own magic, hopefully increasing not only their potency, but efficiency as well, allowing them to fight stronger, faster, and for longer than they would with their current gear.

Despite the lack of weapons, though, there were a few utility enchantments that he planned on adding, such as a version of his darkness enchantment that could make him invisible, as well as enchantments within each helmet to ward away mental attacks. Every suit would have integrated flight and light shield enchantments, too.

Leon quickly made his decision, and he and Valeria spent the next few hours applying the enchantments to the armor. It was fairly tedious, but the two spent their time chatting about training and discussing Leon's plans for a new Lightning Lance, which was still in the design phase. Leon even shared a few stray thoughts he'd been having about golem design, and so excited did it make Valeria that they had to pause their work so that Leon could summon a labor golem and a librarian golem for them to use as visual aids in their discussion.

Both were extremely careful not to actually disturb any of the enchantments that either golem had, however, for though their discussions on the topic were steadily growing more and more advanced, they still lacked the requisite skills to fix all but the smallest of issues that any of the golems might have.

Eventually, they returned to their enchanting work, but it wasn't until a week later that they were finally finished.

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“By my Ancestors!” Alcander loudly exclaimed as he saw his completed armor for the first time. “Leon! This is incredible!”

“It really is,” Gaius agreed. “This is the sort of thing that I never would’ve imagined I’d ever wear!”

“Really?” Alix skeptically asked. “Fancy noble like you with your nose in the sky to better look down upon all of us lesser mortals?”

Gaius grinned back at her, this not being the first time she’d teased him like this in the years since they’d left the Bull Kingdom. “Maybe I dreamed about it, but never seriously thought it would happen.”

Leon beamed with pride as his retainers slowly inspected the armor he, Sid, and Valeria had made. Most of his attention, however, was reserved for Elise. She was looking at her suit, made of black and red scales in spiraling patterns. Unlike the others, she’d never really needed armor before, but now, after having been present for the wyvern hunt and with his retinue having been attacked, Leon had insisted to her that she swap the silk for steel in at least some circumstances. She’d agreed, though only with great reluctance.

Despite that reluctance, now that the armor was before her, her eyes seemed ablaze as she took it all in. It was designed to be a very slim fit, and one that emphasized her sizable bust and slender waist. If it hadn’t been Sid working on it, Leon might’ve feared that Elise’s chosen design was emphasizing the aesthetics a little too much at the expense of practicality, but as it was, even her aesthetic choices didn’t compromise the armor in any meaningful way.

Elise held the suit up to the light, casting her face in sparkling red light as the magic lights in the villa reflected off the polished wyvern scales, a look of wonder on her face. As much as Leon knew she didn’t like using violence, he also knew that she greatly appreciated fine things, and that armor was about as fine as they could make for the time being.

Most of his retinue left to change into the armor, but those who were stronger—essentially just Anna and Anshu—remained, simply pulling the armor into their soul realms, then directly donning it.

Anna twirled around as her armor appeared on her body, fitting quite snugly against her lithe body, her armored wyvern leather skirt rising just a bit and exposing some of the mail chausses beneath that the wyvern leather and scales mostly covered.

Anshu’s armor was almost as slim as hers, without much of the almost exaggerated masculine shape that Alcander had gone for. This was because almost as soon as his armor was on, he then conjured the golden brocade coat that he’d always worn over his armor, and it fit perfectly over his new wyvern scale armor.

Both then donned their accompanying helmets. Anna’s roughly matched Leon’s, though was a little more curved and feminine, with slightly smaller ‘wings’ on the side. Anshu’s meanwhile, bore little resemblance to Leon’s helmet, featuring a closed face design with only a pair of thin, angry-looking eye slits. The whole helmet was conical, with his requested geometric patterns covering several areas of the helmet.

However, where their armors differed in design, they were both made of white wyvern scales, with some of the black wyvern's scales serving to highlight their joints and edges. Both were light mages, and both had decided to lean into the usual aesthetic that light mages tended to employ.

Still, as the rest of Leon's retainers filed back out, their armor now on and ready to test, Leon couldn't help but frown whenever his eyes drifted in Anshu's direction. Everyone else roughly matched in general armor design—especially when it came to the helmet—but he stood out like a sore thumb, and Leon couldn't help but wonder if that was intentional. The man, even after more than ten years in Leon's service, was still incredibly quiet and reserved and didn't interact much with the rest of the retinue. Leon couldn't help but speculate that he didn't see himself as one of them, and this was reflected in his armor.

But rather than bring all of that up right now, Leon led his people toward his workshop and the area where he typically tested his enchantments and let them put their new armor through its paces. He didn't think for a moment that their upcoming journey to the Sacred Golden Empire was going to go smoothly, and he needed to make sure that his people were comfortable with their new gear. Their lives might depend on it.

Fortunately, it seemed that not only did Sid do wonderful work—not that Leon ever doubted her skills—but he and Valeria had done well in inscribing the enchantments upon their armors. All of them could fly perfectly well with Leon's latest flight enchantments, all of them could become invisible without relying on Helen's invisibility salves, their armor could project thin, but powerful, shields of translucent white light, and a few more in-depth testing confirmed that all of them were much stronger and faster, now.

Thus encouraged, Leon turned his attention back to the upcoming journey. He'd allocated about three months to plan and prepare, but now that his people had their armor and Anshu and Talal had arranged the purchase of a small yacht for only about twenty million silvers, it was time to make their final preparations. He still wanted to make a few alterations to the yacht's warding scheme, but apart from that, Leon was about certain that they were ready to go, and he was eager to get underway.

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Less than two months had passed since Marcus and Alcander's kidnapping, and Leon found himself reflecting on how things now threatened to fall apart as his yacht cut through the Scamander River toward the Central Sea on its way out of Occulara. Not even three months ago, his position within Heaven's Eye had seemed completely secure, and he didn't feel at all that they were operating under any kind of pressure. But so much in that time had changed, even if only in the way he saw things.

Vampires were revealed within Heaven's Eye, the Director was shown to not be operating with Leon's interests in mind, and he learned that just about all of the Empires knew that he was of the Thunderbird Clan. All of that was true prior to his learning about it, of course, and nothing had practically changed, but now that he was aware of it all, everything seemed so different.

He took some comfort in the fact that none of the Empires had made any overt moves against him, but he wondered what he might be missing behind the scenes. Penelope, at the very least, had told him before they left the Scorched Fields that there were accusations that the Empires were spying on Heaven's Eye, and he couldn't help but wonder if that was about him, or just more standard efforts to

keep an eye on the largest merchant guild on the plane, the institution that practically controlled the entire plane's economy.

He wasn't sure if he would be insulted or relieved if it turned out to be more practical monitoring designed to check Heaven's Eye's power rather than something to do with him.

Regardless, it was just one more thing that needed to be addressed, and yet here he was, sailing out of Occulara and leaving these problems behind.

There was a not-so-insignificant part of him that was demanding he turn around, return to Occulara, and deal with the Imperial and vampiric threats before leaving, but in the end, he chose not to. More than anything else, he wanted to know what was in his Clan's research facility, and why the forest that contained it was considered so dangerous that even the Sacred Golden Empire itself was unable to exert much control over it.

The Empires, he reasoned, had been waiting for ten years, so he could afford the distraction. The vampires, meanwhile, hadn't acted against him with any kind of threatening force for years, with this latest kidnapping of his retainers being done with little in the way of magical power. That gave him the impression that those in charge weren't quite willing to stand against him, for whatever reason, and that they weren't going to break that streak now that he and his entire retinue were all together and leaving Occulara with little forewarning.

The Director was his greatest concern, but he took some comfort in knowing that whatever the man was planning, he was integral to it. The Director needed him for something; most likely, at least in Leon's mind, that something had to do with the Thunderbird Clan's arsenal, but he didn't know for sure. In this case, he figured it was best to leave Occulara for a while and let the two of them have some space to consider their options. For all that he now had cause to dislike and distrust the Director, Leon didn't want to depose him. He just wanted Heaven's Eye's resources, and he hoped that he and the Director could come to some kind of peaceful arrangement that would ensure they could both get what they wanted.

After all, a Heaven's Eye wracked by infighting and corruption from the loss of an effective and respected Director was worth less to him than it was now.

As the yacht sped down the river, it made great time, and soon enough, Occulara became indistinguishable from the rest of the urban sprawl that lined both sides of the river. Leon consequently put the Director out of his mind and went back inside. The upcoming journey was going to be stressful enough, he imagined; an Imperial power couldn't tame this forest, and yet he was heading into it with a retinue primarily composed of fifth and sixth-tier mages.

[How are you doing, Xaphan?] Leon whispered into his soul realm as he crossed into the yacht.

[Impatient,] the demon replied. [I was hoping that we would've seen more progress on that shit-eating Director's part by now, but what else can we do? Oh wait, I know what we can do, we can storm his fucking office and roast him over an open spit until he tells us where Amon's peons are!]

[Glad to hear you're doing so well,] Leon quipped. [I might need your help for this thing coming up, but I think I'll definitely need your fire when I return.]

[You have that much faith in that old bastard, do you?]

[I'm surprised you're calling him old when you're older than him by at least two orders of magnitude.]

[Age is relative. And don't think I noticed you didn't answer my question!]

[I wasn't aware it needed answering. Well, I suppose it's easy enough for me to say that I'd rather expect the Director to betray us to the vampires when we return than to expect him to side with us and be horribly surprised and disappointed.]

[Makes sense.]

[So, yeah. Are you, at least, ready for that, Xaphan?]

[I'm almost insulted that you need to ask.]

Leon smiled. [Good,] he replied, and he cast one last look back in the direction of Occulara before turning his attention back to the journey ahead. Things back in Occulara would come to a head when he returned, but for now, he needed to focus on what was immediately in front of him.

Chapter 723: Evergold

Deep in the palace of Ilion, within his private chambers, Anastasios sat, staring at the painted idols on the altar before him. Such had been his wont for more than a century now, as time deepened his aches and took his friends.

The Ilion pantheon was vast, with a deity for just about every concept in their world. But on Anastasios' altar, there were only seven.

In the center stood the stalwart King of their pantheon, Diwo, stoic and stern, keeping the order in their universe. It was to him that Anastasios had first thought to pledge himself when he was young and captivated by the tales of the great holy warriors of the Order of Diwo that fought against the Sky Devils for the safety of all, but Diwo, it seemed, had other plans for him. Anastasios had never been one to covet power, but when his cousin, the Emperor before him, died childless and the people looked to him to be their Emperor, he did his duty and assumed the throne. It hadn't been an easy decision, but his mentor, role model, and commander of the Order of Diwo, Demosthenes, had helped him to see that the throne was not an honor for him, but a duty to his people, and that he'd serve Diwo better as an Emperor than as a warrior-priest.

Standing to Diwo's right was Atana, his most favored daughter and goddess of knowledge and wisdom, and patron of Anastasios' family. It was to her that his elder sister, Sofia, had pledged herself, becoming a scholar of great renown within the Empire. He'd always looked up to his sister, following her around like a stray puppy she'd fed once. She was brilliant, wise, and beautiful, and when he'd assumed the mantle of Emperor, she had been his closest confidant.

To Diwo's left stood Perio, his most favored son and god of music. Anastasios' best friend in his youth had been a man named Cimon, a musician unmatched in his field. He was witty, supremely gifted in his craft, and had never failed to bring a smile to Anastasios' face whenever they got together.

All of them were dead, now.

The Order of Diwo was disbanded, having suffered catastrophic casualties that it couldn't recover from in the previous war with the Sky Devils. Demosthenes had led the Order in a counter charge, almost single-handedly buying the Imperial forces the time they needed to escape the Sky Devil's Hell after their ill-fated expedition, but at the cost of the lives of nearly every warrior-priest of the Order. Demosthenes had been almost a thousand years old at the time, and had died a ninth-tier mage.

Sofia's death had come much earlier; having dedicated herself to the scholarly arts rather than the magical arts, she'd not only disqualified herself from ever serving as an Empress—for no Empire would ever survive a weak monarch—but had died at the age of two hundred and thirty-seven, as a sixth-tier mage. Anastasios had fallen apart in grief without her, and had needed years to grieve her loss. He'd told his friends that without his sister, he felt like he was now trying to make his way through the world blind and dumb, and even to this day, he still felt that way.

Cimon had managed to reach the eighth-tier, thanks to Anastasios' constant prodding and refusal to let him rest on his laurels, but had died before he reached the ninth. He was seven hundred and eighty-three years old. Anastasios had known him since they were children, both having been born in the same decade and attended the same academy. The world without his best friend in it had seemed colorless, joyless, and silent. Cimon's music lived on, but it had never sounded the same to Anastasios' ears when played with any hand but his.

Anastasios was now more than a thousand years old. He'd seen many generations come and go, had outlived more than a dozen wives, and had even suffered the loss of his son, who took his own life. The world was dark and depressing without his old friends, family, and heroes. Everyone he'd known when he was a young man was gone, never to be seen again. Everywhere he looked, he saw new faces doing the same things his old friends had used to. The palace of Ilion remained almost unchanged, but as far as he was concerned, it might as well have been a completely different place. All the faces were different, the walls had been repainted many times, the old cracks in the masonry filled in and new cracks forming.

Anastasios, as he'd done so many times in the past few centuries, stared at the idols of his gods and wondered just how much longer it would be before his time would come. One figure notably absent from the lineup was the Goddess of Death. She had no temples, no idols, no icons, for to create such a thing of her, or even to speak her name, was to invite her attention, and few would dare such a thing.

But Anastasios found himself contemplating her more and more as grew older. He wondered why she had chosen to take all of his friends and family from him, leaving him old and alone. He wondered if everyone he knew were resting comfortably, if they were dancing in the great halls of Lysia, the land of eternal joy that all of great virtue were taken to after death.

Most of all, Anastasios wondered if she even existed. He had his doubts, but he supposed that even with his meager knowledge of what lay beyond the tenth-tier, he supposed that nothing said that there weren't realms of power beyond even that, beyond even the greatest and mightiest human powers of this universe.

He hoped that it was all true, and that he'd see all of his loved ones again when he finally passed, whenever the Mistress Without Name decided to take him. But if the gods didn't exist, then he

supposed an eternal sleep wouldn't be all that terrible. At the very least, the deep, ever-present melancholy that had suffused his being ever since his last childhood friend had passed would finally end.

As he sat there, staring at the gods, a soft, almost hesitant knock came at his door. Anastasios let out a deep sigh, composed himself, wiping the grief from his face and ensuring that his eyes were dry, then stood up and went to the door. Waiting just outside was one of his assistants, a young man of about eighty years. Anastasios had taken him in more than half a century ago, the boy having been orphaned following a werewolf attack on his home on the Empire's western frontier. Anastasios was as proud of him as he'd been of his own son, and of his grandson, and he smiled as he opened the door.

The assistant bowed deeply, his demeanor unshakably formal despite Anastasios' frequent insistence to be less so.

"Lord Protector," he whispered respectfully. "Leon Raime has left Occulara earlier than we expected."

Anastasios' pink, nebulous eyes flashed with interest. He knew that over the past couple of months, a rift had been steadily growing between Leon and the Director, and he'd been just waiting for an opportunity to pounce. Bringing Leon to his Empire would be the greatest boon possible.

Anastasios immediately left his private shrine and strode down the halls of his private wing of the palace. He was certain that Leon wasn't coming here, so he'd have to make some travel plans...

As his assistant fell in beside him, he had only one question: "Where is Leon going?"

—

Leon stared in wonder at the city sprawling out in front of him. It had been in range of his magic senses for hours, and he'd been standing on the prow of his yacht, just staring for all of that time. They'd passed several other cities on the Neilos River after leaving the Central Sea, and while they were certainly beautiful and shared an architectural aesthetic that he found incredibly pleasing, Evergold, the capital city of the Sacred Golden Empire, was on another level entirely. In his mind, the Forest of Black and White that existed in his head—the forest that had been his reality during his childhood, and which was now lost forever with his father gone—was the very picture of paradise on Aeterna, but Evergold, at least in terms of aesthetics, came in a close second.

Everywhere he looked, he saw trees. Most were fairly small, about what he would expect, but quite a few were utterly, spectacularly, magnificently tall. These he knew from seeing the Sacred Golden Empire's delegation at the Scorched Fields, were their palace-trees, and they were *everywhere*. Hundreds of them lined the banks of the Neilos River and further out, while everywhere else he looked he just saw a sea of color. Plant life in every shade grew here in abundance, growing fruit and other organic materials, or simply providing some kind of decoration. Notably, he saw that the rainbow-colored trees that lit the Ilian Empire at night were here, too, and in much greater numbers.

The cumulative effect had the effect of making Evergold look like a massive, inhabited forest, not simply a city. Most of the buildings weren't palace-trees, of course, but even those that were made of only enchanted wood had been built with flowing, organic designs that ensured that they blended in perfectly with the natural feel of the city.

After spending ten years in the heavily urban Ilian Empire, with its massive towers of golden metal and sprawling farms, Leon felt like he'd been living with a rope tightly tied around his chest but could now breathe freely. It was incredible, and he couldn't help but stare in awe.

There were, of course, many farms within the Sacred Golden Empire, so he knew that the entire Empire wasn't just one huge forest, but Evergold had an aesthetic that greatly appealed to him, and he had to fight the temptation to immediately find Elise, Maia, and Valeria and convince them to move here.

'On the bright side, if the Director does wind up siding against me, then this might be a good place to move,' Leon thought to himself, almost wishing the Director *would* side with the vampires just so that he could get this excuse.

Unfortunately for him, he didn't think that Elise would go for it, but he dreamt anyway.

As his yacht pushed up the Neilos River, he did his best to temper his expectations, but it was difficult when he found himself in a forest again for the first time in a long time. It felt like the wilds were here in the city, just begging for him to explore, to wrap himself up in the wood, the leaves, and the flowers like an old childhood blanket. But he could remember feeling similar feelings of awe upon arriving in the Ilian Empire, and all of those feelings were completely and irrevocably dashed upon learning just how widespread the anti-Thunderbird Clan sentiment was within the Empire. Given their similar heritage, he couldn't imagine that the Sacred Golden Empire was much different, but it was hard not to feel excited.

Something that made his blood sing even louder were the storm clouds rolling in just behind his yacht, coming in from off the Central Sea. Thunder rumbled in the distance and echoed in his chest. Lightning lit up the afternoon city as it slowly darkened with the approaching storm clouds.

The rain hadn't yet arrived, but Leon could smell it on the breeze, and with every breath of air he took in, he could feel himself growing slightly stronger, absorbing the power that the storm infused into the air. That power entered his blood through his lungs, raced through his circulatory system, and entered his heart, where it was then channeled into his soul realm, helping it to grow. It would take quite a lot of power for him to rise to the ninth-tier, but he took comfort in the fact that his soul realm had healed sufficiently that growth was at least possible, now. And with every breath he took, the space he had to cross between eighth and ninth-tier grew smaller.

There on the prow Leon stood, reveling in everything he could see, hear, smell, and otherwise feel. Hours passed, and while he noted several times some of his retainers and even Elise coming by to check on him, he didn't leave his position until his yacht pulled into a harbor off a canal dug for the private use of Heaven's Eye.

The Neilos River was wide and deep—no doubt partially that way thanks to some of the magic Leon could sense worked into the surroundings—and could afford many such canals dug all throughout the city. However, unlike the ordered, curving canals of the Samarid capital, these canals were constructed to look natural, flowing between the palace-trees and other structures like rivers, not only largely replacing roads as the primary method of travel, but also greatly contributing to the city's naturalistic atmosphere.

When the yacht docked, Leon finally stepped away from the prow and gave Talal the go-ahead to get to work on the usual paperwork that had to be taken care of upon their arrival. Fortunately, Talal was quite

skilled in this sort of thing and much of the paperwork had been completed when they first entered the Sacred Golden Empire, so before the storm even hit Evergold, Leon's yacht had been properly moored and the local Heaven's Eye branch had set aside its most luxurious guest house for the personal use of the visiting Hand of the Director.

Leon's family and retinue then got settled in, for while the yacht picked out by Anshu and Talal was quite fast, it had started to feel just a little cramped with twelve passengers, a griffin, and Anna's Attican Snapper, which she had refused to leave behind this time. While it had only taken about a month to reach Evergold from Occulara, everyone was quite sick of being around each other and eager for a little time spent in privacy.

However, Leon forbade them from heading out into town without having at least two others with them and not to go off the beaten track. He wasn't going to take the chance that they were followed by vampires, so he wanted his people traveling in groups and staying in public.

Leon himself didn't want to head out at all, not when such a beautiful storm was about to hit, and once the rain started falling, he went out into the guest house's main courtyard and didn't come back inside until the storm passed several hours later.

Only then did he seek some rest. He was surprised at just how comfortable he felt here, but it hit him hard as he curled up in bed with Elise and Maia: they were in the Sacred Golden Empire, and hopefully, they'd be at the Thunderbird Clan research facility in only a matter of weeks.

Leon woke early in the morning, despite how late he'd gone to bed—his lack of need to sleep rearing its head. He spent the morning quietly chatting with his family, then did some work with Valeria on the new Lightning Lance design. After several hours of that, he made good on his promise to Sid to practice his earth magic, as he'd done almost every day since leaving Occulara—there hadn't been much to do on the yacht, so he'd had little reason not to.

However, as his retinue was assembling for their own daily training, Talal came hurrying in, almost late.

"Barely made it, Tal!" Alix called out with a teasing grin.

"There's a first for everything," Gaius added with a pointed look at the courtyard's clock, "but it seems your first time late won't be this day..."

Talal ignored them, though, and approached Leon. Once he reached Leon, he leaned in to whisper into his ear.

"Boss, someone's here to see you..."

"Who?" Leon asked, also whispering.

"A representative from the Imperial Palace."

Leon blinked in shock, then sighed in resignation. Given how expected his arrival in Ilion had been, he wasn't surprised that the Evergolden bureaucracy already knew of his arrival. However, a small part of him had been hopeful that his welcome into the Ilian Empire had been partially influenced by the fact that Emilie and Damien Makedon had been in his party, and that this time would be different. He didn't

want to rub shoulders with the local druids, though as his mind flashed back to vibrant purple hair and glittering ruby eyes, he had to admit that there *was* one person he wouldn't mind seeing again.

Still, it was with a tired tone that he asked Talal, "What do they want?"

"She says that she's carrying a message for you and you alone," Talal responded. After a moment's pause, he added, "She's also strong enough that I can't tell what tier she is."

Leon scowled and nodded. Talal was a fifth-tier mage, so that meant the messenger was at least sixth-tier. Even in the Empires, such strong mages were rarely only used as messengers.

Leon straightened up, gave Valeria a pointed look, and said, "All right, I'll go meet with her."

Valeria nodded and took over the retinue's training as he walked with Talal back into the main wing of the guest house. As they walked, Leon projected his magic senses to take stock of the messenger and was almost floored when he found that she was an eighth-tier mage; he even halted in the hallway, his eyes staring at the wall in the messenger's direction.

Other than that, he had to admit that she was quite attractive and dressed in the usual style of those from the Sacred Golden Empire, with a dress that exposed her arms, which were covered in golden jewelry that signified her high station.

Leon walked into the sitting room where she'd been waiting. She looked up at him, her eyes narrowing in mild suspicion, but there was no surprise in her expression. Leon supposed that she must've already noticed him coming since the guest house's anti-magic sense wards were only designed to keep people from outside the guest house from seeing within; since she was already inside, her magic senses weren't blocked, so she'd almost certainly already taken his measure.

"Leon Raime?" she asked.

Leon took a moment to call upon his magic power as subtly as he could, readying himself to summon his sword and armor just in case, and answered, "Yes, that's me."

The woman just smiled, then extended a hand and, in a flash of light, summoned a sealed envelope from her soul realm. Without waiting for Leon to ask what it was, she explained, "On behalf of the Grand Druid; Her Imperial Majesty, Empress Joanna; and Her Highness, Princess Cassandra, you are invited to the Golden Grove for a feast tomorrow night."

Chapter 724: The Golden Grove I

The Golden Grove. When Leon heard those words, he'd initially assumed that it would be something akin to the Heartwood Grove back in the Forest of Black and White; some kind of relatively insulated part of the city where huge golden trees—possibly even Heartwoods—had been set aside for the use of the Imperial family. Given what he already knew of the Sacred Golden Empire's architecture, he easily imagined some giant golden tree serving as the main centerpiece of such a place.

There was only one problem: he could see just about all of Evergold with his magic senses, and nowhere did he see any golden trees. He could see many trees of varying colors, but as a whole, Evergold wasn't nearly as colorful as the Forest of Black and White had been.

However, near the center of the city, he *could* see several square miles of land on a shallow hill, protected on all sides by magical canals, where there was a huge, dense cluster of palace-trees. Their branches intertwined so intricately that he could barely focus on it, and making things more complicated, many of those branches were moving with what could only be directed purpose. These, he knew, were essentially raised walkways to other palace-trees, but they moved with an ease and grace that if he hadn't taken some time to watch this area, he might've guessed that they were natural.

Unfortunately, his magic senses couldn't penetrate too deeply into this area, for the whole area was heavily warded not only against magic senses, but against just about any other kind of magic he could think of. This grove could only be the capitol of the Sacred Golden Empire, where the Imperial family resided.

'And where Cassandra lives...' Leon had thought to himself during his observations, the Imperial Princess' ruby eyes flashing through his mind again, and her parting words to try and win back her mask from him at some point in the future ringing in his ears.

He'd accepted the invitation to the Golden Grove—though refusal wasn't ever on the table when apparently several members of the Imperial family were involved in sending him the invitation. Especially not when an eighth-tier mage was the one relaying the invitation. The messenger didn't stay long, thankfully, and Leon spent as much of the time remaining between then and the feast to try and get a feel for Sacred Golden Empire politics. In service of that, he enlisted Elise, Helen, Anna, and Talal to give him as much of a crash course in the subject as they could fit into a single day.

Fortunately, there wasn't much that Leon specifically needed to know.

The most important things were, as it so happened, that which was most immediately relevant to him: the politics of the ruling family.

At the very top was the Grand Druid, the Sacred Golden Empire's only tenth-tier mage. As far as anyone could say, she was more than eight hundred years old, and had been in her position for at least two centuries. As the Grand Druid, her role was remarkably similar to that of Anastasios', Leon realized, being almost more of a god than a ruler. She was in charge of the spiritual well-being of the Empire, making sure their 'gods'—more like nature spirits, Anna told Leon, that went without name—were happy and supportive, and that the people didn't lose sight of their spiritual and cultural roots. She also technically outranked the Empress, though the Empress was the one who exercised her political power on a regular basis.

The current Empress, Joanna, was the current Grand Druid's daughter by a male concubine—one of many the Grand Druid had taken, or so Leon had been told. She wasn't the Grand Druid's only child, but she was the only one that was politically relevant in Evergold, Talal assured him. The Grand Druid only had four other children, who were mostly filling various roles in the government, while also being kept well away from the capital and any 'real' power. When it came to political power in the Sacred Golden Empire, it mostly rested with the Empress rather than the Grand Druid—convening and adjourning their Circle of Druids, enforcing the laws, commanding the army, and fulfilling the role of Head of State were all duties assigned to the Empress.

The Empress herself had a fairly sizable harem, Elise made sure to point out, giving Leon a rather pointed gaze that he didn't want to dig into too deeply. Empress Joanna had at least ten husbands and

as many concubines, but being a woman of the ninth-tier, and thus having slower reproductive functions than mortal women, she'd only had three children in her several centuries of life. Of them, only Princess Cassandra had achieved anything noteworthy, having ascended to the eighth-tier before the age of thirty.

Once more, Leon's mind turned to the purple-haired Princess, and his heart rate slightly accelerated.

From what Talal knew, Cassandra didn't have any political positions, though her older brother and sister were druids—magistrates—of major cities further along the Neilos River. However, her magical power evidently made her more than powerful enough to have great standing with the Imperial court despite her lack of title other than Princess, enough so that she was able to represent her people in the wyvern hunt.

Other than the members of the Imperial family, there were also a host of other officials in the capital, as Leon expected, but his eyes glazed over partway through and by the time he, Elise, Maia, and Valeria left the guest house, he'd almost entirely forgotten most of them.

Much like the Ilian Empire, the Sacred Golden Empire had their own strange vehicles, only instead of wheelless and horseless carriages, they used small boats to ferry people along the canals, seemingly reserving carriages for those rare times when they left the extensive canal network—though from what Leon could see of their canal network, it extended at least in part all the way out into the fertile fields surrounding the massive city, rather limiting the need for carriages.

These boats came in all different sizes, and were largely self-propelled, using advanced water enchantments to carry them onward. Leon was familiar with such enchantments, but he'd never seen them used in such great numbers, or so efficiently before. From the moment he set foot in the boat that would take them to the Imperial Grove, he was captivated by what he could sense—or rather, what he *couldn't*, speaking volumes to how efficiently the enchantments were transferring power—that they arrived at the Imperial harbor before he'd even realized it.

When he looked up, he found himself and his party shielded from the red evening sun by the thick canopy of the gigantic palace-trees at the center of Evergold, thousands of feet above them. Many of the leaves were multicolored, making it look like the leafy canopy glimmered with all the colors of the rainbow from down below.

"Hey, you with us?" Valeria asked, pulling Leon's attention to her.

"Hm?" he responded with some confusion, noticing that Elise, Maia, and the rest of their party, amounting to about a dozen local Heaven's Eye officials, were staring at him. "What was that?"

"We've arrived, husband," Elise said as she slid in to take his left arm.

"That means time to get up!" Valeria added as she took Leon's right arm, and together, she and Elise pulled him out of his seat.

Leon playfully groaned and said, "If I must!" He then pulled his arms out of their grips, took their hands, and led them off the boat to meet with the large Imperial welcoming party. Maia followed immediately after him, hurrying forward as she did to take Elise's free hand, while behind her came the rest of their party.

They were warmly welcomed, and after some introductions and exchanged pleasantries, an escort was provided that led Leon's party further into the Imperial Grove. They entered the nearest palace-tree, and Leon took in the same details that he had in Cassandra's palace-tree back in the Scorched Fields. Flowing, organic lines not only decorated the interior walls, but were also characteristic of the architectural style. If it hadn't been so perfectly tailored to the needs of a large human number of inhabitants, Leon almost could've believed that the tree had simply been naturally hollow, rather than magically designed to be, itself, a palace filled with light and magic.

Through brightly lit hallways they moved, and through large atriums, up and down stairs, and through the twisting branches that connected the many palace-trees of the Imperial Grove together. As they went, Leon noticed that not only was the guard detail growing heavier, but the population of working bureaucrats and druids thinned out. It was obvious that they were heading further into the more private sections of the grove set aside for the Imperial family rather than the Imperial government.

Leon's wonder was eventually tempered when the branch-hallway opened into a similar chamber as the one that he'd met Cassandra in back at the Scorched Fields—a large dome-like structure formed by a thick leafy canopy and walled by thicker tree limbs. When they emerged, they found themselves on a stone pathway flanked by light-emitting flowers that reached Leon's waist in height. The path forked in two directions, forward and to the right, while to the left was a small courtyard with a statue as a centerpiece and a number of stone benches encircling it.

The statue depicted one of the Brilliant Eleven—or so Leon presumed—with her boot on the chest of a fallen bird-headed figure, her spear brandished at the figure's neck.

Leon hadn't seen any art depicting and glorifying the fall of his Clan until this point, and he almost froze in surprise at being so suddenly confronted by the statue. Had his hands not been tightly held by Elise and Valeria, he might've actually stopped in his tracks, but his ladies kept pulling him onward. Elise even squeezed his hand in support while Valeria flashed him a smile and Maia sent a pulse of affection through their connection.

Thusly boosted, Leon kept his head on straight as they proceeded onward, passing through various other halls and leaf-shrouded courtyards, eventually reaching something that Leon thought was the 'Golden Grove'.

It was yet another covered chamber, only this one was immense and located about as close to the top of the sprawling palace-tree complex as it could be. Shining down through the leaves above was the light of the sun, though some magic was at play that caused all of that sunlight to turn gold as it passed through the leaves. The entire chamber was submerged in this warm golden light, with this light seeming to gather around the trees, and it grew more intense further in.

They walked down another stone path into what seemed to be a forest up in this chamber, past gold-cloaked trees and into a huge stone courtyard populated by at least a hundred people. On the far end was a small stream of water that Leon could feel had been heavily enchanted with defensive wards that separated it quite effectively from the rest of the courtyard, while on the other side of that stream was a stone staircase about twenty feet high. At the top of the stairs was a throne roughly carved of dull granite, looking about as far from regal and imperious as Leon could imagine. But sitting in that throne was who he could only assume was the Empress herself.

She was beautiful, if showing some signs of age in the shallow lines on her face. Her hair was long and as golden as her Empire, while her eyes were blood red that glowed with an inner light. She wore a long gold sleeveless dress, her arms gleamed with gold rings studded with glittering gems of all colors, and on her brow rested a thin golden circlet from which golden flowers seemed to spring like a laurel crown. Around her upper body was a thin diaphanous robe that did absolutely nothing to hide her clothes beneath, but instead seemed to almost act as a visible aura around the Empress.

Her aura was robust, powerful, and weighty, but Leon's attention was taken more by the figure who sat on the stairs, leaning back with a casual, almost provocative smile: Cassandra. She looked a little different, her purple hair having been swapped out for a golden blond that matched her mother, but she was instantly recognizable from her attitude alone. She wasn't wearing armor, but rather what passed for casual wear in the Sacred Golden Empire: an armless dress with long slits up both sides of her legs, but not a lot of jewelry.

As soon as the Princess saw Leon, she smirked and tossed her long ponytail over her shoulder as if she were throwing something away, making eye contact with Leon as she did. He wasn't sure what that meant, but he responded with a challenging smile of his own, silently daring her to make good on her promise to try and win back her mask.

Leon did his best to pay attention to the next quarter hour or so of pleasantries, but at this point, he'd been formally introduced to so many places and people that it was all kind of a blur. He was far more concerned with Cassandra, who stared at him the entire time the courtyard's crier was introducing their party.

Finally, though, it was over, and after a polite exchange with the Empress, Leon and his party were allowed to back away and start mingling with the other guests.

"So," Leon whispered to Elise as they shuffled off, "who should we be speaking with first?" He glanced around, roughly counting more than a hundred others in the courtyard.

"I don't think that's a decision for me to make," Elise said, nodding back toward the throne, and when he glanced back, Leon saw the Empress descending the stairs and Cassandra leaping to her feet and falling in beside her mother once the Empress reached the floor. Together, the two started walking toward the stream, Cassandra shooting Leon a pointed look as she did, making at least her destination clear.

When the two Imperials reached the stream, the water parted around them, as if afraid to even touch their feet. Without a single drop landing upon them, the Empress and Princess reached the other side, and both started walking in Leon's direction.

"Leon Raime," the Empress said, her voice low and sultry though retaining a certain dignified air, "Now that we're acquainted, I have to say that you're a little more than I expected..." She glanced down at Leon's hands, both still entwined with Elise and Valeria's, and Elise's other hand with Maia's. "My daughter's recounting of your meeting during the wyvern hunt didn't indicate such proclivities..."

Unashamed, Leon cocked an eyebrow at Cassandra, then replied to the Empress, "You've heard of me, then?" Inside, he was all-but certain that both already knew that he was of the Thunderbird Clan, but he wasn't going to bring that up on his own.

"A few things," Empress Joanna admitted. "I have to say, I'm rather intrigued... A man from the distant northern Kingdoms, now here in the most civilized part of the world. 'What must be his impression of us?' I had to wonder. 'What can he say about our people that we can't see for ourselves?'"

"Well, yours is a beautiful land," Leon vaguely replied. "This is my first time within your Empire, and I'm quite impressed. I haven't had much time to really form an opinion of your people yet, I'm afraid, having spent most of my time in this city just preparing for this feast."

"Then you absolutely *must* stay for a while," the Empress implored, though without insisting. "My Empire is the very best for raising a family and living a long, healthy, and safe life! So many dangers around Aeterna, but we've achieved such peace here... Werewolves have been eradicated, we're *far* from the Sky Devils, and vampirism is exterminated wherever it's found!"

Leon's smile thinned as suspicions about the Empress' intentions entered his mind. "All great accomplishments, you have my congratulations."

"Please, make yourselves at home, then," the Empress responded as if she didn't hear the chill in Leon's tone. "Stay as long as you like! And I hope you avail yourselves of my hospitality in the future!" She gave Leon a long look and a smile that he utterly refused to analyze, and then turned and walked off, leaving Cassandra with Leon's group.

The five stood there a little awkwardly with Cassandra's eyes slowly roaming Leon's body. At first, he thought she might be checking him out, and he was about to consider being flattered when she said, "You wore that when we met, didn't you? And to my party after the hunt?"

Leon cocked his head in surprise, but she was right, he was wearing the black and silver suit that Elise had bought him in the Bull Kingdom so long ago, and had worn it for nearly all formal occasions ever since.

"Someone had to stay consistent," Leon replied. "You changed your hair."

Cassandra shrugged. "I spent a couple months with purple hair, had my fill. Wanted to return to my natural color. What do you think?" She ran her fingers through the now neck-length hair on the sides of her head, then tossed her much longer ponytail around with a shake of her head.

Before he could respond, Valeria said, "Your hair looks fine."

Cassandra's eyes finally flitted over to Valeria, and her silver blond hair mostly pulled back into an elegant braid, though leaving enough loose to frame her face quite attractively—at least, in Leon's opinion. The Princess thinly smiled and said, "And your name is? I don't believe we've spoken before..."

"Valeria."

"Ah. Valeria. And you just look *lovely* today, don't you? I *love* that necklace you have; we haven't worn something like that in *ages* and it's always fun to have a little throwback, don't you think?"

Valeria's free hand went up to her invisibility amulet, and her eyes narrowed in quiet fury.

Leon blinked in surprise, recognizing the tone and the traces of killing intent both ladies were giving off and knowing that, though their words absent context were pleasant, there was a lot more being said

between the lines. Making it even clearer was how tightly Valeria began squeezing his hand, though he wasn't sure if she realized it.

Interrupting them before either of them could speak, Elise hurriedly said, "You both look fantastic! Why don't you tell us about some of the more scenic places to see while we're here, Your Highness?"

Cassandra glared at Valeria for a long moment before turning her attention to Elise. Leon tuned her out as she started giving a few directions to his wife in favor of glancing at Valeria with a questioning look on his face.

The silver-haired woman just shrugged, shot another glare at Cassandra, then squeezed his hand again, leaving Leon to tune back into Elise's exchange just as it seemed to be ending.

"... so we'll definitely make some time before we head out!" Elise said.

"See that you do," Cassandra responded almost commandingly. "I'd hate for your little vacation to be ruined by visiting all the wrong places."

"We'll see what we can do," Leon responded, his tone a little colder now after Cassandra's brief spat with Valeria. "We're here to relax a bit, and to take care of some business, and then we're out. Kind of a coincidence that we caught you in time for a celebration..." Leon quickly glanced around, but noticed that no one else had shown up after them, and neither were there anything resembling decorations aside from the general natural opulence of the place. Food hadn't even been brought out yet, despite this being called a 'feast' in the invitation.

"It's actually not that lucky that you caught us in this," Cassandra explained. "We have a spiritual festival here e

Chapter 725: The Golden Grove II

The Grand Druid's entrance befitted her position; the trumpets sounded, the criers announced her, and from the rainbow trees behind the throne she emerged, followed by enough other people to double at least the crowd in the courtyard. The stream separating the throne from the courtyard again swirled into the air, allowing the Grand Druid and her entourage to pass without wetting their feet.

The Grand Druid herself struck an imposing figure. She was dressed in the typical Evergolden style, but in a manner much more extravagant than even the Empress. Instead of gold, she was clad in green silkgrass and was bedecked in jewelry, the two most notable pieces being a golden torc around her neck that fastened an enormous emerald against her throat, and a strange-looking crown that had the Evergolden floral themes that the Empress' crown had, but featured golden reliefs of birds all along the thick central gold band. In the very center of the crown, right above the center of her eyes, sat a ruby aglow with magic, glittering like a star, and bigger than both her eyes put together.

Most striking about the Grand Druid, of course, was her aura, and Leon immediately went on guard. He doubted that anything violent would break out here, but if the red-eyed, gray-haired Grand Druid wanted to, he knew that she could probably end everyone in the courtyard with little effort, and there were at least a dozen eighth-tier mages present, including the woman who'd delivered the message to Leon at the Heaven's Eye guest house. In her own procession came four more mages that he presumed were ninth-tier.

“Grandmother!” Cassandra excitedly called out as the Grand Druid joined everyone else in the courtyard, her voice ringing out loudly in the courtyard as everyone else had gone silent upon the Grand Druid’s arrival. “How did the ritual go?”

“It went well,” the Grand Druid replied, a loving smile spreading across her face as she pulled the Princess in for a loose embrace. “The spirits were pleased and sent us good omens.”

“Wonderful,” the Empress said as she joined the other two. She then gave the Grand Druid a quick hug of her own and whispered something into her ear. Leon wouldn’t have thought much of it, assuming it was simply some familial or official business that had nothing to do with him, but immediately after the Empress pulled away, the Grand Druid’s eyes flickered in his direction.

He almost felt her attention hitting him like a brick wall. Her ruby red eyes locked upon him and his legs almost turned to mush, his grip in Elise and Valeria’s hands slackened, and he felt an immense weight settle in around his shoulders.

And then it was gone as the Grand Druid looked away.

“Shit,” Leon murmured.

“Something wrong?” Valeria asked.

[That one wants something from Leon,] Maia astutely replied, and all of them knew that she was talking about the Grand Druid.

“Give it a minute or two, she needs to greet her own people, but she’ll come this way,” Elise then warned.

Her statement proved prophetic, for over the next ten minutes, Leon and his ladies quietly mingled, and the Grand Druid slowly made her way around the courtyard, speaking for a moment or two with powerful mages and the other important people at the feast. But clearly enough, she was slowly making her way in their direction, and Leon’s heart rate accelerated with every step she took in his direction.

Soon enough, as Elise quietly chatted with some fifth-tier bureaucrat about certain Heaven’s Eye policies, Valeria squeezed his hand and Leon knew exactly why.

[She’s here,] Maia whispered into his mind, and when Leon glanced over, he saw the Grand Druid only a few steps away, smiling at them with nothing but welcome in her expression, though her warmth didn’t extend to the two ninth-tier women at her shoulder, nor to the dozen others in her entourage who were staring with varying degrees of curiosity and hostility at Leon and his ladies.

Like using a bucket of water to extinguish a candle, the conversation that Elise had been carrying out with the Evergolden bureaucrats ceased, and the bureaucrats around them quietly slunk backward, extricating themselves from Leon’s presence.

“Leon Raime,” the Grand Druid declared as she stepped in front of Leon. “How wonderful to finally meet you.”

Leon did his best to smile with as much charm as he could muster, but inside, his mind was racing.

‘Finally meet me? Is she going to just say that she knows who I am? What does she want?’

Such questions only she could answer, so Leon, summoning all of the decorum he could, replied, "You honor me... Grand Druid? Your Druidness?"

Several of the Evergolden hangers-on glared at him, and one even looked about ready to lay into him for the style he used, but before anyone could, the Grand Druid broke out laughing.

"Ha! 'Your Druidness'! I have to say I've never heard that one before! At least, not to my face!"

Leon's cheeks burned in embarrassment, and he could almost feel Elise's urge to facepalm beside him, but he kept his demeanor as stoic and neutral as he could make it.

"I apologize for any offense, I wasn't briefed on how to address you properly," Leon explained.

One of the ninth-tiers at the Grand Druid's shoulders finally spat, "An oversight unworthy of someone in your position within Heaven's Eye! You should be ashamed of yourself!"

Leon cringed internally, but looked at the woman who spoke, something within him stirring, anger and indignation that this glorified bodyguard was taking that tone with *him*!

But just as soon as the feeling rose up, he quashed it, and humbly replied, "I was unprepared to meet someone so high up the chain, and I should have been. It is what it is."

"Oh I don't mind," the Grand Druid said, silencing her guard with a wave of her hand. "Heaven's Eye has always been delightfully informal, and I don't see why I ought to insist on formality anyway!" She then turned and looked at her entourage and said, "All of you can go enjoy the feast, I don't need you following little old me around everywhere!"

Most of her entourage dutifully scattered, though a few, including her two ninth-tier guards, needed another word or two and a glare of warning before they stepped back.

"Now, that's a little better, isn't it?" the Grand Druid said as she turned back to Leon, and he had to admit, it was better, not having a dozen of the most powerful members of the Sacred Golden Empire's government staring at him—at least, not quite so closely, for he noticed that a significant number of eyes were still turned in their direction.

"So," Leon said as he disentangled his hands from Elise and Valeria and crossing his arms over his chest, "is there something I can help you with?"

He figured he already knew what she wanted, what Anastasios had also wanted: to recruit him, or to intimidate him.

The Grand Druid stared at him for a moment, then smiled widely and sweetly, her natural grace and beauty evident despite the lines on her face and gray in her hair. "There is something that I would like to talk to you about, as a matter of fact. Would you come with me for a few minutes?"

"My answer would depend on what you want to talk to me about," Leon replied, not moving.

The Grand Druid's smile thinned a little, but her eyebrows rose in amusement. "So reluctant, are we? I get that I may not be in my prime anymore, but it still hurts when I learn that people don't want to spend any time with me!"

She made a great show of being hurt, and Leon could feel quite a few of those people who were watching them start to grow a little more hostile. He suppressed a grimace and said, "I didn't refuse outright, I just want to know what you want to talk about."

The Grand Druid's expression took a more serious turn, and she stared searchingly at Leon for a long moment. She didn't exert any pressure with her aura, but Leon still felt almost naked beneath her intense scrutiny. Fortunately, as far as he could tell, his mental defenses weren't breached.

"I'd like to talk about you, Leon *Raime*," she finally said. "If possible, I would speak with you alone. Your companions can wait here." She gave Elise, Maia, and Valeria respectful nods, but then turned her insistent gaze back to Leon.

[She wants to talk about the Clan,] Nestor whispered from Leon's soul realm.

A little surprised at his interjection, it took Leon a moment to reply. So, as he made his own show of thinking over her request, Leon responded to Nestor, [I think that's obvious enough. I don't particularly want to go with her, but I also want to hear her out. What's your opinion of her so far?]

Nestor replied, [I would skin her alive for her insolence, but I felt that way before she even opened her thieving mouth!]

[Hm? What's drawing your ire? Not that I think you need one, with your superiority complex...]

Ignoring Leon's last comment, Nestor explained, [That crown she's wearing... It used to be my sister's. It's been modified and embellished, but Penthesilea's circlet is there, still barely visible.]

Leon cocked an eyebrow and couldn't help but stare for a moment at the Grand Druid's elaborate crown. Sure enough, as far as he could tell from this close up, the base golden band, with its bird reliefs, seemed to be older than the flowers added to it.

[That would certainly explain just how powerful it seems to be,] Leon muttered to his clansman, noting that the crown had been heavily enchanted.

[It's not a weapon, so no need to fear it,] Nestor growled. [That being said, if you can get it back, I would be grateful.]

Leon had to resist the urge to snort. [And what use is your gratitude to me, dead man?]

He heard Nestor grunt indignantly and fall silent, and for a moment, he reveled in his minor victory over his long dead clansman. However, that attitude died as soon as he looked back down at the Grand Druid and saw her staring back, a wide, carnivorous smile on her face, and his heart skipped a beat as he realized that he'd been too obviously staring at her crown.

'She knows what she's wearing!' he realized.

But he quickly mastered himself, as did she, and a moment later, both were looking at each other with polite, understated smiles.

He didn't think the Grand Druid was going to get violent, and buoyed by the fact that he was still a part of Heaven's Eye and that Anastasios hadn't seen him threat enough to actively move against, Leon said to the Grand Druid, "There's no harm in talking, is there? Lead the way."

“Wonderful,” she replied, and she turned on a dime and started walking. Leon fell in beside her, and Elise, Maia, and Valeria remained behind.

[If you don’t come out soon, I’m going to tear this place apart until I find you,] Maia promised as he walked away, and he could see similar sentiments reflected in Elise and Valeria’s expressions.

He smiled reassuringly back at them, but his attention was soon pulled back when the Grand Druid’s two ninth-tier guards fell back in beside her as they walked, and, after a quick gesture from the Grand Druid, so did Cassandra.

“Leon,” she smugly said in greeting.

“Your Highness,” Leon replied, causing her to frown and go silent at his display of formality.

The Grand Druid led them down a stone path and through the trees cast in golden light. They walked for several long minutes, passing several smaller deserted courtyards and a few other small stone sitting areas, until they eventually arrived at what Leon assumed to be their destination.

They reached a beautiful private grove surrounding a clearing, with a large stone table in the center and about half a dozen small trees growing around it that had formed the shape of large, comfortable-looking armchairs.

“Please, have a seat,” the Grand Druid said to Leon as the two ninth-tier guards took up positions just outside of the ring of trees that surrounded the clearing. The Grand Druid herself took a seat in the furthest tree-chair from the stone path, and when she sat down, Leon felt a substantial amount of magic suddenly flow through the ring of trees around them, and the trees’ branches whipped around like arms, interlocking and forming magical connections. When they went still again, the clearing had been, as far as he could tell, effectively warded against any eavesdroppers.

It seemed this was to be a truly private conversation.

“Interesting...” Leon whispered, his eyes wide with wonder. He didn’t take a seat as the Grand Druid had invited him, but instead took a few steps toward the trees and examined them in as great of detail as he could. “How is it that you have such control over these trees? And how are they acting as conduits for enchantments? I don’t see any visible runes...”

The Grand Druid laughed as Cassandra took a seat to her right. “I’m not surprised that an enchanter of your skill is so fascinated by our work. If you want, we could teach you some of our arts...”

Leon turned back toward her, an eyebrow raised. “And the cost of such instruction?”

The Grand Druid smiled back at him, then gestured to the seat directly across from hers.

Taking the hint, Leon gave the trees one more appreciative glance, then sat down.

Without any preamble, the Grand Druid said, “Leon Raime, I want you to join my Empire.”

Leon almost reeled at her bluntness, but managed to hoarsely asked, “What?”

“Join us,” the Grand Druid suggested. “We have cake...” With a wave of her hand, a large, cream-covered pastry appeared before all three of them. Without further ado, the Grand Druid picked up a

fork and started in on hers, but Cassandra and Leon just stared at her, and Leon wasn't sure who was more confused: himself, or the Princess.

"Grandmother..." Cassandra murmured.

The Grand Druid paused a moment, sighed, and put her fork down. "I was just trying to lighten the mood a little, and nothing's better for that than something sweet, don't you think?"

"Maybe this doesn't call for a lighter mood?" Cassandra replied.

The Grand Druid shrugged, then looked back at Leon. "Are you at least willing to hear my offer out?"

Leon stared back at her, painfully aware that Cassandra was now looking at him, too. He thought about the Director and his current issues with Heaven's Eye, but he also wasn't that willing to get involved with someone without knowing a *lot* more about their motivations. At the very least, though, he figured that this offer might put a little more pressure on the Director...

"I suppose I can at least hear it out," Leon said with a shrug, and he leaned back in his tree-chair.

"We have the aforementioned enchantments that you seemed so interested in, and much more besides. But we can offer high position and great benefits, along with instruction and support in ascending through the magical tiers. We have ancient secrets of the Thunderbird Clan that we're willing to share, and more, besides."

Leon's eyes narrowed at the mention of his Clan. If nothing else, he had to admire the Grand Druid's audacity to try and bribe him with something that others considered his birthright.

After a moment of silence, Leon asked, "Is that it?"

"What more might you want?" the Grand Druid innocently asked. She glanced at Cassandra, then back to Leon. "I could arrange for the two of you to get married, if you'd like."

Cassandra froze, then stiffly turned to her grandmother with a look of utter mortification, but she didn't say anything.

Leon, however, just chuckled. "I'm already married, and I'm not looking for another."

Contrary to what he thought might happen, after his statement, Cassandra shot him an almost indignant look.

"That's... I suppose that's your choice," the Grand Druid said, sounding disappointed for the first time.

"However, your Thunderbird blood will undoubtedly make things difficult for you in the future, won't it? If you have the support of an Empire, however, especially an Empire with which you have marriage ties, then a lot of those problems will go away, won't they?"

Leon stared at her in shock, though his shock had been somewhat lessened by her earlier bluntness. Cassandra, on the other hand, stared wildly at the two of them, her eyes flitting between them like she was watching them toss a ball between themselves.

With a light frown, Leon wondered if Cassandra *did* actually know about him, and if she didn't, then he was even more surprised if this was how she was learning about it.

When he turned his attention back to the Grand Druid, he said with steel entering his tone, “Are you threatening me?”

“I was offering support,” the Grand Druid replied, her wolfish grin returning. “Let’s not play games, Leon Raime. You are vulnerable as you are. That the Empires haven’t moved against you has been out of respect for Heaven’s Eye, among others, and because you don’t seem interested in political power. But that could always change in the future. If you grow too strong, too uncontrollable, too unpredictable, then action will be taken against you. I can only promise that it won’t be from us, and only if you join hands with us...”

Leon chuckled to cover up his growing anxiety. “I’m not looking for another wife,” he repeated. “I’m not trying to offend you, Your Highness, I’m sure you’ll make everyone you take as a husband, concubine, or whatever very happy. I’m just happy with the family I have, and that’s that.”

“Being content and being happy aren’t the same things,” the Grand Druid pressed. “Your ambitions are high, aren’t they? And with high ambitions come high expectations. Having a large family will likely be hard for you, won’t it? Having another wife, and a *well-connected* one could prove extremely useful.”

“What would you be getting out of this?” Leon asked. “You would *share* the bounties that my blood might unlock? Or would you just expect me to have a few kids with the Princess and have that be that?”

“We can discuss the details later. What I want to know is if you’re willing to truly consider the possibility...”

Leon sighed, then looked at Cassandra, whose cheeks had reddened, though from anger, embarrassment, or some combination thereof, he couldn’t tell from her expression alone.

“I’ll think about it,” he eventually said. “I make no promises.”

“That’s all I ask,” the Grand Druid replied.

Chapter 726: Departing Evergold

Cassandra’s heart raced with fury, and she could barely hear herself think over the roar of blood rushing through her head. She couldn’t believe the meeting she’d just witnessed between Leon and her grandmother...

... Although, it was becoming more and more believable the longer that those revelations turned about in her head.

She and the Grand Druid still sat in the private room of the Golden Grove, Leon having left only a few minutes before. A screen of light had been projected out of the stone table, and the two women were able to watch Leon being escorted back to the feast with it. The Grand Druid seemed rather distracted, staring at the screen and Leon’s image on it with an intensity that Cassandra had never seen before, which was the only reason she was able to wait that long without letting her building outburst loose.

When it became too much to bear, she finally asked in the native language of the Evergolden people instead of the common tongue, “Grandmother... What in the Ashen Fields was *that*?”

The Grand Druid pried her eyes off the screen and to Cassandra, lighting up with pride the moment they locked upon her and serving to calm a little bit of Cassandra’s wrath.

Responding to Cassandra in common rather than their native language, the Grand Druid said, “My dear, I think you know exactly what that was. And if you don’t, then I’m sure all you need is a few more minutes. With me here, you’ll have all the time you need.”

Cassandra resisted the urge to facepalm. Switching back to common, she said, “Grandmother, I appreciate your faith in me, but I’d rather you just cut the shit and let me in on your plans. They clearly concern me, and I have to say, I don’t like being dangled before Leon like a piece of meat before a starving lion!”

“Oh? But I thought you were already thinking about courting him? You came back from the Scorched Fields with such a glowing impression of him, I thought that you’d jump at the chance to make him yours!”

“Not like that! By the Gods and Spirits, I’m not some cheap whore who’ll spread my legs for anyone with silver! I’m a Princess, and Leon Raime should be lucky to kiss the ground at my feet! If I were to ask anyone else to be my first husband, they’d fall over themselves in eagerness to accept! I won’t *pursue* Leon just because I want him, he has to come to me! He has to beg me to take him as my husband, I won’t have it any other way!”

The Grand Druid smiled at her almost pityingly, and while it angered Cassandra even further, she reined in her ire until after her grandmother could respond.

“We may not have the time for that,” the Grand Druid said as she glanced back at the screen. Leon had arrived back at the feast and was speaking with the women he’d arrived with, who were all listening quite intently. It was obvious enough even though they couldn’t hear him that he was filling them in on what happened while he was gone.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that the Lord Protector has sent word that he would like to visit Evergold in the next few weeks. I would normally welcome such a thing with open arms, but the timing is a little too coincidental...”

“You think he’s coming here for Leon?”

“Of course he is. The Ilian Empire’s cache of ancient Thunderbird relics is second only to those wasteful Sentinels! The gains they could make if they were to successfully recruit Leon Raime are unimaginable! We’d gain much from adding his blood to our line, but I can’t say that we’d gain more than the Ilians would if Leon were to choose them, instead.”

Cassandra’s tone lowered in pitch as her simmering anger boiled over for just a moment. “Is that why you told me to get to know him before the wyvern hunt?”

The Grand Druid turned back to her and nodded. “He has three wives. Or at least, he has two wives and two concubines, I’m honestly not sure what constitutes a marriage ceremony in those worthless Kingdoms up north. I thought that not only would he jump at the chance to get with my gorgeous, stunning, incredible-in-every-way granddaughter, but that your interest would finally be piqued enough by a man that you’d jump at the chance to have him, too!”

Cassandra groaned in frustration and pushed herself back from the table, though remained in her seat. “I don’t like being used like that, grandma!”

"I wasn't using you! I was just putting you in a situation and seeing how it went! And it seemed to have gone quite well if how much you were gushing about Leon Raimé when you got home was anything to go by..."

"I wasn't *gushing*..."

"You were more complimentary to him than you were to anyone else I and your mother have sent your way..."

"That's only because you told me to watch him." Cassandra pointedly didn't look at her grandmother, hoping to salvage some bits of her broken pride by turning her head away. "If it weren't for that, I don't think I would've given him a second look!"

"That's exactly what I was afraid of, little one. Why don't you do me a favor and bring out that new sword I had commissioned for you?"

Cassandra frowned, but dutifully retrieved Sunlight from her soul realm, summoning it out onto the table. Realization began to dawn on her the moment that the Grand Druid looked at it and smiled.

"Leon Raimé forged that blade, you know..."

Cassandra squeezed her eyes shut to process that information, and when she opened them, she stared blankly at Sunlight and at her grandmother, not really focusing on either one.

"How long have you been manipulating us?" Cassandra demanded, then cringed slightly as she remembered parading the blade before Leon during the wyvern hunt, bragging about its capabilities and even threatening him with it. "Does he know that you were the one who commissioned the sword? Or does he think that was me?"

"You'd have to ask him," the Grand Druid replied. "You'll get plenty of opportunities to ask him about it, too, in the coming months..."

"What?!"

The Grand Druid's eyes drifted back to the screen. "The last surviving member of the Thunderbird Clan, as far as anyone knows... He can't have come to our Empire on a whim, especially not with how badly his situation in Heaven's Eye deteriorated following that wyvern hunt... He's here looking for something; something that has to have the ability to strengthen his position within that guild of silver-pinchers, or to increase his personal power, or for some other reason I can't even imagine. The secrets of that Clan are deep, and it's hard to guess what his aim is. Regardless, I feel safe in assuming that his aim is related to his Clan, and I want to know what exactly it is. So you'll be joining his expedition."

Cassandra scowled lightly, though in a quiet admittance that she didn't dare to vocalize, she didn't find the order all that unpleasant...

"Besides," the Grand Druid continued as she glanced back at the screen, "to have someone like him wandering around our Empire unescorted would be foolishness of the highest order. If we don't keep an eye on him, then he might unleash some terrible monster from archaic times upon us; or even worse, take some long-lost piece of Thunderbird magic that should've been ours! Cassandra, find out what he's doing here, and if possible, ensure that if it can benefit the Empire, then it stays with the Empire!"

Cassandra was pulled out of her brief reverie by the sheer intensity that the Grand Druid built up to, and it surprised her. Rarely had she ever seen her grandmother display such passion for something, and on those rare occasions when she did, it was usually because something was threatening the Empire in some way. Although, if she thought about it, Cassandra supposed that a descendent of the Thunderbird Clan wandering around their Empire on 'personal business' was a little concerning. Normally—if there ever was such a thing as 'normal' when it came to situations like these—Cassandra guessed she would've just thrown Leon out of the Empire entirely, but that was hardly practical in this case, so keeping an eye on him was the best option.

"Very well," the Princess said, her eyes watching every move Leon made as he took his wives' hands and started making his way out of the Golden Grove. Her eyes narrowed slightly as she saw the fingers of the silver-haired one interlock with Leon's, and a bitter smile spread across her face. With some effort, Cassandra pried her eyes away from the screen and added, "I'll go with Leon, see what he's up to, and if possible, see if I can convince him to stay in our Empire. Do I have the authority to negotiate on that front?"

"You do," the Grand Druid confirmed. "Just about whatever he wants, I'm willing to give. Not 'anything', of course, but everything within reason, and most things without, I'd say are worth it for what his blood can bring us."

"What should I do?" Cassandra asked. "Where should I begin?"

The Grand Druid hummed in thought and remained quiet for a moment. "Tensions between him and the Director have increased dramatically recently," she said. "His retinue was attacked by vampires, and it seems the Director isn't doing much about it. That in and of itself warrants some investigation, but for the moment, make him believe that you're on his side. Sympathize with him, and dig into the resentment he has to feel for the Director. Make him see what he has to gain in our Empire, and make him realize that we won't hang him out to dry for a bunch of degenerate leeches."

Cassandra nodded, though a frown had again appeared on her face. If Leon's blood was so important, then she couldn't imagine why the Director was so willing to not protect him from any threats that might crop up, especially those of a vampiric or demonic nature.

"I'll get started right away," Cassandra said as she stood up.

The Grand Druid gave her a loving smile, her red eyes sparkling with joy and pride. "Keep me informed."

—

"Well, it's good to know that we have options," Elise said as she calmly stripped herself of her jewelry. She was strong enough to use elemental magic, now, but not quite strong enough to have unfettered use of her soul realm quite yet, so she still had to undress by hand instead of simply willing herself into different clothes.

Maia and Valeria, however, had changed into something much more comfortable as soon as they returned to the guest house, with Valeria simply donning loose training clothes and Maia going without clothing entirely—Valeria was still a little awkward with her like that, but after more than ten years living together, they already knew what they looked like without clothes, so it was no longer that big of a deal.

“Options are good,” Leon agreed as he collapsed onto the huge bed in the guest house’s master suite, mentally exhausted from the evening. “It’s always nice to feel wanted, but everyone’s coming on just a little too strong. I think I’d be more comfortable approaching them on my own terms, you know? It all just seems so manipulative when they’re the ones putting in offers, going so far as to offer up the hands of their family members in marriage...”

“It’s a bit heavy handed, I agree,” Elise responded, “but marriage alliances are hardly uncommon among any people with a gentry class.”

[And it seems that the red-eyed one likes you, anyway,] Maia added, surprising Leon a little bit—she was laying back and staring at the ceiling with an almost blank look on her face, making her seem like she wasn’t paying attention at all to what was going on around her.

Leon sighed. “Given who we’re dealing with,” he said, “I don’t think we can take anything completely at face value. It does seem strange that it didn’t seem like she’d been informed of my bloodline before the hunt, but that could just be theater for my benefit.”

Her jewelry taken off, Elise then set aside some pajamas and began to change. Leon let his eyes drink in the sight, but Valeria tactfully averted her gaze.

“Are you considering their offer?” Elise asked, smiling and moving a little slower when she noticed his gaze, obviously reveling in his attention.

“No,” Leon honestly replied. “I was tempted to refuse out of hand, but decided not to commit to that course, just yet. Still, signing on with the Sacred Golden Empire is pretty far down my list of fallback plans.”

“How far is it?” Valeria wondered. “It sounds like they’re offering you everything but the Empire itself, up to and including an Imperial Princess. Maybe it’s just me, but an offer that came with such a strong and beautiful woman strikes me as being one that ought to be fairly high.”

Elise paused a moment as she pulled her pajama bottoms up. “Didn’t you just call Cassandra a bitch like three hours ago?”

Valeria shrugged. “She is kind of a bitch. But she’s strong and beautiful, that much can’t be denied.”

[And young,] Maia added. [To have reached her level at her age is... not unprecedented...] Maia gave Leon a pointed look. [... But it’s still extremely rare.]

“It’s not about power, though,” Leon protested. “If all I wanted in rebuilding the Thunderbird Clan was power, then I would’ve sought out the most powerful people around as soon as I could and offered them a place under me. But I don’t want to just recruit anyone, I’d rather know that my people are loyal to us, not just that they’re strong. I need that trust, and Cassandra doesn’t have it. Hells, even if this topic was never broached by her or her people, I still wouldn’t trust her. I just haven’t known her long enough for to have that much trust.”

“So, I shouldn’t hold my breath thinking that we’re about to move to Evergold?” Elise asked as she fell onto the bed beside Leon, now fully clad in her pajamas. Leon sat up a bit so that he could wrap his arm around her, then pulled her close.

“No,” he said.

“Oh well. At least we’re leaving on relatively good terms.”

Leon quietly agreed. “At least there’s that,” he muttered. Still, he was glad that they weren’t staying long in the city; only a couple days, to rest up and replenish their supplies. He was looking forward to seeing this research facility of his Clan, and if anything of value remained there.

—

Leon felt much better as his retinue prepared to leave Evergold than when he did leaving Ilion years ago. He felt like he was actually going to miss the beautiful forest-city. It was a heavily populated region; not quite as urbanized and dense as Ilion, but still with a population of millions. And yet, despite this vast collection of humanity, the city still *felt* like a forest, with similar sights and smells, and with so many trees around, Leon could rarely see more than a few streets at a time. Where Ilion and all of the Ilian urbanization along the Scamander River could feel stifling, here, he felt like he could relax.

The relative lack of art glorifying the downfall of his Clan certainly helped. Evergolden art tended to be more nature-focused, and only rarely did he see people represented.

So, it was with some reluctance that he led his people back to their yacht only two days after arriving in Evergold. They had a mission, and he couldn’t fully relax until it was over. On the way back, however, he was intending to stop for a little longer to properly experience the city and see if his impression carried through.

However, as his yacht was finishing up preparations, Anshu came to find him, telling him that the Evergolden authorities had asked them to wait a while.

Leon wasn’t sure what to make of that, but he didn’t have much time to consider the problem before another sleek yacht came cutting through the waves of the Heaven’s Eye harbor. Standing upon the prow was a blond figure in beautiful golden armor, with ruby-colored eyes that sparkled in the light of the morning sun.

Leon sighed, then walked over to the side of his yacht, meeting the Princess as her yacht came to a stop next to his.

“Leon Raime!” she called out, a glowing smile lighting up her face.

“Your Highness!” he responded. Without waiting for her to explain herself on her own accord, he asked, “Are you the one who asked us to wait?”

“In a way,” the Princess called back. “It was decided that to a man of your stature couldn’t just be made to wander our great Empire without an escort, and what better escort can there be than a Princess? None have as great an understanding of their lands as I do of mine!”

Leon bitterly smiled and nodded, then turned to Anshu and muttered, “Get the ship ready to go.”

Anshu nodded in acknowledgment and made for the bridge.

Turning back to the Princess, Leon said without much honesty, “Of course we’d be honored to have an Imperial escort!”

“Good!” Cassandra replied. Without waiting another moment, she leaped off her ship and landed right next to Leon on the deck of his ship. “Then how about we head inside and discuss your current expedition?”

Leon, seeing no other real option, acquiesced, but his good mood had just taken a beating, and he struggled not to let that show. That last thing he wanted was to have an Imperial Princess breathing down his neck as he plumbed the depths of an ancient and dangerous forest searching for the remnants of his Clan.

But it seemed he had little choice except to allow her to join them, for he could tell that even if he turned the Princess down, she wasn’t just going to leave him alone. He just had to get used to an Imperial presence on his journey, and it was better to have that presence where he could see it than where he couldn’t.

He stifled a groan, sensing a headache already starting to set in.

Chapter 727: Chaperones

“Your Highness!” Elise exclaimed as Cassandra walked into the yacht’s primary lounge. “It’s such a surprise to see you!”

Leon smiled at her as he led Cassandra inside. He’d sent everyone else on the ship a message with his darkness magic that Cassandra was here—assuming they hadn’t noticed the Princess’ yacht idling in the harbor blocking them from leaving.

“A surprise, huh?” Cassandra replied as she strode in looking like she owned the place. “Is it a welcome one, at least?”

“Always,” Elise replied as she seamlessly took over Leon’s role of escorting the Princess over to the central sofas.

As she did, Leon sensed Maia approach, but she wasn’t on the ship—rather, she was below it, merged with the water, literally in her element. Gaius, Alix, Alcander, and Marcus all took up posts on the deck, watching the Princess’ own ship for any more boarders. Anshu remained on the bridge waiting for their clearance to leave, while Talal, Helen, and Anna approached the room, but stayed in an adjacent room, ready for anything that might happen. Only Valeria came in to join them, walking in just as the Princess was sitting down.

Valeria gave Leon a look but didn’t say a word as she entered. Cassandra gave her a quiet glare, but likewise remained quiet.

And with that, Leon took a seat, himself.

“Now, then,” the Princess said, “let’s dispense with all formalities, all right? It’s not like any of us are strangers...”

“An Imperial Princess is on my ship,” Leon countered. “Some formalities are unavoidable.”

“Everything can be avoided,” Cassandra rebutted. “I’m not one to hold on ceremony. If I were, I would’ve had your ship swarming with my guards, by now.”

“Such restraint,” Leon quipped.

Before Cassandra could reply, Elise asked, “So what brings you here, Your Highness?”

“I’ve decided to escort you as you see to your personal business—at least, so long as you remain within my Empire.”

“A personal escort?” Elise said a little disbelievingly.

“Is that a problem?”

“No, no, it isn’t...” Elise replied with some hesitation.

“Not for us,” Leon clarified. “But we’re a little concerned that we’re taking up your time. We don’t feel like we need an escort, especially not one quite so high in rank.”

Leon didn’t honestly think that Cassandra would back down, and even if she did, at this point, he didn’t think Evergold would just let them do what they wanted without supervision. That was essentially what the Grand Druid—or so he assumed—was saying by sending Cassandra to escort him.

As he expected, Cassandra declared, “The choice has been made; I’ll be joining you for the foreseeable future. Now, why don’t you two tell me what your business in my Empire is, and I can ensure it goes smoothly?”

Elise smiled, but didn’t immediately respond, and Cassandra’s focus narrowed in on Leon. She fixed him in her ruby gaze, and he stared right back, his golden eyes narrowed from a low smile masking his annoyance.

“We’re seeking some leisure,” Leon explained. “I heard that there’s a forest in the north of your Empire that’s particularly dangerous, and it piqued my interest. That’s our destination.”

“Leisure?” Cassandra inquired, almost mocking him with her tone. “Is that it? With everything that’s been happening in Heaven’s Eye recently, I wouldn’t have thought that you’d have the time for leisure...”

Leon’s narrow gaze turned to a glare of warning, but he wasn’t that surprised to hear the Princess allude to his current troubles with the Director.

“And what’s ‘been happening’ in Heaven’s Eye, recently?” Leon innocently asked.

“Vampires, kidnappings, violence in the streets,” Cassandra replied. “Made for some juicy headlines, I have to say. Journalists were practically falling all over themselves speculating about what prompted such violence, and of course, as an Imperial Princess, I have sources of my own linking you to all of that excitement. And yet, you’re leaving so soon after all of that? Aren’t you worried about what might happen in your absence?”

Cassandra smiled at Leon like she’d just found a weak scale in his hide, but Leon stared right back at her, unconcerned.

“Don’t believe everything you read,” he replied. “Things back in Occulara are fine. Whatever violence you’ve heard about has clearly been overblown.”

Cassandra stared at him for a moment, then sighed and said, "I suppose we can go with that. If you want to pretend everything is fine in Occulara, then so be it."

"There's no need to call me out like that," Leon replied. "If we both know what's going on, then the only difference is how blunt I am in my refusal to talk about it. If you'd like, I could be a little clearer with how I tell you that I'm not going to talk about it."

"Do you not trust me to talk about this, Leon Raime?" Cassandra asked, acting offended and scandalized.

"In the interest of not being called out again by being too subtle, I'll be brutally honest" Leon responded. "No, I don't trust you. You've given me a generally positive impression, but I don't even know you, not really. And I don't talk about sensitive topics with people I don't know well, let alone people I'm only somewhat acquainted with."

Like a switch had been flipped, Cassandra fell back into her usual attitude, her confident smirk returning.

"And your goals in the Prota Forest? Is that something you won't talk about, too?"

"I've already told you my goal: to explore this dangerous place. For fun."

Cassandra gave him another skeptical look, but didn't challenge him this time. "Very well, Leon Raime. I suppose there's only one thing left for me to do: get to know you better. Prepare a cabin for me; I'm going to be traveling with you on your ship. I'll also need space for at least three of my guards."

"Hold on a mo—" Leon tried to protest, but Cassandra just spoke louder, cutting him off.

"I also have a strict diet, I'll be sure to send your chefs my requirements—wait, you *do* have chefs on this thing, right? Ah, if you don't, I'll just bring mine. I'm also going to require use of your training facilities in the mornings and evenings, and would prefer to be alone when I'm using them."

"This is not *your* ship!" Leon shouted, and Cassandra fell into an arrogant silence, smirking at him like she'd won some kind of duel. "You have your own ship, there's no reason for you to slum it with us."

"We're not exactly slumming it, though," Elise said as she languidly stretched on the sofa, the silk curtains over the windows billowing slightly and casting her face in the morning light.

"Not the point," Leon said with some exasperation.

"It's a point worth addressing," Cassandra responded. "Your ship is adequately appointed for one of my station. Now, where will I be sleeping?"

Leon stared at her, wondering if what he was hearing was true, or if it were distorted by some trickster god.

"Your ship would be better for your comfort," he insisted.

"I don't want my ship, I want to travel on yours," Cassandra replied, equally insistently.

Leon glared at her, but after a moment's thought, realized that she wasn't going to back down, and she *was* a Princess, so he switched tactics, deciding to mitigate what seemed like an inevitability instead of trying to prevent it altogether.

"You're not going to stay on my ship and act like you own it," Leon said. "I don't care if this is your Empire or not."

Cassandra smiled in triumph, then asked, "Conceding, hm? And what are your conditions?"

Leon almost reversed his decision to not be stubborn just out of spite, but reluctantly stayed his course. "Your guards stay on your ship. They'll still be plenty close, my defenses are more than adequate to ensure you won't come to any harm."

"Fine," Cassandra said so quickly that Leon immediately knew that she'd never intended for her own guards to stay here in the first place. He buried his regret and continued.

"Secondly, my training facilities are for my people first and foremost. We don't spend much time training in the evenings, so if you want to train without an audience then that would be the time. But you don't get exclusive use, *ever*. Those facilities are for my people's use, and you're not going to kick them out."

Cassandra looked a little more bitter about that, but after a moment, she still nodded in agreement.

"Finally, you aren't going to disturb my chef. He does damn fine work and his food is to die for. Unless you have an actual medical reason not to eat his food, you'll eat what he cooks."

"That's unacceptable!" Cassandra finally protested, looking as if Leon had just told her to skin her family dog to accompany him. "I have *extremely* refined standards and I won't lower them for anyone!"

"Then eat on *your* ship, where they might care more for *your* standards," Leon shot back, silencing Cassandra.

After several long seconds of staring at each other, wondering if the other was going to break, Cassandra finally said, "Fine. I guess I'll have to do that, then. Have my room ready in an hour, I have to go inform my people of this development. I'll return after."

Cassandra, without waiting for either Leon or Elise to acknowledge her declaration, stood up and left. Valeria watched her leave like a hawk eyeing a mouse, but Cassandra didn't spare her so much as a glance.

As soon as the door closed behind the Princess, Valeria asked, "Are we really going to host this arrogant bitch?"

"Would you rather she stay on her own ship?" Leon asked, though he knew the answer already.

"I would," Valeria confirmed without a shred of hesitation.

"She's going to be coming with us anyway," Elise said, her tone resigned. "It's not easy to turn down a Princess, and as it is, I think that she wants to join us on our yacht without the rest of her entourage is already more than we could've asked for."

"Leon didn't ask for that, though," Valeria replied. "He just said no to those things and she accepted it! Couldn't we have pushed a little more?"

"Doubtful," Leon muttered. "She only accepted those concessions because she wants to travel with us on this ship."

Valeria scowled. "She wants to travel with *you*. She seems like she'd be happier pretending the rest of us don't exist."

Leon walked over and took her in his arms. "This won't take long. Just ignore her as she ignores everyone else. If she proves to be too bothersome, just let me know and I'll tie her up and throw her in the river!"

Valeria burst out laughing. "Now that... would be a... sight to see!" she gasped between giggles.

"In the meantime," Leon continued, "Let's just try to get along with our new... what should we call them? Our escorts? Our uninvited companions?"

"Stalkers," Valeria suggested.

"Chaperones," Elise said, her tone a little more diplomatic but expressing the same intent.

"Let's just tolerate them as best as we can," Leon replied. "At this point, either we see them or we don't, they're not going away. We're just going to have to come to terms with having Evergolden eyes on us."

"Splendid," Valeria murmured.

"It's fine with me," Elise added, though she sounded a little tired and unenthusiastic.

Leon gratefully nodded to both, the thought that he was sure occurred to all three of them to abandon their expedition remaining unsaid, then stated, "I'll make sure everyone knows. We're going to have to be fairly tight-lipped going forward about what we're looking for, but I think we'll get through this just fine."

Valeria, still in his arms, laid a hand on his cheek. "Do you really think that?"

Leon paused and smiled awkwardly. "I... I'll be doing what I can to make sure we get through this just fine."

"You inspire such confidence, husband," Elise said as she stood up. "I'll do what I can, too, so let's get this over with, shall we?"

—

Cassandra made good on her demand to move into a cabin on Leon's yacht. She didn't get a particularly large cabin, and in Leon's opinion, while it was well-appointed, it wasn't quite up to Imperial standards. Still, she accepted it with a surprising lack of complaints, and she didn't bother anyone else for the rest of the day. Her own yacht got out of the way, and Anshu was cleared to take the yacht back out onto the river. From there, they made good time.

Much like the Scamander River for the Ilian Empire, the Neilos River for the Sacred Golden Empire was quite built up on either side. However, it was in the Evergolden style, making the riverbanks seem almost like they were cutting through a forest of gigantic trees whose branches constantly intertwined

around and above them. The river practically ran through a corridor roofed by leaves frequently shining in every color.

Not too far out were the farms growing just about everything that Leon could imagine. Food, alchemical ingredients, textiles, and other growable materials could all be seen. Leon knew that the Sacred Golden Empire was the most fertile and agriculturally productive of the four Empires, but it had been a hard fact to internalize after seeing the extent to which the Ilian Empire's land was farmed. However, Leon could now believe it, as what he could see was hard to deny; the Sacred Golden Empire was filled with farms, ranches, and orchards farther than even his magic senses could see.

Of course, further out there was wilder land, with most of the Sacred Golden Empire's populace being concentrated around the Neilos River, but at least in that first day of sailing up the river, Leon wasn't able to see any of those less civilized regions.

By the end of that first day, though, Leon found himself feeling restless. He could sense another storm coming, rolling in off the central sea, but this far inland, its power was much diminished, and it had much less of an impact on him. Still, he found it hard to sit still, so made his way to his yacht's training chamber.

His yacht was fairly large, but to have enough space for everyone aboard, many concessions had to be made for its amenities. One of those concessions was a training room that was much smaller than what Leon was used to, and no meditation chambers. There was enough room for Leon's entire retinue to train in at once, but only just barely.

When Leon entered the training chamber, he was accompanied only by Anzu, and he found that it was already occupied: Valeria had come here first, and she was alone.

"Val," Leon whispered lovingly as he walked in. She'd been gracefully turning and swinging a training glaive, her silver hair pulled back into a loose braid and whipping behind her beautifully. The evening sun shone in through the large windows, and she appeared to glow in the light.

Valeria didn't even open her eyes, but a smile spread across her face, and she said, "Leon." She didn't stop moving, but instead of more deliberate and practiced movements, she shifted into something that flowed even more between movements, something that was more dancing than training.

Leon almost froze right there in the doorway, and only pushed a little further in when Anzu nudge him with his head. The griffin laid down in a corner, but watched the two of them intently.

Without a word, and without taking his eyes off his silver-haired lover for very long, Leon took a training sword down from the wall. He'd been intending on more magical training as that would help him bleed off some of this energy that the distant storm was sending his way, but now that he saw Valeria, her body aglow with evening light, he was in the mood for something a little more physical.

Similarly silent, Valeria slowed her twirling until she came to a stop standing opposite Leon about twenty feet away, her glaive at the ready.

Leon swung his sword a couple times to limber up, and then assumed the stance of his family's ancient fighting style, the style that he'd since refined to near-perfection from training with the Thunderbird. He

didn't call upon his magic, and neither did Valeria, from what he could tell of her aura. This was to be a fight about skill, not power.

At this point, Leon and Valeria had sparred together so much that they could practically read each other's minds in battle. Each knew exactly what the other was capable of, and what their habits were. So, their sparring sessions these days had a more tactical aspect to them, where they often mixed up their styles trying to catch each other off-guard.

Things were rarely so easy, but Leon had great fun facing off against Valeria like this.

The two slowly circled each other, eyeing each other up, searching for any exploitable weak points. They rather leisurely drew closer a step at a time, each knowing that they were about to come to blows, but neither in much of a rush to make the first move.

The tension between them ratcheted up the longer they went without exchanging blows, until finally, it all seemed to explode in one violent moment as Leon lunged forward, his blade extended, while Valeria simultaneously swept outward with her glaive. Their blades met in the air with a loud metallic clang that resounded through the ship, and in a flash, the two exchanged half a dozen more.

Their attention was wholly focused on the other, their movements and the glow of their eyes all they could see. Each reveled in the way the other was utterly captivated by them, but in no way did that distract from their spar.

In five minutes, they exchanged a hundred blows, neither striking the other even once. They simply knew each other too well, and without the benefit of magic power, their skill was about equal.

They both stepped back, smiling fiercely despite the inconclusiveness of this first round, only to be pulled out of their brief reverie by an amazed, "That was... something to see," from the door.

Leon turned, his movement mirrored perfectly by Valeria, and saw Cassandra in the doorway, staring near-slack jawed at the two of them.

After an awkward moment, the Princess took another step into the training room, her expression hungry and predatory, and she asked, "Mind if I cut in here?"

Chapter 728: Working Out Some Frustration

"Mind if I cut in here?" Cassandra asked, Leon and Valeria stuck in her ravenous, ruby gaze.

Leon could almost feel Valeria's antipathy. They had been having a wonderful time sparring, as they were wont to do, and he knew that his silver-haired lover didn't appreciate being interrupted, let alone by a Princess she didn't think too fondly of.

"I would, actually," Leon replied. He assumed that Cassandra, in turn, would assume that she wasn't going to be turned down. From the way her smugly interested expression froze on her face, then fell into one of confusion told him that he was right. "Valeria and I were in the middle of something private. It's fine if you wish to train here, too, but I'd rather you didn't insert yourself into something private."

Cassandra stared at him in disbelief and didn't immediately respond. So, to hammer his point home, he turned back to Valeria to resume their sparring. He found her giving the Princess a look of such

smugness that he momentarily wondered who the spoiled one was. But then she turned back to him and gave him such a glowing look that he no longer cared.

Leon resumed sparring with Valeria while Cassandra watched from the sidelines. Unfortunately, with the Princess so blatantly watching and with their flow already disturbed, they couldn't get back into the zone. The best part of these magicless sparring sessions was that their skills forced them to focus completely on the other, letting each other take up the entirety of their thoughts for a while. They simply couldn't get into that mental state with Cassandra there, hovering over their shoulder, glowering in displeasure.

So, after about ten minutes, they silently agreed to stop. They both realized almost immediately that they weren't returning to that state of absolute focus, but both had too much pride to call an end to their sparring so quickly after Cassandra's arrival.

When they finally lowered their practice weapons, Valeria said, "This was fun. I'm looking forward to next time."

"As am I, always," Leon replied, pulling her into a loose embrace and sealing her lips with his. Valeria melted into his arms and fiercely returned the kiss, putting on something of a show for their Imperial spectator.

Leon wondered which would break first: Cassandra's anger, or her dignity. To demand them to stop in their own yacht, when she was a guest, was beneath the dignity of an Imperial Princess. If she had any attendants with her, they surely would've spared her the trouble and shouted at Leon and Valeria themselves, but as it was, she was alone. But from the way she was glaring at them, he could tell that she was getting close to the point of exploding in anger anyway.

Reluctantly, he pulled back from Valeria, gave her a heated look, and then finally turned back to the frustrated and impatient Princess.

"Sorry about that," he said without a shred of sincerity.

"How rude," Cassandra replied a little testily, but it initially seemed like that was all she was going to say.

But then Valeria responded, "You didn't have to watch us the entire time, looking like you wanted nothing more than to cut in. You have this entire room to train in, why did you spend this time creepily watching us?"

"I *didn't*!" Cassandra shouted back, looking suddenly apoplectic; so much so that she shivered with anger and indignation, apparently unable to form coherent sentences.

"You did, and quite blatantly, too," Valeria shot back, looking like she'd picked up all the smug that Cassandra had dropped.

Leon sensed an imminent fight, so he stepped in. "Your Highness, feel free to enjoy this training chamber. I think Val and I are done with it, for the moment."

"No!" Cassandra shouted, to Leon's surprise. It seemed to take her by surprise, too, because she looked shocked with herself, but only for a moment. She then straightened up and said much more gracefully, "Please, Leon Raime, stay a while. And you, 'Val'. I enjoy having training companions."

"Why not?" Valeria said as she crossed her arms over her chest and glared at the Princess. "I can always use more training. Besides, I would love to see how an Evergolden Princess keeps herself sharp..."

"I'm sure you do since it seems to have me sharper than you," Cassandra shot back, her eighth-tier aura flaring slightly, and Leon saw Valeria momentarily wobble on her feet. Cassandra then began to stalk toward Valeria, a sadistic look on her face. "You have a lot of nerve, talking to a Princess like that. Maybe I should teach you some—"

Before she could finish her threat, Leon appeared in front of her, standing between her and Valeria, silver-blue lightning dancing across his body, killing intent radiating from him. Under his withering glare, Cassandra halted in her tracks, and then took a step backward as terror spread across her face.

But then she steeled herself and stood firm. She didn't do anything more, but as her aura calmed, so too did Leon restrain himself.

"Just a word of warning, Your Highness," Leon said as he turned from Cassandra to Valeria, making sure that his lover was all right after having been hit with the weight of the Princess' aura, "if you try to harm *any* of my people, let alone a woman I love, then you will be my enemy."

He let his statement hang as he went and stood in solidarity with Valeria, but he got from the Princess' expression that she understood; she glared at him, as if enraged that he would dare to even implicitly threaten her, but she didn't do anything hostile.

The three stood there in the training room staring at each other in awkward silence for a long moment, none of them giving an inch to the other side.

Cassandra broke first, averting her wrathful gaze for a moment, and saying, "I... apologize. We're on your ship. I'm your guest. I shouldn't be so rude."

Leon didn't respond, but Valeria beside him sighed and replied, "You're a Princess. I should find it in me to be a little more polite. For my lack of propriety, I apologize to you."

The two ladies stared at each other, significantly less tension now, and Leon tentatively let out a breath of relief.

"You know what always helps me to unwind?" he asked them, drawing their attention. "A little physical training. Nothing quite like swinging a blade, even if it isn't sharp, to help work things out. Your Highness, I'm sure you have things you could show us that we've never seen before, just as we might have something to show you that you've never considered."

Brightening up, Cassandra exclaimed, "Yes! I have to admit that watching the two of you spar, I was quite captivated. I've never seen a fighting style like yours, Leon! I would like to test myself against you!"

"Looking to lose again?" Leon asked.

"This won't be like the hunt!"

Leon smirked. "You'll have to restrict yourself. And if you don't use even a single spark of magic power, then you and Valeria might be able to spar a bit."

Cassandra took on a more thoughtful look and glanced at Valeria. Leon guessed his silver-haired lover was quite enthusiastic for the opportunity given the smile on her face, but the Princess needed another moment or two to think it over.

"I'd be willing," Cassandra eventually stated. "But who'll be first?"

Valeria immediately walked into the center of the room and brandished her training glaive, the milk-white blade gleaming with the only magic that she was going to use. With Leon, she could get away with no power at all, but with the Princess, it seemed she wasn't going to go quite that far.

Cassandra smiled, then looked to the weapons adorning the wall and selected a training weapon that Leon noted was almost identical to Sunlight.

"This will do," she said, pointedly looking at Leon. "I'm rather fond of swords. Extremely versatile weapons, and by far the most prestigious."

Leon felt like he knew what she was getting at, and asked, "By the way, how're you liking that new sword of yours?"

"It's all right," Cassandra replied, pausing just before she faced Valeria. "It has its flaws."

"You seemed pretty keen on it the last time you told me of it," Leon replied with a cheeky smile.

"Leon Raime," Cassandra responded, her tone both sarcastic and accusatory, "are you fishing for compliments? So uncouth..."

Leon shrugged. "Honestly I was just wondering if you finally figured out who made it."

Cassandra glared at him and growled, "You should've told me back then instead of letting me make a fool out of myself. You forged Sunlight!"

"I was tempted," Leon admitted, "but I thought it felt a little like bragging. I didn't want it to seem like I was trying to compete or show you up or anything like that. You liked my work, that was enough for me."

Cassandra snorted, then turned back to face Valeria. "When I'm done with Valeria, you'd better not shy away from stepping up to face me."

"Ha!" Valeria exclaimed. "This battle hasn't even begun yet, don't treat it as if it's over already!"

"Indeed," Leon added. "I'll be watching, so remember that this is, aside from those stunning enchantments, a magicless duel."

Cassandra straightened up for a moment and glared indignantly at Leon. "What am I, a child that needs to be reminded every five seconds? I am a Princess and I gave my word! I will be true to it!"

"Very well, then," Leon said as he stepped back, giving Valeria and Cassandra as much room as they'd need.

Valeria immediately assumed a defensive style. From his own extensive experience sparring with her, Leon could tell that for all that Cassandra irritated her, Valeria was still cautious and took this fight incredibly seriously. She wasn't going to lose right out of the gate.

Cassandra, on the other hand, assumed a far more aggressive stance, her blade extended to make the most of her reach given the advantage Valeria's glaive had over her longsword.

For the next few seconds, neither woman moved much. They simply stared at each other as if waiting for the other to begin. Cassandra wound up moving first, but only by taking a few steps forward, and then beginning to circle Valeria.

Valeria spun with her, always keeping her glaive up and at the ready, making sure that Cassandra didn't have a single opportunity to strike and end their spar before it had even begun. The Princess kept circling Valeria, the tension between the two rising ever higher, until finally, Valeria made her move. She took a cautious step forward and lightly swung her glaive, looking to Leon like she was trying to swipe at Cassandra's wrist.

The Princess raised her arm, letting Valeria's glaive pass right by, and followed through with an overhead strike at Valeria's exposed arms. But Valeria stepped back and brought her glaive back into her defensive stance. However, at that point, the equilibrium had been shattered, and Cassandra pressed forward, raining more and more blows down upon Valeria, with Valeria blocking and deflecting every time.

After a dozen exchanges, it might've looked like Valeria was losing, but Leon could see that her defenses were strong and she was just biding her time, letting the Princess get in a little closer, commit more and more to every swing. A few tiny opportunities presented themselves that Leon felt he might've taken if given the chance, but Valeria let Cassandra press in more and more.

Only after more than twenty exchanges did she change tacks.

Cassandra swung wide and strong, and Valeria leaned back while retracting the head of her glaive. She then lashed out with the butt of the weapon, slamming the pommel into the back of Cassandra's knee just as the Princess' blade passed barely more than a finger length in front of her face.

To her credit, Cassandra barely reacted more than taking a quick step back. The Princess kept the pressure on, but her expression shifted into one of absolute focus, and she didn't try to go for a move that would leave her that vulnerable again.

But Valeria wasn't content with simply playing defense anymore. She blocked one of Cassandra's blows, then stepped in and body-slammed the Princess, sending Cassandra reeling back. The Princess at least had the wherewithal to keep her balance and her weapon up, so Valeria wasn't able to capitalize that well on her vulnerability, but Cassandra's flow had been disrupted. Valeria followed as Cassandra took a few steps back to regain her footing, swinging her glaive down in a powerful strike.

Cassandra barely managed to deflect, and Leon began to see some genuine concern in the Princess' ruby eyes, whereas Valeria started to show a little more glee as she pressed against the Princess.

Blow after blow was exchanged, with Valeria on offense now and Cassandra too busy defending to alter that state of affairs. If they were allowed to use magic, of course, then Cassandra would have had no

problems slipping in and around Valeria's glaive, but in a fight of pure skill, Leon felt like Cassandra was getting the worse of it.

Valeria pressed in harder and harder, and Cassandra was having a more and more difficult time making sure her sword was where it needed to be to block Valeria's strikes. She had to take a step back, and then another, and then a third, and more until her back was almost up against the wall. With Valeria's range with her polearm, Cassandra couldn't maintain her maneuverability, and was growing increasingly desperate.

Finally, she made a decision that had Leon's eyes widening in surprise: she abandoned all defense. Whether out of frustration, anger, or something of that sort, Cassandra lunged forward as Valeria pressed in, taking what would've been a lethal slash across her shoulder if their blades weren't training weapons to rake her own blade across Valeria's midsection. Had it been battle-ready steel, Valeria's abdomen would've been split right open.

Both women reeled as the training weapons' enchantments flared. Back in their days in the Bull Kingdom's Knight Academy, these weapons would've stunned Leon and Valeria if they'd been hit like that. However, now that they were stronger and more powerful, they just stung badly enough that they couldn't be ignored, but hardly so debilitating.

Valeria and Cassandra stumbled back from each other, each having inflicting a devastating blow on the other at just about the exact same time.

"Ahh, damn it," Cassandra groaned as she reeled back into the wall, clutching her shoulder where Valeria's glaive had struck.

Valeria didn't vocalize her pain, but she gritted her teeth and slightly doubled over.

"That was quite the fight," Leon said, speaking from the heart. It had barely lasted a minute, but in a fight like this, that was practically an eternity. One fight was hardly a good metric for gauging skills, but he guessed that both ladies weren't that far apart in terms of pure fighting ability. Valeria might've had the edge, but she was older and, Leon guessed, more experienced in war.

"Well fought," Valeria said, and, Leon noted, without too much sarcasm.

"And to you," Cassandra replied, in much the same tone.

Without a word, the two walked back to their starting positions and assumed their stances once again. Leon just leaned back against the wall and watched, utterly fascinated.

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Cassandra and Valeria fought for an hour with barely any breaks. Leon was encouraged to see that neither used even a spark of magic power, both seemingly dedicated to showing that she was the superior among them in pure technical skill.

Unfortunately, the result of all their sparring was inconclusive; neither decisively won a single spar, and neither were able to say with a straight face at the end that she was better.

When they separated one final time—Valeria limping slightly from Cassandra landing a slash on one of her calves, and Cassandra grimacing as she rubbed her ribs where Valeria had gotten in a solid hit—their competitiveness was still there, but Leon was grateful to see that much of their hostility wasn't.

"I think I'm done for the day, but this isn't over," Cassandra promised.

"I'd be disappointed if it was," Valeria replied.

They then put their training weapons back on the wall racks and finally turned back to Leon, who had silently watched every exchange, absorbing and analyzing everything he saw.

"Still here, huh?" Cassandra asked.

"I wasn't about to miss this," Leon replied. "You have quite the fighting style, Your Highness. Is it typical of your Empire?"

"Typical enough," Cassandra said with a shrug.

"Who taught you, if you don't mind me asking?"

Cassandra took a deep breath and a wistful look appeared in her eyes. "My grandmother. My mother was of the opinion that I should focus entirely on matters of magic, but my grandmother insisted I learn how to fight 'for real', as she said."

"For 'real', huh? Does the Grand Druid not care much for magic?"

"She has the greatest respect for elemental magic. She just doesn't think that any aspect of war should be ignored."

Leon smiled and nodded. "Wise. I respect that position."

"What do you think of it? My fighting style, I mean."

"It's strong, but leaves a few small holes here and there. I assume it was designed to be used in conjunction with heavy armor?"

Cassandra nodded.

"That makes sense," Valeria chimed in. "There were a few holes in your defenses that I might've gone for were I using a faster weapon, but your speed with that blade was enough to make me hesitate."

Cassandra smiled in pride. "Your defenses were quite robust, too, Valeria."

Valeria accepted the compliment with a silent head nod, and Cassandra turned her attention back to Leon.

"What about you, Leon Raime? I'm not quite in the mood for more fighting today, so I won't yet test myself against it, but from what I saw of your fighting style earlier, you fight similarly, don't you?"

"I'm a lightning mage," Leon explained. "Lightning isn't the best element for defense. So, yeah, I also rely on my armor quite a bit and focus my blade skills on offense."

"It looked powerful," Cassandra said. "Would you indulge me with some sparring tomorrow?"

Competitiveness flared up within Leon at the thought. "Of course, Your Highness. I think I would love a chance to fight you..."

Chapter 729: Leon and Cassandra

Leon stood opposite Cassandra, his training sword brandished, his golden eyes narrow with focus. Cassandra looked quite similar with her ruby eyes trained on him, her own sword in a guard position, her aura roiling with power.

They were the only ones in the training room this time, Valeria having decided not to interrupt their duel despite wanting a rematch with Cassandra after their inconclusive spar the day before. Unlike the duel with Valeria, though, both Cassandra and Leon decided that using magic power to enhance their physical abilities was fine since they were both of the same tier, but elemental magic was still out of the question. Fortunately, Leon had seen to the enchantments in the training room himself, ensuring that it would take quite a monumental amount of force for anything within to negatively affect the rest of the yacht.

Leon hadn't interacted much with Cassandra earlier in the day, with the Princess largely left to her own devices while Leon supervised the training of his retinue, spent some time with his family, and put in some work on his next generation of Lightning Lance. When he'd shown up for his evening training, he'd found Cassandra waiting for him, and neither had said so much as a word as they readied themselves for their own spar.

After about ten seconds of staring at each other in silence, Leon made his move. He was a little nervous about the skill that Cassandra had displayed the day before, but he fought with an aggressive style, and he knew that the Princess did too, so if he wanted to win this, he'd have to make the first move.

Backed with his eighth-tier strength, Leon brought his sword down in an overhead cleave, which Cassandra nimbly deflected. Fortunately, Leon hadn't committed entirely, so he was able to throw himself back and avoid the milk-white blade of Cassandra's training sword.

Leon then followed up with another slash, which Cassandra blocked. She stabbed, and he deflected. He cut at her front leg, but she stepped back and barely avoided it. She slapped his sword away with hers, then stepped back in with a vicious swing at his head. He raised his blade and blocked, then pushed back against her, locking their blades together.

The two pushed and pulled, their swords tangled, and their spar turned into a grapple. Leon twisted and pushed, trying to knock Cassandra off-balance. Cassandra braced and responded in kind. Leon stepped in and tried to get a foot behind hers that she would trip over, but she gave enough ground to retain her balance, while a quick twist of her upper-body had Leon straining, and ultimately succeeding, to hold onto his own sword.

Leon eventually just threw himself into her, finally knocking her back and disentangling their swords. In an instant, he was back on her, trying to exploit the moment of vulnerability he'd created as she moved to regain her balance. She barely managed to fend him off, and then they were back where they were in the beginning.

This back-and-forth went on for several minutes, but Leon and Cassandra moved with great speed. Leon was a lightning mage and she was a light mage; both were extremely fast even without using elemental

magic. They were both incredibly strong, too, and their every crossing of swords shook the training room and rang throughout the ship.

But they couldn't keep fighting like that forever, and something had to give. That something turned out to be their weapons—barely five minutes into their spar, they both separated, their eyes wide, their minds strained, and their swords cracked and blunted. They'd exchanged blows more than a thousand times in those five minutes, and the force of their clash had ruined them.

Leon stared at Cassandra for a long moment, knowing she'd seen the same thing he had, but wondering just how she was going to take it. He slowly began to relax, and was relieved to see her do the same. With some certainty that their first spar was now over, he pried his eyes off of her and analyzed the damage done to his sword.

The enchantment was failing, the milk-white metal now a dull gray. The edges were always blunt, but the blade now featured numerous cracks and chips, some big enough to compromise the blade's integrity.

"I think... we went a little too hard," Leon said, displaying his ruined sword for Cassandra to see.

"I think you're right," Cassandra replied, looking a little awkward and apologetic as she showed Leon her weapon, similarly ruined. "I'll arrange for some replacements, this is my fault."

"Nonsense," Leon responded with a wave of his hand. "These aren't expensive, and this is kind of what they're made for."

"You're too generous," Cassandra replied as she laid her ruined blade on a thin table along the wall. Leon did the same. "So," Cassandra said as they set aside their training weapons, "what now? That was a little disappointing and not at all satisfying, so... should we find someplace to stop and head out into the wild? Find some place that doesn't have many people, where we can actually *use* our magic and see who's the stronger?"

"No," Leon replied with a look of distaste. "I'm certainly eager to see the result, but I'd rather not stop for something so trivial. No offense."

Cassandra scowled at him, but nodded. "Yeah, I figured. That was only a suggestion."

Leon sighed. "We're heading into your Prota Forest, so don't worry about it too much; I'd be willing to guess that we're going to be using our magic plenty in the days to come."

"That's true. The Prota Forest is quite dangerous. You know, you still haven't told me why you're going there..."

"I did actually tell you: for recreation. I heard about these goat men and plant-based giants and wanted to see them for myself. Reminds me quite a bit of where I came from."

"Oh? Do they have such creatures in the north?"

"There aren't any goat men, but there are several tribes of stone giants living in the Border Mountains between the Bull and Talfar Kingdoms. In the Northern Vales north of the Bull Kingdom, there are deep forests filled with ice wraiths and tree sprites. There are enough people around in the north that most

creatures that pose much risk have been hunted to extinction, but there are still a few around if you know where to look.”

“That sounds quite interesting, I might have to visit the north sometime. Maybe you ought to come with me and show me around.”

Leon chuckled as he leaned up against the wall opposite the windows and stared out at the forest-city that lined the banks of the Neilos River. “I’d consider it, assuming I ever found the time. I have to admit to some curiosity to seeing how the Bull Kingdom has been doing these past few years, and I’d certainly love to see the place I grew up again.”

“Your family were nobles, right? And royalty even before that?”

Leon nodded. “We were, though I never really saw much of it. For the most part, I lived in a place that even the northerners considered barbaric.”

“That’s... hard to believe,” Cassandra replied with a deep frown of thought. “I *do* believe you, but your Clan once ruled this plane. It’s hard to comprehend such a fall.”

“Now it’s just me,” Leon said. He had to carefully control his face to keep a sad smile from spreading across it, but he guessed that Cassandra got his emotional state anyway from his tone alone. She gave him an odd look that seemed both pitying and confused, but it was hard for him to say.

“You fight like them?” she asked.

“I do. My father told me that my fighting style has been passed down for a long, *long* time, and from what I’ve been able to see from Thunderbird Clan ruins that I’ve seen, that’s been true.”

“Have you been to many of these ruins then?”

Leon laughed. “No, but enough. And all that I’ve been to are essentially just ruins, now.”

“Are you sure about that?” Cassandra asked challengingly as she gave him a hungry look.

“Quite.”

“A shame. I’ve never seen appreciable ruins. Just some broken stones and architecture. I would’ve loved to see a ruin—*any* ruin, really—that’s still intact enough to make an adventure out of.”

“It does tickle the imagination, doesn’t it? The idea that there’s something incredibly old just waiting to be discovered, something our Ancestors once had at least some measure of control over, but which has since been lost to time.”

“There aren’t many places like that left in Aeterna. None, I think in the Empires.”

Leon stared out of the window for a long moment, contemplating her words. He’d seen Thunderbird Clan ruins in the north, one of which held a demon; in another, he’d found the ghost of an ancestral uncle; a third was protected by stone giants and held an enchantment array that helped boost him to the fifth-tier; and the fourth held a huge library that his House had maintained in the Bull Kingdom for millennia. After coming to the Ilian empire, he’d found many other ruins, most of them little more than ruined stone, but he *had* found two labor golems in one.

Aside from the ruins of his Clan, he'd also delved into long-forgotten ruins of the Serpentine Isles, built by people that predated his Clan's dominance over the plane. He shivered as he remembered the Primal God forcing its way into his soul realm, and the long crawl he, Maia, and Gaius had to endure to get through that underground temple on the third island.

'That golden colossus is still in my soul realm, isn't it?' he reminded himself, and a quick glance inward confirmed that it hadn't moved from the place where he'd left it.

"There are still places left on this plane that haven't been discovered," he said aloud. "Places with hidden and forgotten powers. Places that are practically begging to be discovered."

"You sound so confident in that, Leon Raime, is there something you'd like to tell me?" Cassandra shot him a knowing look, but Leon shrugged.

"Nothing specific, really. Just that if you really want to explore this plane, then there's no shortage of places to discover. My wife told me of the Isle of Empty Promise following our bet, that place seems promising..."

"It also seems like a deathtrap. No one who's ever gone there has lived."

"Just my point. There are still places waiting to be discovered. Places that no one has ever managed to breach. If adventure is what you crave, then it's there for you to find, you just have to put in a little bit of work."

"Are you saying I don't work hard enough?"

"I'm saying if all you're looking at is your own Empire, then of course you're not going to find anything worth exploring; it's all already been explored! My Clan fell here eighty thousand years ago! That's a mind-bending amount of time, so much time that there can't be many places built by my Ancestors that remain undisturbed. However..."

"However...?"

Leon gave her a smug smile. "Time on this plane didn't start with my Ancestors. How much do you know of those who came before the Thunderbird arrived on this plane?"

Cassandra frowned again. "Not much. Eighty thousand years is a long time, and what they built hasn't lasted that long. Besides, I think your Clan destroyed much of what was here when they invaded." She gave him an accusing look, and he smiled awkwardly.

"Not everything, though," Leon replied. "There are still many places in the world that retain bits and pieces of their culture before my Clan arrived, little, tiny remnants of the people they used to be and the magics they once wielded. If it's adventure and discovery that you seek, there's no shortage of both to be found in Aeterna."

Cassandra just stared at him, a strange look in her eyes. "I'm a Princess, adventure beyond the borders of my Empire isn't available to me."

Leon nodded, understanding what she meant. The more power she had, the more responsibilities she had to her people. She was a Princess and an eighth-tier mage, but he supposed she likely had enough

duties to keep her squarely in the Sacred Golden Empire. Duties such as escorting dignitaries and people like him around, he noted.

Looking at it from this angle, he was almost glad that Cassandra was accompanying them to the Prota Forest. If she wanted adventure, he had a sneaking suspicion that that was what she was going to find with his people.

“So, anyway,” Leon said, changing the subject after a long and somewhat awkward pause, “I have some questions for you, unless you want to get back to sparring?”

Cassandra grinned. “We can always fight later; what questions do you have?”

Leon grinned back, but paused again, wondering just what he wanted to ask first.

“I... hope it’s not too personal,” he said, “but I was wondering what you thought of your grandmother offering you to me. I mean, I don’t want to offend, but as I said at the time, I’m really not looking for any more partners. But I couldn’t help but be a little curious as to what you thought about the matter.”

Cassandra stared at him, a playful look crossing her face. “What, are you asking me to say that you’re wonderful and everything a girl could want in a man and that I want nothing more than to offer you my virtue?”

Leon cringed slightly and shook his head. “I wasn’t asking for you to prop up my ego, I don’t need that kind of thing. I was more wondering about your side of the offer, if you were upset at all by your grandmother’s treatment of your future. Is this sort of arrangement common in your Empire?”

“Marriage alliances aren’t uncommon,” Cassandra said. “I always kind of thought that I would get to choose my partner, but for me, my Empire comes before my happiness. If my grandmother believes that marrying you would be to the Empire’s benefit, then I would go along with it without question.”

Leon nodded again. She hadn’t seemed all that into it at the time, but he supposed she *did* go along with it without question—at least, without question in front of him. He saw no reason to continue pressing for details, though.

“All right. If you don’t mind me changing topics again, how are you liking Sunlight so far?”

“Leon Raime!” Cassandra exclaimed, sounding mockingly scandalized. “You say that you need no propping up of your ego, yet you so transparently fish for compliments!”

Leon sighed and resigned himself to receiving a bit of mocking for every question he wanted to ask. Then, he shook his head again and clarified, “You have the smith himself in front of you. If there was anything you wanted fixed about your weapon, then this is the time to say so.”

“I’m very happy with Sunlight,” Cassandra replied, her tone turning more serious. “It’s honestly one of the finest weapons I’ve ever had the pleasure of wielding. I don’t even know what I would change if I had to, though. It fits in my hand perfectly, its power aligns with mine so well that I can hardly comprehend the idea that you *didn’t* tailor make it for me, and when I wield it, it feels like it’s an extension of my being!”

Leon’s happy grin widened more and more as Cassandra grew more and more excited, and he couldn’t see even an ounce of dishonesty in her demeanor.

"That's great to hear," Leon said. "I've been designing weapons for my retinue, and it would've eaten into my time a bit if I had to adjust Sunlight in any way."

"That brings up a good question: why don't your people have weapons like this?"

Leon frowned and shrugged. "Sunlight is made of extremely expensive materials, and it took months to forge. My people are already using fine weapons as it is, so I figured the new weapons could wait a little longer while we went on this little vacation."

"I have a question, Leon..."

"Go for it."

"Does this 'little vacation' have anything to do with the Director of Heaven's Eye?"

Leon's smile thinned and he glared at the Princess. "Why would it?"

"It's just that it's no secret that you and he are on bad terms right now, and over vampires, was it? You know that the Sacred Golden Empire would never side with vampires over you..."

"Trying to recruit me, are you?"

"I was made aware of your many skills before I was sent as your escort. I don't think I would've believed them if I hadn't seen you in action during our hunt in the Scorched Fields."

"You flatter me."

"Flattering enough to get you to say yes?"

Leon had to fight the urge to snort at the Princess' shameless and seemingly joking attempt to recruit him. "I'm afraid not. I'm not looking to swear myself to any Empire."

"What *are* you looking for, then?"

"What *are you* looking for, Your Highness?"

A look of surprise crept across Cassandra's face. "What do you mean?"

"There had to have been other escorts for this, right? I get that I might not be the usual run-of-the-mill Heaven's Eye dignitary on account of my blood, but is this something that a Princess needs to concern herself with? I think setting aside this responsibility and going off in search of adventure would be a better use of your time, no?"

"If I didn't know better, Leon Raime, I might think you were trying to get rid of me. Is what you're looking for in that forest so valuable that you can't stand the thought of it falling into the hands of my Empire?"

Leon chuckled and looked away. He was looking for a hidden legacy of his Clan. She was here to watch him and quite possibly take whatever it was that he found, while also trying to entice him to join her Empire. All of this was obvious, but for some reason, he didn't feel like doing away with this illusion they'd constructed.

"I'm just here on vacation," Leon insisted despite knowing that she knew it was a lie.

“And it is my solemn duty to ensure that your visit to my Empire goes well,” Cassandra replied with a knowing smile.

They stared at each other for long moment, then decided to return to sparring. Unfortunately, neither of them won decisively despite using their non-elemental magic. But still, Leon had fun. He was testing himself against a strong opponent, and without the headaches of responsibility to those under his command, the possibilities of death, and the dire consequences of failure, fighting like this was immensely enjoyable.

Barely a minute after they ended their sparring session, Leon was already looking forward to the next one.

Chapter 730: Reaching the Prota Forest

The Prota Forest. Leon could see it from the Neilos River with his magic senses. Even from a distance of less than two hundred miles, he could see it was deep, dark, and wild. He couldn't see any goat men or plant giants, but what he could see spoke of little human habitation.

He couldn't wait to get there. The Scorched Fields were a good distraction, but with the wyverns demanding his attention, he hadn't been able to savor being out in the wilds. Now, however, he was just a day or two away from entering a primeval forest the likes of which he hadn't seen since moving through the jungles of the Serpentine Isles.

The banks of the Neilos River were quite built up even this far north, but the thickness of the Sacred Golden Empire's forest city was much less than it was further south. This far north, there weren't even that many farms outside of the city's western limits, either—the cultivated fields only extended about five or six miles past the suburbs. Beyond those fields lay the Prota Forest.

It had been about a week since they left Evergold. A fairly leisurely pace for moving along the river, but riverine traffic had been fairly bad, even with extensive, and extremely advanced, Evergolden canals built up just about all along the river's length. Getting the yacht this deep into the Empire hadn't been easy, and for that, Leon greatly commended Anshu's navigational skills.

But they'd gone as far as they could on the yacht, now they had to disembark and proceed under their own power. Fortunately, they all had flight gear, so Leon estimated that they'd reach the Prota Forest less than an hour after taking off.

The only problem there was Cassandra and the rest of the Imperial escort. Leon knew that his group wasn't going to be left alone, and they couldn't very well just abandon their escorts without causing serious diplomatic trouble. As a result, after docking the yacht in a private Heaven's Eye dock, Leon and his group were forced to stop for a couple more days while Cassandra arranged transport for the rest of the escort, which currently numbered more than two hundred—though those that actually accompanied his retinue into the forest were not likely to number more than two or three dozen, the Princess had assured him.

The need to stop had annoyed Leon at the time, but after a while, he grew to appreciate the moment to rest. It gave him a few extra days to finish his designs on something new that he was dying to try out, and to use the smithing equipment he'd brought with them from Occulara to forge it. All of that equipment took up quite a bit of space in his soul realm and storing and retrieving all of it there was

fairly uncomfortable given the size of the tools. It wasn't lost on Leon at all that he wouldn't even need such tools if his skill in earth magic was greater, and during his training sessions, he focused as much as he could on increasing his skill with the element. He didn't notice any improvements, but it hadn't been that long since he'd left Occulara, so he wasn't that discouraged in his lack of progress.

Instead, he was much more interested in his magical progress outside of earth magic. For one, he'd managed to purposely conjure black fire again, though it hadn't lasted any longer than it had previously. He was a little disappointed in the result, but he took much comfort in the simple fact that having reproduced the feat meant that he'd be able to reproduce it again.

More importantly than that, though, was the fact that his soul realm was back to growing. Under the tutelage of the Thunderbird, he'd already added a mile onto the radius of his soul realm.

Most importantly of all, however, was the artifact that he'd finished forging while waiting for Cassandra's escort to work out their logistics. It was a fairly ugly thing, lacking any adornments, but Leon wasn't one to make his prototypes look good. It looked like little more than a ring of black iron, but it had been inscribed with hundreds of runes giving it a kind of stark beauty despite its lack of embellishment or aesthetic shape. That ring had a relatively small slot built into it from which the runes spiraled, though that slot was currently empty.

The ring was quite large, being too large to even fit tightly over a bodybuilder's arm, but it wasn't meant for a human arm. It was designed for something else entirely...

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Leon stood in the courtyard of the small Heaven's Eye guest house. The city they were in was fairly small by Imperial standards, so while Heaven's Eye had a huge local branch, their guest house was a little smaller than many of the others that Leon had stayed in. Still, it gave him the privacy he needed, with the guest house's powerful security wards extended even over the courtyard, ensuring that no one outside of the guest house could see what he was doing or hear what anyone in the courtyard might be saying.

However, that didn't mean that everyone was comfortable with what he was about to do.

"Are you sure about this?" Elise hesitantly asked, looking to Valeria and Maia for a little support. Aside from them, Leon and Anzu were the only other ones present, and even then, Anzu was only casually watching as he laid in the courtyard's grass, bathing in the sun.

"It's fine," Leon assured his wife. "At this point, what do we have to lose? It's not like seeing me transform would be that great of a shock for people who already know my ancestry."

[It's still better not to let those who are not with us know,] Maia whispered as she pointedly looked at Leon.

"You're preaching to the converted," Leon replied. "Why do you think I'm doing this here and not out in a public square?"

"Because you don't want people to see you swinging in the wind?" Valeria suggested.

Leon nodded, replying, "That's certainly part of it, but there's more to this than just that. There's a difference between not caring who sees and not wanting to advertise my abilities."

"This is still risky," Elise protested. "I'd prefer if you waited to test that thing until we were more certain of our privacy. Even if Princess Cassandra knows about you, we don't know about everyone else in the city, and who knows how they might react to seeing a gigantic eighth-tier bird flying around their city?"

"Have some faith in my work, please," Leon pleaded, and he walked over and took his wife in his arms. He gave her a quick kiss, and her worried demeanor thawed slightly. "Besides, it's not like I want to go flying around the city, I just want to test this thing, and I don't need to leave the courtyard to do that."

With that, Leon pulled his clothes back into his soul realm and activated his transformation enchantment, moving before any more worries could be voiced. In a matter of seconds, he was standing before his family in his avian form, towering over them, the gold of his beak and flecked within his feathers glittering in the afternoon light.

Then he summoned the iron ring around one of his legs. It was a little loose, but it fit around his leg securely enough, so even if he were to ball up his talons, the ring wouldn't slip off. For a prototype, that was really all he needed.

Into the ring's slot he summoned his enchanted black opal. It fit perfectly into the ring's slot, and Leon let a trickle of magic power enter the ring. The runes along the iron band flashed with light for a moment, and he could feel the enchantment in the ring turning his element-less magic power into darkness magic which began to spread around him. It wasn't enough magic power to do anything, but it was enough for him to know that the ring was functioning as well as he could expect for such a small amount of power.

He slowly built up the charge, feeding the enchantment more and more power, and soon enough, he found his avian body fading from sight as darkness obscured it.

'Good, good,' he thought to himself. *'Now for the moment of truth...'*

Given his size in avian form, he either needed to exert great physical power in order to fly, or use wind magic. He hoped that using such magic wouldn't overly disturb the invisibility, and he wasn't going to leave that to chance. So, he summoned his wind magic and beat his wings a few times—just enough to lift off the ground and fly a few dozen feet through the courtyard.

Immediately, he felt the enchantment wavering, but it still held, if only just. He couldn't physically do so since he now had a beak, but inside, Leon frowned. He gave it a few more tests to ensure that what he was sensing wasn't a fluke, and came to the same relatively disappointing conclusion every time.

Soon enough, Leon dropped the invisibility, changed back into his human form, and clothed himself.

"So, how was it?" Elise asked as she and the others surrounded Leon and pelted him with inquiring looks.

Leon scowled and said, "Good enough, I suppose. Not as good as I'd hoped. Better than I feared, at least."

Valeria, a thoughtful look crossing her face, guessed, "You could fly?"

The way she asked made Leon think she'd already landed on the reason for his subdued reaction. Answering her, he said, "I could fly well enough with the enchantment functioning. The problem is with the power requirements and the rather shaky shroud. If I had to make an estimate, I'd say that the invisibility shroud will hold for about fifteen minutes before cracks start to appear. At that point, there would be limited point in continuing since it would take only one wave of magic senses to see through those cracks."

[Our enemies will almost all have magic senses...] Maia whispered.

Leon gravely nodded. "That's not all, though. Given what I could sense, the shroud was shaky enough that just flying around was enough to slightly disturb it. Not enough to make it fall, but enough for me to know that attacking anyone without a better shroud will make it dissipate."

"So no flying around invisibly attacking our enemies?" Valeria cheekily asked.

"No," Leon confirmed. Finally, he said, "It also suffers from the same problem as the rest of our invisibility gear: if it comes into contact with foreign magic in high enough quantities, it'll be dispersed."

"How high is 'high enough'?" Elise asked.

"Any enchanted item that I wasn't wearing or touching at the time the shroud was put into place," Leon explained. "Any magical attack. Basically anything that has greater magical power than the magic all around us."

"You can make improvements, though," Elise said, though the way she looked at him made him think it was a question despite her definitive tone.

"I think so..." Leon murmured as he mulled the problem over. "This *is* only a prototype, but..."

As he trailed off, Valeria picked up on his meaning. "Your invisibility enchantment is designed for someone of your size, and simply making it bigger doesn't mean it'll work the same way."

"Exactly. I need to redesign it to work with my Thunderbird body, and that'll take time. Time we don't have right now..."

As he spoke, he cast his gaze toward the front of the guest house, where he'd noticed an Imperial convoy had just arrived. A moment later, Cassandra hopped out of the fanciest of the horseless carriages and, flanked by about two dozen guards, marched toward the guest house's front door where the Heaven's Eye staff were already scrambling to prepare themselves as much as they could.

"Looks like our escorts have finished getting their shit together," he said.

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An hour after testing his invisibility enchantment for his avian form, Leon's entire retinue was gathered in his courtyard. Despite everyone having suited up in their shiny new armor, Anzu and Anna's Attican Snapper made them look like quite the eclectic bunch, especially compared to the much more disciplined and orderly guards that Cassandra had brought with her.

"So, are we ready to go?" Cassandra asked them, shooting Leon a challenging grin. He even noticed her eyes flit in Valeria's direction for a moment.

"We were ready days ago," Leon replied.

His implication that it was Cassandra that they were waiting on didn't seem to sit well with the Princess, whose eyes narrowed slightly in anger.

If she were truly upset, though, Leon was always ready to spar with her again. He'd quite enjoyed testing himself against her during the course of their northward journey, even if their bouts had been frustratingly indecisive. He almost thought she was going to challenge him to a fight right then and there given how dark her expression turned, but then she smiled, looking for all the world like the model prim and proper Princess. A heavily armored prim and proper Princess, at that, as she was wearing the golden armor that she'd primarily donned during the wyvern hunt, though draped around her shoulders was the golden cloak she'd taken from the black wyvern's hoard.

Moving on, Cassandra informed them, "I've secured special dispensation for all of you to fly to the edge of the Prota Forest. I and my guards will be escorting you there. You're only allowed to fly to your destination, so stay with the group. Half of us will fly in front, and the other half will fly in the back. Breaking out of that formation will not be taken lightly, leading to fines and possible imprisonment."

Leon smiled and nodded in acknowledgment. "We'll behave," he said.

"You'd better," Cassandra responded, looking like she wanted nothing more than to explain in graphic detail exactly what would happen if they didn't, and how much she wanted them to test her.

Without another word, Cassandra began to lift into the air, her eighth-tier magic allowing her to fly without the aid of any flight gear. The rest of her group, two dozen armed and armored women between the fifth and seventh-tier, however, began to rise into the air under the power of Leon's latest flight belts, which had him staring in shock.

"I didn't think those were being widely sold, yet," Elise whispered to him.

Cassandra heard her, and before Leon could respond, explained, "We bought these as soon as they were put on the market. They're not being sold at scale yet, though, so my Empire was only able to get our hands on about a hundred so far."

"Impressive," Leon replied. She'd had to commandeer almost a quarter of the entire Empire's flight belts for this journey. He knew that they had many hundreds of other flight suits he'd developed during the past ten years, though, but it still spoke volumes about the importance that the Empire was placing on this journey to commit such resources to it.

"I'd offer you some of these belts, but it seems you don't need them," Cassandra said almost dismissively.

Leon smiled as the rest of his retinue rose into the air. He'd built flight enchantments into their armor, so they didn't even need the belts. Getting the Attican Snapper to fly had been a little trickier, but the flight belt it was wearing combined with the perfect mental dominance that Anna had over it thanks to the onyx bracelet meant that it could fly well enough to keep up. Anzu, however, was circling their group, his blood-red eyes fixed on the snapper as if he were expecting it to lash out.

Leon then followed the rest of his retinue and rose into the air, his magic seizing control of the air around him and lifting him up almost effortlessly. He had to resist the urge to tell Cassandra that he'd

created the flight belts—they were in front of her guards, and as much as he might want to throw her words back in her face, he didn't want to humiliate her in front of her entourage. That wouldn't end well for anyone.

"Lead on, Your Highness," Leon said, and with a haughty smile, Cassandra rose into the air, followed closely by a dozen of her guards. The remainder of the guards waited for the rest of Leon's retinue to follow before taking up the rear.

They didn't rise too high off the ground—only about eight or nine stories. The massive palatial trees around the Neilos River meant that the city practically had a ceiling made of leaves and branches, so they couldn't just fly into the sky without breaking through the canopy. Instead, they had to fly out of the forest-city before they could gain greater air.

And that's exactly what they did. Cassandra set a hard pace, flying fast and without any pretention, leading them out of the city on what Leon could see was practically a straight course for a small village at the rough edge of the Prota Forest. Leon and his retinue followed as best as they could, but the pace eventually had to slow to allow for the difficulties that Anna had with her snapper, despite Leon's tailored flight gear and her onyx bracelet. The beast was simply large and cumbersome, and Leon was thankful that they were traveling less than two hundred miles. At that distance, they didn't even have to stop to rest, and closed in on the village before evening.

They didn't land in the village, however. Instead, Cassandra took them a little further into the thin woods that separated the primeval forests further out and the cultivated lands of the Sacred Golden Empire. Within those woods was a particularly large tree on a hill surrounded only by new growth of flora. Leon guessed that it was an older campsite used by Evergold as a staging point for any operations they carried out in the Prota Forest, though it seemed like it hadn't been used in a good long while.

His guess was proven correct when several of Cassandra's guards landed in front of the large tree and its trunk lit up with thousands of glowing light, earth, and water runes.

Leon, however, was far more captivated by the Prota Forest. Now that they were closer, he could see a lot further into the primeval forest, and the sights and smells relaxed him greatly. He almost felt like he was coming home. He couldn't see any of the more exotic things he'd heard lived in these parts, but he was able to see several wolf packs, wandering bears, large birds of prey, and all sorts of other fauna that screamed 'the wild' to him.

He decided immediately that even if they were unable to find the Thunderbird Clan research facility, this was still going to be a worthwhile trip.