

## Storm King 751

### Chapter 751: Sprites

Leon stared at his party, bloodied and broken, as they bravely put up what looked to be a last stand.

And he was in the depths of the research facility, unable to do anything about it.

“These are your people?” Apati asked apprehensively.

“Yes,” Leon answered through clenched teeth. “I need to get to them, what’s the fastest way out of here? Tell me on the way!”

As he spoke, he turned around and leaped into the air, using his magic to catch him, and began flying back toward the entrance of the control room.

“Wait!” Apati shouted. “Wait, wait, wait!”

Leon paused in the air and glared at the emerald in his hand.

“Leave me here,” Apati said. “I can get you there quickly and re-enable the defenses!”

Leon still didn’t quite trust the man, but with his people in such a dire situation and little chance of him getting to them in time to do anything about it, he decided to roll the dice.

“What do I do?” he asked.

“Down there, northern console bank,” Apati directed, and Leon shot back down to the control consoles. Following Apati’s directions, he found one a few seconds later with a few slots for gems. “These are emergency battery terminals,” Apati explained as Leon plugged the emerald into one. It was a little small, but the console lit up with power as soon as Apati made contact. “This isn’t quite what they were designed for, but from here, I can control what remains of the facility’s enchantment array, and that means I should be able to get a few teleportation enchantments back up and running with bypasses and rearrangements...”

“Really?” Leon asked, glancing up at the massive sphere speckled with millions of runes. There were certainly quite a few light, lightning, and darkness runes, but he wondered just how moving them around to create new enchantments might affect the enchantment scheme as a whole—and how it would work.

“It might compromise a few defenses, but yes, it’s possible,” Apati replied. “Just do me one favor, if you could, my Lord: this is obviously the work of the tree sprite that escaped from this facility and killed everyone here. Please, kill it in my stead. Once it’s done, I’ll do everything within my power to salvage what can be taken from this place...”

Leon’s eyes narrowed in suspicion.

[This guy...] Nestor whispered from within his soul realm, [I know I’ve heard his voice before...]

[Is he trustworthy?] Leon asked.

[No,] Nestor and Xaphan said in unison.

Leon grimaced lightly, knowing that he should've expected that answer. Still, it was one he agreed with, so he noncommittally responded to Apati, "My retinue is my priority, but I'll do what I can."

"I suppose that's all I can hope for, isn't it?" Apati replied.

Throughout this exchange, Leon noticed the slow movement of many runes speed up, forming a complex new enchantment on the roof of the sphere.

[Yes, this guy knows far more than he's letting on,] Nestor said as the enchantment neared completion. [No way this is just a security guard left behind to supervise the facility after the researchers abandoned the place. He's too good at this.]

[If you figure out who he is, do be sure to let me know,] Leon growled as he glanced back at the screens that he'd left on his people. They were getting broken even further, and only a few were left fighting.

"Hurry up," Leon impatiently demanded.

"Just... about..." Apati said, "... done! This thing is very ad-hoc and my accuracy is going to be a little spotty, so prepare to move quickly!"

"Quick, I can do," Leon replied.

"Good. See you when this is all over."

With that, darkness gathered around Leon, and in but a moment, a sphere had formed around him, like a shell of darkness. He felt hot pressure all around him, very reminiscent of the teleportation tunnels he'd been through in the Serpentine Isles. However, unlike then, he wasn't dropped into a spatial tunnel, but instead, felt like he was suddenly squeezed by some titan of incomprehensible strength. He thought for a moment that he was about to die, but then suddenly, he was surrounded by light. He barely had time to realize that he was now outside before the teleportation sphere fully dissipated and he started falling.

In an instant, Leon projected his magic senses and got his bearings—Apati had gotten most of the coordinates right, but instead of appearing right by his people, he instead appeared more than half a mile above them.

He plummeted like a meteor, but instead of terror at the sudden fall, Leon madly grinned, feeling right in his element. In an instant, his armor vanished into his soul realm, and his transformation enchantment was activated. He'd not even fallen five hundred feet before he was doing so with the wind in his feathers, his eagle eyes locked on the battle below him.

Things were dire for the expedition. Most of his retinue was down, as was the Evergolden squad with them. Only Valeria and Cassandra remained upright, with even Maia lying on the ground, battered and bloody. As he watched, he saw a plant giant suddenly hit Valeria with a full-bodied punch, and she went down hard and ceased to move.

In that moment, all of his pent-up rage exploded out from him in the form of his magic power. Behind him streamed black storm clouds, spreading across the sky within the upper limits of the warded zone, and before Leon had fallen halfway, lightning was already raining down upon the battlefield.

What eagles remained in the sky were blasted to pieces, and goat men fell by the score. Plant giants were sturdier, but they, too, broke under Leon's power. At the same time, Cassandra, the one remaining member of the expedition—himself excluded—struck back with all that she could, with great beams of light that sliced and cleaved through all they touched, but she'd attracted the attention of at least three bulbous vines and had to keep diverting her attention to prevent their vines from wrapping around her and dragging her underground.

Despite Leon's arrival, the army facing them was still massive. But his anger was terrible, and as he plummeted, he changed his strategy. In the space of less than five seconds, a hundred lightning bolts had rained down upon his foes, but he suddenly switched back to human form, his armor and sword appearing almost instantly as soon as the transformation was complete. In the last second before he hit the ground, he called his fire magic without thought, simply letting his instincts and emotions guide him.

He hit the ground just between where the expedition members had fallen and the grove of massive trees in the center of the warded zone, and as soon as he touched the earth, he exploded in black flame. A wave of opaque black fire washed out over his surroundings, not even singeing the clothes of the expedition members on the ground, but causing all else it touched to burn to ash.

Unlike many times he'd used this power, he was conscious of what he was doing, but not thinking too hard about it. He realized immediately that it was black flame coming from him, but his desperate rage had so thoroughly peaked that he'd practically stopped noticing it, and maintaining the black flame was almost distressingly easy. Right then, Leon realized that he wasn't exerting any magical control over his fire magic at all, simply letting his blood and magic flow as it would, directed by him but otherwise unrestrained. This fire simply did what he wanted it to do without him having to squeeze and force it to do so, just like his lightning.

He couldn't hold on forever, but his fiery conflagration lasted about five seconds—a significantly longer time than it had anytime before now. As the flames disappeared, half of the remaining army arrayed against the expedition had been rendered naught but ash, and the ground stripped bare of vegetation for two hundred feet around him.

Cassandra, who'd barely managed to remain on her feet, croaked, "It's about time, Leon Raimel!"

Leon just gave her a quick nod before turning his attention back to the situation at hand. They were still standing against thousands of goat men, hundreds of plant giants, and the trees at the tree line were shaking with such purpose that he could only assume more tree sprites were involved.

Except, all that changed a second later. As the last black embers of his power dissipated in the wind, the goat men slipped into the earth like it was water, the plant giants rooted themselves and froze, and the tree sprites behind them settled down.

Cassandra fell to her knees, her injuries and fatigue clearly weighing down her down too much, while Leon made the choice not to question what was happening and leaped back into the middle of the battlefield.

He landed right next to Maia, and when his power whispered to the tau pearl, it practically jumped at his query. The purest light emanated from him, and Maia's wounds healed in a flash, though she remained

unconscious. Still, from what Leon had been able to sense as the tau pearl's magic went to work, her injuries had been extreme.

Likewise, as he went to Valeria, he found her approaching death's door, with internal bleeding, bruised organs, broken bones, and not nearly enough magic power in her body for her natural sixth-tier healing abilities to keep up with everything. But the tau pearl healed her worst wounds in short order.

"See to everyone!" Leon shouted at Cassandra, who'd simply numbly watched as he rushed to his lovers. His voice shook her out of whatever fugue state she was in, and she immediately closed her eyes and channeled her magic. Leon watched as her wounds were covered with white light, and when the light vanished, the wounds had been closed, though not erased.

Leon might've been a little aggrieved that she was healing herself before tending to anyone else, but he knew it was the best move—if she were to heal anyone else, then she needed to do get herself back in good condition, otherwise she might not get to everyone before keeling over.

That she didn't take the time to fully heal herself was a credit to her, he thought as she sprang to her feet and, though still a little unbalanced, she rushed back to join Leon. She waved her hand and a number of healing spells appeared over everyone who still breathed, who were all covered in potent healing magic.

At the same time, Cassandra conjured a healing potion and began pouring it onto the healing wounds of the last of the sixth-tier Evergolden mages, a woman that Leon knew to be another light mage.

Taking his cue from her, Leon, as soon as he judged Valeria to no longer be in mortal danger, sprinted as fast as his lightning magic could take him to Anna's side, and once more called upon the tau pearl.

This time, however, he didn't stop as soon as Anna was no longer in danger of death, and pushed until she started stirring. Then, he went to Anshu and did the same. Only then did he start going to each of his own people in order of what he judged to be need. Alcander was first, with a massive hole in his midsection that had only been hastily closed with a healing spell, and reopened sometime during the battle. The man was barely clinging to life, but the tau pearl still brought him back.

However, now that he'd healed five people of grievous wounds, he felt the tau pearl starting to strain. It was a thing of extremely potent power, but it had its limits...

Leon didn't want to test those limits too much, but his people needed aid, and fortunately, the tau pearl seemed to agree. Leon managed to go around to all of his people at least once and used the tau pearl to drag them back from the edge of death—though not much further. With that, he let the pearl rest, and went about applying additional healing spells and potions to his people as needed now that they weren't in danger of imminent death.

As he worked, Anna started to stir, and when she opened her eyes, Leon shouted to her, "Meds! Now!"

It took her a moment to realize what was going on, but once she did, she sprang to her feet as quickly and steadily as she could and joined Leon in healing the rest of the retinue. When Anshu awoke, Leon repeated his order, and the Indradian did the same.

In the span of five minutes, what had been a terribly dire situation had completely turned itself around, though several more Evergolden mages had died in the fighting. Only four remained alive, and

Cassandra herself, as the only one of the Evergolden contingent with them to remain conscious, looked completely shell-shocked once her remaining subordinates were largely healed, though still covered in healing spells that would finish her work.

As Leon leaned back, exhausted after using his power so intensely in such a short period of time, Anna, just as tired, wondered aloud, "What... in the Ashen... hell... is going on? Why aren't they pressing us...?"

As if on cue, the twelve massive ethereal trees that surrounded and seemed to be supporting the titanic ethereal tree nearly blinded Leon's magic senses as their auras exploded out from them. This didn't affect their physical surroundings too much, but Leon sprang to his feet and armed himself, just in case.

At the point of their trunks that were closest to the titanic tree in the center, a welling of magic appeared, drawing Leon's attention as the rest of the trees' auras disappeared. From these twelve trees stepped twelve tree sprites, one from each tree. Their body shapes were all a little different, with some appearing vaguely masculine and some feminine, but all were exceedingly tall, taller than Leon by at least half. Their bark-like skin glittered in the light of the sun, and in contrast to all the other tree sprites he'd seen, had leaves growing out of their heads like hair.

And all of them radiated eighth-tier power.

Twelve eighth-tier equivalent beings had appeared, and Leon's blood ran cold.

"Get ready to run!" he said, though in these circumstances, he couldn't possibly envision them escaping, not with most of their people still unconscious.

He sensed a brief surge of magic power in the canopy of the central tree, and when he glanced up, he saw many large branches waving like fingers plucking at a harp. He knew that the ancient runes creating the wards of this region were up there, and from what he knew of ancient runes, it seemed like the central tree was doing something...

He immediately realized what as all twelve tree sprites appeared about fifty feet in front of him. Leon almost attacked without thought, but his reason kicked in just as his muscles tensed.

He couldn't sense any killing intent, and all twelve tree sprites had appeared directly in front of him, between him and the cluster of gigantic trees. They hadn't surrounded the expedition, and after appearing, remained standing right where they were, their power obvious, but not overtly displayed.

Cassandra, a little slower than Leon had reacted, pushed herself to her feet and appeared at his side in a flash of light, Sunlight in her hand and aglow with magic power.

"Looks like this is it, Leon Raime," she said, and Leon felt her power surge. At the same time, the power among some of the tree sprites rose to match.

Just before she charged, Leon grabbed her arm and held her back.

"What?!" she shouted as she turned to face him.

"Hold just one moment," he said as he stared at the tree sprites, who still stood unmoving, staring back at them.

As he held the Princess back, those among their number whose power had spiked calmed down, and Cassandra, with such a deep frown on her face that Leon could see it through her helmet's visor, paused.

At the same time, an emerald light appeared not far behind Leon, and from it came Apati's voice. "My Lord! These things are dangerous! Destroy them! Before they attack first!"

"What is *that* thing?!" Cassandra shouted as she spun around to face the glowing ball of light no bigger than her fist.

Leon, not questioning too much at this point, shrugged and said, "Something I found." To Apati, he shouted, "Hold on, there! Let's not jump the bow just yet!"

"My Lord, these are monsters in need of purging!" Apati insisted.

Leon glared back at the orb. "That is *my* call to make!" His statement was punctuated by a fierce remnant of his anger, powered by the adrenaline still coursing through his system after that fight.

"Yes, yes, of course, my Lord," Apati obsequiously replied. "I only urge caution..."

Leon turned back to the tree sprites, who still hadn't moved, and, still not wanting to get too close, asked, "Can either of you get everyone out of here?"

Cassandra, through gritted teeth, replied, "I can see about organizing an evacuation..."

"Apati!" Leon shouted.

"My Lord?" the glowing orb responded.

"Lead Princess Cassandra and the others back to the facility!"

Apati seemed to hesitate in replying, but he eventually said, "Yes, my Lord..."

Just before she went back to take charge of those who were now starting to stir, Cassandra said to Leon, "You'd better know what you're doing..."

Leon took a deep breath but decided against responding. He simply wasn't sure what to say at this moment.

But, as Cassandra rallied everyone to double down on the healing enchantments to get those who were unconscious up and moving as soon as possible, Leon started taking slow, hesitant steps toward the tree sprites.

They stood like a wall, watching him like a hawk as he approached, not taking a single step back and remaining firm in the face of his approach.

When he got to within ten feet of the two tree sprites in the center, he glanced up and down their line, noting that they'd watched him the entire time, not sparing the rest of the expedition a single glance.

"All right," he loudly said. "I think you've made your point. Let's talk: what do you want?"

## **Chapter 752: Ultimatum**

Despite Leon's offer to talk, the tree sprites didn't utter a word—hardly surprising, given none of them had mouths, but he was hoping for some kind of reaction anyway, or at least an attempt to communicate with him mentally. Instead, they just stared at him for a long moment before anything else happened.

For his part, he remained patient, forcing himself to relax his posture and appear non-threatening.

Behind him, he could see everyone starting to wake up as the healing spells did their magic, and he smiled and waved at Valeria and Maia as they awoke, while at almost the same time had to raise a hand to stop Anzu from running right for him.

The emerald ball of light that Apati had conjured was quietly corralling them, and Leon felt relatively confident that they'd reach the research facility unscathed.

Assuming, of course, that the violence was over. With twelve eighth-tier tree sprites in front of him, each one controlling a massive ethereal tree, he wasn't quite so confident that he wasn't wracked with worry and desire to simply grab everyone in his magic and try to run.

His attention was pulled back to the tree sprites when, in unison, they turned around and faced the massive central tree, showing him their backs in the process. Aside from a brief predatory instinct to hit them now while they weren't looking, Leon didn't think to strike, for at the base of the central tree at the point closest to them, the tree's black bark was splitting open and bright golden light came spilling through.

The tree sprites then pointed at the rapidly-widening crack, and Leon got the impression that they were telling him to go over there.

"I'll head on over..." he said hesitantly as he glanced once more over his shoulder at his people. "Will they be all right? Any peace talks will be off the table if any of them are harmed any further..."

As one, all twelve tree sprites looked over their shoulders at him, and their auras fluttered. That, combined with a complete lack of killing intent, told Leon that they weren't planning on attacking his people any more.

So, with a great deal of trepidation, Leon said, "All right..." and began to walk toward the central tree, passing right between the two tree sprites in the middle of their formation. None of them moved, nor even so much as acknowledged him as he passed, simply continuing to point at the crack, now as wide as a large city's main gates.

The light that poured from the tree grew more intense as Leon neared, and even his eighth-tier eyesight was starting to strain as he approached.

[What is this?] he asked his soul realm passengers. [Am I going to be teleported once I touch this light?]

[Not exactly...] Nestor said, his tone contemplative. [I don't really know what this is...]

[It's a portal to the tree's soul realm,] Xaphan explained. [Or, at least, the equivalent of a soul realm. Being non-sapient, trees don't have soul realms, of course, but this one is inhabited by a tree sprite of great power, and it's inviting you into its most vulnerable and sacred of places. It's also a place of immense power, so be careful Leon. Don't debase yourself, but don't let it catch you off-guard.]

[I'll keep that in mind,] Leon said. As they spoke, he'd reached about as close to the base of the tree as he could while on foot. He'd walked through a few streets of the goat man village, seeing neither hide nor hair of the strange horned beings the entire way, but finally came to a tree root that blocked his passage. So, he lifted himself into the air and slowly flew toward the crack.

He kept his magic not quite battle-ready, but certainly more active than it would otherwise be under peaceful circumstances. Despite Apati's urging, he didn't want to head in there radiating killing intent, he just wanted the freedom to poke around the research facility at his leisure without worrying about being attacked.

When he reached the edge of the crack, the light shining from within was so bright that he had to squint to see anything. The light shimmered and waved almost like a curtain that caught the wind, and Leon tentatively reached out to touch it, trusting in the strength of his magic and his armor to keep him safe. As soon as his fingers brushed against the light, it suddenly surged, washing over him and completely overwhelming his senses.

He was rendered blind, deaf, and unable to feel any tactile sensations, and when he tried to project his magic senses, his magic power refused to leave his body.

For a moment, he thought that maybe he was dead, but that possibility faded as quickly as it entered his mind—he couldn't touch anything, but he could still *himself*. He then wondered if he'd just been captured, but it still seemed like he had full range of movement and his power wasn't being suppressed—at least, not by the tree.

Slowly, the light faded, as did his panic. When it grew dim enough that he was able to see again, he found himself in a bright field of grass floating in a misty void. It took him a moment, but he realized that he stood within the Mists of Chaos, upon an island much like his own.

This island was much smaller than the land he'd built within his soul realm, but as his magic senses spread through the area, he found that they didn't even cover ten percent of the volume within this space. The Mists of Chaos were still more than visible in the distance, but they were so much farther away from this island than they were from his soul realm that he knew he was dealing with something that dwarfed him in power. If he had to guess, he was dealing with something well into the ninth-tier.

As he was doing this, he took in what else the island had to offer. It wasn't much, with little else other than some of the greenest grass he'd ever seen, and a single tree in the very center of the island. By appearances, it appeared to be an oak tree, and an extremely old one at that. Its trunk was thick and sturdy, and from root to highest leaf, it was about ten stories tall. From its thick trunk, Leon counted twelve large branches that gently swayed despite a lack of wind. There were more branches, but they were all much smaller and mostly devoid of leaves.

Beneath the island, reaching downward into the space between the island and the Mists of Chaos were the tree's roots. They didn't reach far from the rocky bottom of the island, perhaps only twenty or thirty feet, but what Leon found quite startling was that thin streams of the Mists of Chaos were being drawn in from the clouds thousands of miles away, looking like silver threads filling the air—or, he supposed, like silver roots filling this cavernous empty space. These threads terminated at the ends of the roots, showing that the tree was absorbing the Mists of Chaos. To what end, Leon couldn't say, but he guessed that the purpose was similar to the enchantment Xaphan had gotten him to build during his decade



running around for the Director, and that the demon had used to reach the eighth-tier all the way back in Ariminium: powering up by absorbing the mist.

With nothing else to do, and no curtain of light to take him back to the physical world, Leon started walking toward the enormous oak tree, feeling far less confident than his purposeful strides suggested. He kept an eye open for anything unexpected, but he reached the without trouble.

When he got within a dozen paces, the tree shuddered, and he stopped. From the trunk emerged the familiar figure of a tree sprite, though larger than any he'd ever seen, even bigger than even the twelve waiting outside. It stood at nearly double Leon's height, but otherwise had the same rather slight build, bark skin, and almost featureless face that all other tree sprites had.

It stepped out of its tree and stood before Leon, not saying a word. It radiated ninth-tier power at the very least, though Leon noted that it wasn't exerting any power to try and suppress him. If anything, from the way the sprite's aura trembled, he'd almost say that it seemed more scared than anything.

"Hi... there..." Leon awkwardly said as their mutual silence stretched to an uncomfortable length. "Nice place... you have here... I like what you did with the roots, lends this place quite the... ambiance..."

The tree sprite's aura slightly flexed, and though it remained physically motionless, Leon felt it reach for him with its magic. He didn't sense any killing intent, and the magic felt quite gentle, but he still had to force himself to remain calm and not to try and defend himself as the magic reached him.

He'd taken off his helmet, so when the magic finally touched him, his vision was overtaken by flashes of light, interspersed with extremely brief and confusing scenes of what appeared to be men cutting down trees, setting fire to forests, and slaughtering any tree sprites they found. The images were jumbled and hard to parse with how quickly they came and went, but as his mind reached for an explanation, he felt the power flex, and he suddenly understood: these were lumberjacks of his Clan, clearing land for some purpose.

He saw them pull several particularly large tree sprites out of their trees, and then drag them away. He only ever saw one sprite after that. He watched as best as he could as images of the sprite was brought to the research facility and subjected to every kind of magical experimentation that the researchers could come up with. He didn't feel any of it, but the magic conjuring these images whispered to him of existential pain.

The images soon slowed, and he watched as the tree sprite realized the researchers were gone and the wards were being powered down. It released its power into the air, and the nearby slaves fell into its control. From there, it spread its influence, shutting down wards and tearing the facility apart. Its anger burned hot, but even hotter was its terror and desperation to escape.

Eventually, the tree sprite forced its way out of the research facility and fled, soon finding a large tree and hiding within.

The power spoke to Leon, not using words, but telling him that the tree sprite never left that tree, and it was that very tree that they now stood in, having grown strong and powerful under the care of the ancient tree sprite.

With that, the images receded, and Leon was left almost speechless. He'd seen the experimentation done upon the tree sprite, and had known its fear. It wasn't a violent being, and though powerful, it barely knew how to defend itself.

As his eyes refocused on the ninth-tier tree sprite in front of him, he saw that little about it had changed in these intervening eighty-thousand years other than its pure magical strength. It still seemed to shake with fear as it met his gaze.

Leon couldn't help but feel some kind of pity for the sprite. It was powerful and ancient, but it had no idea how to fight, and seemed to lack taste for killing.

"Is this... why we were never attacked in large enough numbers to drive us off?" Leon wondered aloud. "You... didn't want to kill us? Or were too afraid to try?"

The tree sprite's power reached out towards him again, though it didn't submerge him in images of the past again. Instead, it flexed and bowed, and fed to him understanding. The tree sprite didn't use words, but Leon felt what it wanted to say, anyway.

He felt compassion, a desire to grow, and a yearning for light. He felt great loss and sadness at the loss of old kin, and great happiness and joy in the sprouting of new buds. He felt the loneliness at being one of the last remaining tree sprites of the Prota Forest, and great determination to ensure that its buds remained strong and alive.

Most of all, he felt deep, primal fear. The tree sprite's power spoke to him of a great aversion to violence, only surmounted on rare occasions when it felt threatened. And it felt great sadness when it sent plant giants and goat men and all the rest to attack those they couldn't possibly hope to defeat. He felt a sense of helplessness as it watched humans constantly encroach upon its territory and great relief when they were warded away. He felt revulsion and regret when it came down to violence to ensure the humans were driven off—and it often came to such measures. He felt a profound sense of helplessness as the tree showed him his own expedition pushing deeper and deeper into the forest, ignoring all signs trying to get them to turn back, and being forced to choose between allowing his expedition to continue, or to send denizens of the forest to their deaths in an attempt to get his expedition to turn around and leave.

The tree sprite's power pulled back, and Leon felt a growing sense of shame burn within him as he realized that these attacks, though dangerous, were the tree sprite's attempt to get him to leave, not kill him.

After a moment of awkwardness as Leon realized he'd forced himself into someone else's house without even asking first, the tree sprite cocked its head and flexed its power again. This time, Leon felt curiosity, laced with a deep undercurrent of fear. As far as he could interpret the question, the tree sprite was wondering why he came here, and if its subjugation and torture were his goal.

As a part of this question, Leon felt powerful emotions, and for a moment, he saw himself restrained, several human figures above him, cutting away at the natural growths that came from his bark-like skin. Every growth that was taken came with indescribable pain, and an even more painful sense of loss, as these growths were the buds that were supposed to, one day, turn into new tree sprites. Instead, they

were taken from him—from the tree sprite before him, he was forced to remind himself—and used for some purpose he couldn't know.

As soon as these visions came, they went, but Leon remembered them vividly enough to know that they weren't simply a hallucination—the way the tree sprite communicated had somehow shown him some of its memories, and he'd felt some of its pain. He'd felt its fear, too, and remembered the face of the one it had feared the most: a tall, handsome man by Leon's standards, with a chiseled jawline and piercing blue eyes. His hair was short and professional, and every time he'd come to the tree sprite, the sprite had experienced the cruelest pain it could remember.

It took a moment for Leon to refocus on the tree sprite's question, and when he did, he said, "I was... looking for anything left behind by my Clan. I wasn't looking to restart any projects, I simply wanted to find anything that might have been left behind. My Clan has been fallen, and I'm the only one left."

The tree sprite didn't immediately respond, but stared at him for a long time.

As it stared, Leon turned his attention inward. Nestor and Xaphan were paying attention, and he asked Nestor about the face of the lead researcher that the tree sprite remembered.

[That sounds like one of the top researchers assigned here,] Nestor responded. [I can't quite remember his name, but he was one of the men who pushed hard for establishing the local research facility.]

[I see...] Leon whispered back.

He glanced back at the tree sprite, and it was still staring at him. So, deciding he'd waited for it to speak long enough, he said, "I mean you and your people no harm. I just want what remains in the research facility, if anything. Once I've salvaged what can be salvaged, I will be leaving this forest. You have nothing to fear from me."

The tree sprite's power roiled and churned, and Leon thought that meant a great deal of indecision. Regardless, despite their gulf in power, he could still feel a great deal of fear from the sprite.

It didn't get a chance to respond, as a moment later, Leon heard Apati's voice from behind him saying, "What? 'No harm'?"

Leon turned and saw the floating ball of green light appearing about twenty feet behind him. At the same time, the tree sprite leaped backward, vanishing into its tree. A great well of power opened, and Leon's vision was drowned out in light. He felt power sweeping over him, and then he felt weightless. Something squeezed his body, and he felt great heat, and when his vision returned to him, he found himself once again out in the physical world, standing on the roots before the great crack in the central tree. He barely had time to register where he was, though, before the crack slammed shut.

Beside him hovered the green ball of light that Apati was presumably using to hear, see, and project his voice.

"My Lord!" he shouted before Leon could get a word in edgewise. "What is the meaning of this?! That creature must die! It killed so many of our people, so many of *my* people! You can't possibly be thinking of letting it go!"

“What I’m thinking is my own business!” Leon imperiously retorted, furious that the dead man’s interruption had caused the tree sprite to kick them both out. “I was trying to make peace!”

“What ‘peace’?” Apati shouted back, all deference in his tone gone. “There can be no peace with monsters such as these! They are fit only to serve as test subjects, to showcase the wonders of the universe for the Clan to learn from! Aside from that, they are animals, and the most violent and dangerous of animals must be put down!”

“That’s not your decision to make!” Leon responded as fire began to burn through his body. He still remembered the sensation of black fire, and he emulated it as best as he could. To his surprise, as fire began to burn in his off-hand, every so often within the licks of orange, he could see a hint of black.

Seemingly oblivious to Leon’s current state, Apati angrily growled, “Oh, but it *is* my decision, my ‘Lord’. You see, everything you just said you’d come here for is in *my* possession! All remaining research notes and paused experiments are mine!”

“Are you threatening me?” Leon coldly asked, his eyes narrowing as a furious smile spread across his face.

“I’m doing what must be done!” Apati bellowed. “Kill that tree sprite! Burn this tree to the ground! If you do not, you will never leave this forest! Your retainers will never leave this forest! And you will never find what you came here for!”

### **Chapter 753: Deceit**

Once Apati was finished with his threats, the first thing Leon did was to project his magic senses and try to locate his people. If Apati had done anything with them already, then he was going to explode in anger.

Fortunately, he located them fairly quickly on the route to the research facility. Thanks to their still-healing wounds, they were moving rather slowly, but they were still being led by the glowing green light that Apati was using to communicate. It seemed that he could conjure multiple given there was another light there with Leon.

Leon didn’t bother responding to Apati’s threats. He didn’t need that long to think the problem over: he could kill the tree sprites and Apati would give him the remains of the research facility, or he could leave the tree sprites alone and go force Apati to give him what he came here for.

With an enormous smile on his face and anger in his heart, Leon leaped into the air and began flying toward the remains of his expedition, leaving the tree sprites alone and paying Apati’s green light no more mind. He didn’t think the ninth-tier sprite was deceiving him when it showed him its memories of the past, of the tortures his Clan had inflicted upon it as they studied it. It was more than within its rights to seek vengeance, as far as Leon was concerned. He was a little more conflicted that it was mostly slaves that took the fall when the tree sprite escaped, but in the millennia since its escape, it had mostly kept itself to the Protia Forest, leaving everyone else alone. It was only those who entered the forest that were killed or driven off, and again, Leon couldn’t blame it for doing so. This was its home, and it was protecting itself and its kin from further harm.

As he took flight, he reached out to Maia and Valeria, mentally speaking with them both and updating them on what had happened within the massive ethereal tree. From this point on, they were to treat Apati as the enemy and the forces of the Prota Forest as... not *friends*, but not direct enemies, either.

He just hoped that after being expelled from the ethereal tree that the ninth-tier tree sprite would leave them to their own devices. He could easily see its assault on his expedition ramping up given the way it had kicked him back out into the physical world, but if he were in its place, he might leave two feuding enemies to bleed each other dry before moving in.

At the very least, he estimated that he, Maia, Cassandra, and Xaphan could all take the ninth-tier sprite. It didn't seem to be one that predisposed toward killing, so for all its power, Leon doubted that it was that good at fighting.

As he finished his explanation, he watched as Maia and Valeria called the expedition to a halt, to Cassandra's surprisingly muted confusion. The Princess didn't seem to be arguing as much as Leon might've expected.

Leon doubled his efforts to reach his expedition, but in a moment, his anger and worry skyrocketed—magic bent around the expedition, and they vanished within a curtain of darkness. A moment later, the curtain faded, leaving his expedition nowhere to be seen.

In a panic, Leon began bathing the forest in his magic senses, and only started breathing again when he located his people standing at the foot of the twin hills that the research facility was buried beneath. However, as his people assumed defensive formations, a dozen golems appeared around them, and six towers erupted from the ground. At the top of each of these towers were machines that looked like Imperial Lances.

Another ball of green light appeared next to Leon, sticking with him in the air.

"My Lord," Apati growled. "I *must* insist. This childishness is unbecoming of one in your position. These tree sprites present great dangers to the Clan, both materially, and to its reputation. They must be destroyed at all costs!"

"The only thing that *must* be done, Apati," Leon shouted back, "is for you to stand down!"

"I will do what I must!" Apati roared back, sounding near-hysterical as the ball of light vanished.

*'Guess he was more insane than he sounded,'* Leon thought as he reached into his soul realm for his transformation enchantment. A few seconds later, he was flying by feathered wing rather than his magic, and he moved with much greater speed.

The research facility wasn't that far from the trees, and by this point, Leon was already on his final approach. But he could see the Lances on the top of the towers begin to power up and aim themselves at his people, while the golems Apati summoned began advancing.

These golems appeared to be labor golems, nearly identical to the two in Leon's soul realm. That meant they weren't built for battle, but they were durable and strong.

As Leon approached, he filled the sky with thunderclouds, while at the same time, Cassandra conjured a shield of light between the expedition and the golems, and Maia summoned a huge ice dragon.

[Don't hold back,] Leon said to his people. [These golems are the enemy.]

No one needed any further encouragement. Most of Leon's retainers and the remaining Evergolden escorts were still healing, but their worst injuries had been taken care of, leaving them ready for battle. Still, Leon sensed their auras rise as Maia's ice dragon lunged outward, snapping up one of the golems in its jaws.

The golem showed its durability quite well as it resisted Maia's attempts to destroy it, but her ice dragon was powerful, and as Leon angled into a steep dive, it fell from the ice dragon's mouth in tiny pieces.

As he dove, the Lances opened up, and huge bolts of lightning erupted from their barrels. They hit Cassandra's shield, and its pure white surface was instantly cracked. But crucially, it held, though she roared in exertion.

Leon, angered further at seeing his people attacked, conjured six lightning bolts and had them fall upon the Lances. The Lances themselves didn't seem to take much damage, but Leon could see the towers crack and buckle under the weight of his power. If he could disrupt the enchantments that kept power flowing into the Lances, then even if he couldn't destroy the weapons themselves, he could at least render them inert.

He kept up the barrage, and when he slammed into the first tower, it collapsed beneath him, the Lance atop it falling to the ground and all magic contained within it bleeding out into the surroundings.

"A valiant effort," Apati said as his orb of light appeared next to Leon again. "Not enough, though."

Maia's ice dragon had destroyed three labor golems in this time, including the first, but the remaining nine charged, soon slamming into Cassandra's damaged light shield. The Princess cried out in exertion, but the remaining five Lances unleashed another barrage of lightning bolts, causing her shield to shatter. Maia's ice dragon swooped in and grabbed another labor golem, but the other eight proceeded with their charge.

Leon's retainers and the Evergolden squad then surged forward, engaging the golems with blade and magic, though not making too many dents. Leon himself didn't waste too much time before he launched himself back into the air and dove onto another tower.

[How do I break this?!] he roared into his soul realm.

[They're weak in the back!] Nestor responded, and Leon began hitting the Lances with more targeted lightning strikes as he tried to tear into the one he'd practically landed upon. [They have delicate machinery inside to aid them in target acquisition!] Nestor explained. [Break that machinery, and the Lance barrel will be disabled!]

If Leon could've scowled in avian form, he would've, for it was much easier to say 'hit the Lances in the back' than it was to actually do. The Lances were hardened and armored, with the delicate machinery that Nestor had pointed him towards being locked behind thick plates of steel. Still, he scratched and gouged at the metal, his golden talons finding some small purchase within. As the cries of pain and battle filled his ears, his anger grew, and once again, he found himself reaching deep for power.

His golden talons then darkened as fire began to burn around them. He felt the power of black fire, the strength of his inner dragon yearning to be free. Instead of trying to call upon it, however, he simply unleashed it, letting his instincts handle things rather than trying to corral his power.

The fire that burned around his talons turned black almost immediately, and the steel between him and the Lance's internals liquified. After a few more seconds of tearing, the barrel of the Lance went limp, little more than scrap with its internal machinery and enchantments rendered into slag.

"Damned ancient things!" Apati raged, and Leon smiled inside. This man was betraying him, and it felt great to cause him grief.

At the same time, three more golems had been destroyed, and Cassandra got back to her feet. Instead of conjuring another shield of light, she instead began firing off intense light beams at the base of the towers holding up the remaining four Lances. Already weakened by Leon's thunder and lightning, the towers quickly began to crumble under her onslaught.

"Why are you damned children not listening to your elders?!" Apati screamed. "You side with monsters against a loyal servant of your Clan?! Why?!"

Leon couldn't verbally respond—his mouth being a beak and all—but when he glared at the green orb, he hoped his anger and contempt was communicated.

It seemed it was, for after a moment of thought, during which two more golems and another Lance tower were destroyed, Apati finally said, "Fine. I guess I'll have to teach you some other way."

The ambient magic around Leon flared again and another curtain of darkness fell over his people.

Leon's eyes widened in alarm as he beat his wings and tried to disrupt what was going to happen—spatial magic was composed of darkness, light, and lightning, and by filling the air with lightning, he had a faint hope that he might be able to do something to stop this. However, when the curtain disappeared, his people were gone, leaving the remaining three Lances to aim at nothing, and the final handful of golems to stand there, targetless. It seemed that Apati had either refined the teleportation enchantment he'd thrown together, or simply lied to Leon about how accurate it was.

"Now, Leon," Apati said, "I need you to—"

Before he finished his statement, Leon had already taken flight again and smashed into another Lance, destroying it.

[That's unnecessary,] Nestor said, though Leon was inclined to disagree. [I doubt these defenses have been subverted enough to allow them to target one of us, who bears the awakened blood of our Honored Ancestor.]

Nestor's assessment turned out to be accurate, as far as Leon could tell, as none of the Lances turned toward him, nor did the labor golems make any threatening moves against him.

Apati's ball of light, however, wasn't quite so dissuaded, as it appeared again beside him.

"The impetuosity of youth," he said condescendingly, "is easily forgiven. I know that you think you know what's right and what's wrong. You think that that these monsters have a right to live, or something, don't you? Well, let me tell you something: things that slaughter men like farmers reaping

wheat aren't fit to live! When we conquered this plane, these creatures put up great resistance! They killed many of the Clan's warriors! After so much blood has been spilled by them, they deserve nothing less than to be exterminated—save a few specimens who ought to be studied, so that we might make their strength, ours!”

Finally feeling like he wanted to respond, Leon began transforming back into his human form. As he did, Nestor quietly said, [I think... I think I finally know who this guy is!]

[Who?] Leon asked as his clothes and armor appeared over him.

[One of the lead researchers here...] Nestor said. [The one you saw in that vision, I think...]

[So he's not a security guard who was left in charge of this place after the evacuation?] Leon asked, his anger and disgust with Apati growing more intense.

[No,] Nestor confirmed.

Thusly even further enraged, Leon turned to face the call of light. “And you think you know better than I do?” he asked.

“I am older, wiser, more experienced, and more intelligent,” Apati responded without a shred of humility. “There was a reason I was chosen to supervise this facility when all the researchers abandoned it.”

Leon almost called out his lie right then and there, but instead, he asked, “Where have you taken my people?”

“They were brought somewhere quiet where they can't do any more damage,” Apati replied. “I'm not so uncouth as to try and kill good warriors of the Clan. Yet.”

Leon glanced around at the Lances, then down at the golems.

“Sure,” he said sarcastically, though making no more comment on that front. “Apati, you will stand down, and you will return my people this instant. If you do not, I will consider you in rebellion against the Clan, and will act accordingly.”

“You are a fool,” Apati replied. “I am doing what's best for this Clan! I have given my life, all of my effort, for years beyond counting! Even when I was passed over for promotion in favor of that brainless fool Nes... Look, Leon, I know this place. I know these creatures. You *must* destroy them. There is no alternative. Destroy them, and then we can leave. Everything you came here for will be yours, and I can rejoin the Clan. All that I know, all the knowledge that I have collected over a lifetime of good, loyal service, will be yours! If you don't destroy these monsters, they will continue to blight human civilization forever! The blood of countless will be on your hands!”

Leon frowned. The tree sprites had at least been willing to negotiate, but Apati was trying to order him around. They had both tried to have him killed, but he'd borne witness to the memories of the ninth-tier tree sprite. While he wasn't particularly fond of either Apati or the tree sprites, with his people having been stolen by Apati, he was a little more predisposed towards killing Apati than the sprites right now.

“The sprites are sapient,” Leon said.



Apati was quiet for a moment, as if he needed a moment to try and suss out what exactly Leon was trying to say. It appeared he failed, for he asked, "So what?"

"If they're a threat, how did you deal with them?" Leon asked.

"As the Clan demanded," Apati said. "They resisted us, so the order came down to exterminate them. Only their incredible mastery over nature magic saved them from complete eradication in those first few years. We needed to study them, so we kept a few alive."

"And how did you study them? By letting them infect slaves?"

"We... needed living samples," Apati said, sounding rather confused and not all ashamed, as if he simply couldn't understand what direction Leon was taking this conversation.

"I wonder what happened here, *Apati*," Leon said. "I wonder if they were acting in self-defense. Personally, if I found invaders coming to where I lived, I would fight like the hells to kill them. If they took me prisoner, I would fight to escape, too. I wonder if this isn't a problem of our making, and if some accord can't be reached."

"It can't!" Apati insisted. "They are monsters, and to kill us is all they think about!"

Leon's frown deepened. The simple fact that the Protia Forest hadn't really expanded in these millennia was proof enough that Apati was wrong, though Leon didn't put much stock in his words, anyway.

"What is your real name?" Leon asked the man.

Apati went quiet, and this time, his silence stretched over many seconds.

It became clear that he wasn't going to respond, so Leon continued, "You're not a security guard here. You were a researcher. You weren't placed in charge of the evacuation, were you?"

"You don't know anything, *fool*," Apati spat.

Leon continued along on that path, though.

"The tree sprites can store memories and share them quite vividly, did you know that? Of course, who am I kidding? Of course you know that. I wonder what that ninth-tier tree sprite might be able to show me of its time in our captivity. I doubt anything you did to it back then might be considered a crime, but I wonder just how it managed to escape. Why so many of our slaves were confined when cerebral roots burst out of them? Did you expose our own slaves to these tree sprites to study their capabilities?"

Leon had no proof, but was just guessing based on what was starting to make more sense to him the more he thought aloud.

"Were those even slaves? What exactly happened here after Jason Keraunos was killed? Was the order to evacuate even given? Or did you just seize control of this place to pursue your own research when the Clan fell?"

Without another word, Apati's ball of light disappeared. With this small triumph achieved, Leon allowed himself a smile, but that smile was short-lived. Regardless of how he felt, his people were missing once again.

However, he took some solace in the fact that they couldn't be far. The teleportation enchantment thrown together by Apati, despite clearly being more accurate and useful than the dead man had let on, couldn't be powerful enough to send them outside of the Prota Forest, and he guessed that they were probably somewhere beneath his feet, within the research facility.

He quickly leaped down from the tower intending to charge in and do what he could to find his people and kill Apati, but before he hit the ground, an enormous root erupted from the earth and slammed into the tower, knocking it right down and disabling the Lance still atop it. The last remaining Lance was similarly disabled, with a second huge root thicker than Leon was tall destroying its tower. The final few golems met similar ends as thick roots speared them right through their cores, rendering them little more than scrap.

Leon's sword was already in hand, sparking with silver-blue lightning, when he hit the ground, and his head went on a swivel as he leaped into the air and hovered, looking around for any potential enemies.

He didn't have long to wait, as a moment later, a tree sprite pushed its way out of the earth like a diver breaking the surface of the ocean. It was one of the eighth-tier sprites, as far as Leon could tell, and when it stood up, it made no more hostile moves, choosing to stand still and stare at Leon.

Leon almost attacked immediately, but managed to suppress that impulse, and when he detected not a hint of killing intent within the tree sprite's aura, he slowly descended until he hovered before it, not quite touching the ground and ready to spring into violence at the slightest moment.

However, the tree sprite held out its hand, and sap congealed within its palm. That sap hardened into glittering amber that glowed with arcane light. From that chunk of amber came a simple, understandable, but thoroughly alien voice.

"You oppose the Pain-Bringer?" the tree sprite through the amber asked.

Leon, not wanting to be caught in a misunderstanding about who the 'Pain-Bringer' was, replied, "I'm heading down below to kill the man who stole my people and took over this facility."

The tree sprite stared at him for a long moment, and then the amber spoke again. "We wish him dead, too."

"Are you proposing an alliance?" Leon asked with a smile.

Again, the tree sprite was quiet, but when it spoke, it answered quite simply.

"Yes."

#### **Chapter 754: Making His Decision**

Leon and the tree sprite had an alliance. He didn't think too hard about it, but neither did he entirely trust the creature. He'd spent too long on the watch out for such beings back in the Forest of Black and White, and those old instincts, while almost forgotten, had shown themselves to still be quite strong after arriving the Prota Forest. Still, he was enraged at the kidnapping of his people—for the *secondtime*—and at Apati's betrayal and attempted extortion. He was going to cut his way down to the enchantment control room and vent a little on Apati, and if the eighth-tier tree sprite wanted to tag along for the ride, then he was all for it.

At the very least, he could envision this ending in a way that left both him and the forest's tree sprites parting, if not on friendly terms, then at least relatively amicably. If they could allow him peace enough to plunder the research facility, then that would be ideal, but if not, then there might even be a possibility for a longer lasting partnership there...

But those thoughts weren't fleshed out as Leon began running for the hole carved by the cerebral root that he'd used to enter the research facility only a few hours earlier. Unfortunately, when he reached it, he found that the hole had been sealed.

"There was a passage here," Leon said, and was about to elaborate when the tree sprite simply knelt, and the earth opened. The ease with which it used earth magic was astounding, and Leon could hardly feel its effects in the atmosphere surrounding them.

Not wanting to look a gift horse in the mouth, Leon jumped down the hole, which terminated right at the hole he'd carved into the facility wall. What awaited him on the other side, however, wasn't an empty room, but a room with three more labor golems holding Alix, Marcus, and Alcander, and one of Apati's green orbs of light hovering nearby. His retainers were thoroughly restrained, but they hadn't been gagged, so Alix called out as soon as Leon appeared.

"Leon! Over here!"

"My Lord," Apati insincerely said as Leon hopped into the room, his three retainers looking quite relieved, not a trace of fear anywhere in their expressions, "if you won't listen to reason, then perhaps—"

Before Apati could finish, Leon had already moved. Lightning blazed through his body and he moved faster than the mortal eye could track. In barely more time than a flash of light, he'd sank his blade deep into the bronze chassis of the nearest golem, which had restrained Alix. As soon as his Adamant weapon pierced through the bronze, he let loose with his power, destroying the core workings of the construct. Given his careful studies of the two labor golems already in his possession, he knew just where to strike.

The golem fell, rendered inert, and Leon launched himself at the next, dealing with it as quickly and efficiently as the first and released Marcus from his captivity, though not yet his restraints. The third, instead of moving against Leon, simply wrapped Alcander in its massive arms and began to squeeze. Leon was about to move again when a root exploded from his point of ingress and wrapped itself around the golem. The construct was subjected to the same punishment it was about to subject Alcander to, and the root was far stronger, crushing the golem like it was made of a thin sheet of aluminum rather than thick bronze.

"Gah! Fuck!" Alcander cried out as he hit the ground. Leon, lightning still coursing through his veins, wasted not a second in freeing his retainers from their bonds.

"Is everyone all right?" he shouted.

"Good to go, boss!" Alix replied. "They didn't hold us for long!"

"Right," Marcus added. "Our weapons were taken, though we still have our... magic..."

Marcus went quiet as Leon noted movement over by the hole in the wall, and when he glanced that way, saw the tree sprite being hoisted in, borne aloft by a twisting mass of thin vines that set it down almost comically gently within the room.

“Watch out!” Alcander shouted as his hands lit up with fire. Marcus and Alix, too, conjured their magic, with Marcus’s hands and eyes glowing with white light, and golden lightning sparkling around Alix’s hands and forearms.

“It’s fine!” Leon roared, stopping all three before they could do anything rash. “Right now, the tree sprites aren’t our enemies!”

The three looked at him like he was crazy, but he glared back. All still had their helmets on, so he couldn’t communicate privately with them, but he hoped his demeanor got through, even if he was, himself, wearing a helmet that obscured his face.

“For now, we need to focus on finding the others,” Leon said. “I don’t think it should be that difficult, but still, follow me.”

“Any idea where to start?” Marcus asked as he and Alix fell in beside Leon without question. Alcander took another moment, but eventually, after a hard look at the tree sprite who trailed behind Leon, he, too, fell in.

“They can’t have gone far,” Leon said. “The teleportation enchantment was made kind of ad-hoc, and the power supply of the research facility, while not depleted by any means, isn’t infinite, either. So they can’t have been teleported far. I’m guessing they’re somewhere else here in the facility.”

“That... might be harder said than done,” Alix observed as they emerged in the hallway and saw for themselves just how intact everything was. The hallway stretched for a long distance, and the projected murals and artificial sky were quite breathtaking, Leon knew, but he urged them onward anyway.

“I don’t think it’ll be that hard, actually,” he said. Before anyone could ask what he meant, they all heard a muffled explosion in the distance and a flash of orange light emanate from around a corner ahead of them.

Without a word, all five began running forward, with Leon and his retainers moving as one, while the tree sprite continued to lag behind. Leon didn’t think too harshly about that, as he didn’t trust it entirely, either, and this way, they wouldn’t have to worry too much about Apati ambushing them from behind.

In a hurried tone, rushing to pass on his information before Leon jumped into another fight, Nestor said, [These golems are likely keyed into your power, Leon. They probably won’t attack you, no matter how much ‘Apati’ tries to get them to. Your friends, however...”

As Nestor finished, Leon rounded the corner at the intersecting hallways and finally saw what was going on: the three remaining Evergolden mages were battling a single labor golem, and doing quite well. One of them, a wind mage, was flying around above the golem, constantly striking at its head with compressed wind strikes, doing a surprising amount of damage for so gentle an element. Another was hacking away at the golem’s legs with a blade of light, while the final mage was hitting the golem with fire.

The labor golems, while durable, weren't built for combat, and just as Leon started charging in their direction, the golem fell to the ground.

"Friendlies coming up!" Alix shouted as Leon's group approached. The Evergolden mages swung to face them and relaxed slightly, but went on guard once again as the tree sprite made its presence known.

Leon immediately told them of his impromptu alliance, and while he didn't think they liked the thought, they still minutely relaxed when the tree sprite made no threatening moves.

When everyone had accepted their situation, Leon said, "I know the way to the control room. From there, we should be able to search through the entire facility for everyone else, assuming they weren't teleported somewhere along the way."

The strongest of the three Evergolden mages, the sixth-tier woman with wind magic, simply replied, "Lead the way."

Leon smiled, appreciating their professionalism, and then turned around and began running, everyone else on his heels. He tensed up slightly as the Evergolden mages ran past the tree sprite, but apart from some suspicious looks and clear lack of trust, they ran past it with little argument, to his relief. Once again, the tree sprite took up the rear.

As they ran, Leon traced his steps as best as he could, moving around some of the more destroyed sections of the research facility constantly on the lookout for any more of his people. So, when he was leading them down another long corridor and heard the sounds of distant fighting, he noticed.

On their route, he needed to go straight through a large atrium, but the fighting was coming from another corridor off the right. Without hesitation, Leon turned and ran towards the fighting, and none of the others said a word.

The fighting was coming from another room filled with cerebral roots that Leon hadn't cleared out on his first run through the facility. Anna, her snapper, and Anzu were dealing with that oversight, as well as another labor golem.

Leon charged into the room ready to slaughter everything that was attacking his people. However, the tree sprite had suddenly lunged forward, surpassing everyone else and projecting its magic at the roots. The tree sprite took control of them, and they suddenly became as docile as flowers. The labor golem, on the other hand, wasn't so easily taken care of. It was being pressed up against the wall by Anna's snapper while Anzu kept beating his wings at it, gouging out chunks of bronze from its reinforced frame with sharp blades of wind. Anna had been covering them from the roots, but as soon as they were taken care of and she saw Leon, she turned and fired off a scorching ray of light at the golem's head.

The golem wasn't destroyed, so Leon charged and, in an instant, impaled his sword right through its neck, sending his lightning surging throughout its body, frying everything it touched, destroying delicate machinery and obliterating enchantments.

When Leon ripped his sword free, the golem went limp.

"It's good to see you!" Anna said, exhaustion clear in her features. She hadn't had much magic left over after helping everyone to heal, and Leon could see that she was running on fumes. Still, she was upright and coherent, and after she glanced at the tree sprite uncertainly, she asked, "Everything all right?"

"Yes," Leon said, and quickly filled her in on what had happened their separation.

"I'm ready," Anna said once he was finished.

Anzu, who'd expressed his elation at reuniting with Leon in his usual way, chirped in agreement.

The snapper didn't say anything, but Leon didn't expect it to. It seemed good to go, and Anna wasn't too worried about it, which was good enough for him.

Together, they moved on, their group now swelling in size.

As they ran down the halls, another ball of green light appeared next to Leon.

"My Lord," Apati said, condescension now gone from his voice, "we can talk about this, can't we? Like civilized men?"

"Bring my people back," Leon ordered. "Otherwise, there will be no talking."

"I can't do that, I'm afraid," Apati replied. "They're the biggest guarantee of safety at the moment. You're looking quite murderous, and I'm not one to fold, even when my hand isn't looking like it's going to win."

Leon scowled and kept moving, intending to charge right down to the control room and finish what that cerebral root had started eighty-thousand years ago.

"If you're not going to surrender," Leon said as he ran, "then at least be honest! What happened here?"

"Ahh, *honesty*," Apati said with what sounded like derision. "Quite the word, isn't it?"

"I'm not here to listen to sophistry over the nature of language!" Leon shouted.

"Neither are we, you glowing anal bead!" Alcander shouted from behind.

"Your retinue seems to lack discipline, Leon," Apati observed.

"That's not for you to judge," Leon spat. "What happened here?! Tell me!"

"Fine. Fine. You want to know what I did here? I'll tell you. I did what I needed to do! When Jason Keraunos led the Clan to ruin back then, all resources flowing to this facility ceased! And we were so close to some of the greatest breakthroughs I have ever seen! Revolutions in the way we approach nature magic! The ability to grow rare materials that were beyond our ability before! Certain projects that promised to change the way we approach ascension through the magical tiers! Revolutionize our understanding of Inherited Bloodlines! We could've made achieving Apotheosis so easy that anyone could do it if we had more time and resources!"

"Really? That's a lofty claim," Leon replied, his voice dripping with doubt.

[Indeed,] Nestor said scornfully.

"But not an unfounded one!" Apati insisted. "The things we could've done here promised to do so much, advance us in ways that we were only starting to glimpse! But all of that was almost lost when the Clan crumbled on this plane!"

“Almost?” Leon noted.

“I took measures to ensure the work could continue,” Apati replied. “We had no direction from the Clan, and it seemed like everyone was just trying to survive as the vassals fought over what was left. We needed human test subjects, so I sacrificed all the slaves we could spare. When we ran out of slaves, we took locals who lived nearby. There weren’t many, so when we quickly ran out of locals, I started triaging our people, sacrificing those who weren’t needed so that our work could continue.”

Leon’s anger was already towering so high that he didn’t think it could grow any more. His disgust, however, was only now starting to catch up.

“And continue our work did!” Apati claimed, his green ball of light vibrating in the air with his excitement as it closely followed Leon and his moving party. “We made many breakthroughs! We learned so much once we stopped holding ourselves back and experimented as we pleased with the materials we had at our disposal!”

Leon raised an eyebrow at that statement. It rather sounded like they were going well beyond certain regulations that they had limiting their behavior. *‘Supervision? Limits?’* Leon thought in muted surprise. *‘I never would’ve guessed, coming from my Clan.’*

Apati continued, “However, when our experiments started getting out of hand and escaping from our facility, we had to take some drastic measures. Our work was compiled, but destroyed when some of the upper levels of the facility caught fire and collapsed. Other physical results of our experiments were lost when what few upper levels that hadn’t been destroyed when our security failed, flooded. I’m afraid, Leon, that the only copy of the results of our work is in my hands. Or, I suppose I should say, in my *head*.”

“You don’t have a head!” Alix shouted.

“You know damn well what I mean!” Apati irately responded. Turning his attention back to Leon, Apati suggested, “If you want what I have, then how about this? I give your people back, and you guarantee my safety. Take me from this place, and I’ll give you everything that we learned here. All of it, enough information to completely change the fields of enchanting, alchemy, medicine, agriculture, and nature magic! Even advances we made in materials science! All of this can be yours, all for the price of guaranteeing my safety and my freedom!”

Leon slowed as he contemplated the problem. He’d originally come here for what he could salvage from this very facility. If there was truly nothing left, then if he killed Apati, then the whole expedition would’ve been for naught. He’d have to return empty-handed, having done nothing with his time except give the Director a few months to consolidate his position against him.

And here was Apati, sounding perfectly willing to give him everything that he’d come here for, and more. Leon hadn’t been expecting so much. If Apati could be taken at face-value, then Leon’s gains here could be immeasurably vast.

He just had to left Apati live. He just had to let the man’s sacrifice of who-knows-how-many go unpunished. And a quick glance backward at the tree sprite, whose glittering black eyes were now locked on his back, reminded him that an agreement to keep Apati alive would be to immediately make

an enemy out of the entire Prota Forest once again. They had a tentative ceasefire right now, but that would come to a swift and violent end, that much Leon could predict with confidence.

[That's a pretty good deal,] Nestor whispered.

[That's a good deal—if you can trust this guy,] Xaphan added.

[Yes, with that assumption,] Nestor replied. [I'll admit, though; what this man claims to have is intriguing. I wouldn't mind getting to pick his brain—or what's left of it, anyway.]

[You're asking me not to kill him?] Leon inquired, his pace only slowing slightly as he turned the problem over in his head.

[I can probably whip something up to make it look like you killed him,] Nestor said. [Hit his emerald with a bolt of lightning, while also using a spell to make it look like the emerald exploded. Something like that. With enough time, I can make anything happen. If you want to take this man's deal, Leon—and I'd tentatively recommend you do so—then we don't have to give up anything else. We can make it look like he's dead so those tree sprites don't lose their minds.]

Xaphan scoffed. [It would only involve giving up honor and having to lower ourselves to dealing with this swine.]

Leon gritted his teeth in frustration. He *wanted* what Apati could offer him. He wanted it badly enough that he'd allowed the Director several months without him around, just so that he could come and claim what was here that much sooner.

But he also found the idea of working with Apati detestable. He trusted the man less than he trusted the tree sprites, and the idea of working with someone who sacrificed so many people the way he did didn't sit well with Leon.

And yet, he was working with Nestor, wasn't he? And Xaphan, a demon who wanted nothing more than to burn everything that he didn't like. And the Thunderbird, an ancient, inhuman, divine being that conquered and killed more than her fair share, he could reasonably guess. And wasn't he trying to rebuild the Thunderbird Clan, which had its own bloody history even without the Thunderbird around directly leading it?

Leon didn't consider himself an honorable man. Hells, honor, in his opinion, was mostly just an excuse for people to try and force others to play by their rules – a foolish notion, in his experience.

And yet, and yet, and yet. Leon felt like he could argue both sides endlessly, and he desperately wanted both. He supposed he could take Nestor up on his deal and keep Apati alive, while claiming that he was dead. It wouldn't be that hard to give him enough time to throw something together to ensure that.

No matter what, though, Leon had to make a decision. So, instead of allowing himself to get bogged down in indecision, he turned to face Apati as he ran down the halls, faced the glowing orb representing the entire reason he'd come here, representing enough power—or so Apati claimed, anyway—that taking over Heaven's Eye, guaranteeing his safety among the Empires, moving on to the Nexus, and rebuilding his Clan could be trivially easy...

... and he made his decision.



## Chapter 755: Securing the Facility

Leon and his party blazed their way down the halls of the research facility, no longer interrupted by Apati. Leon had refused the man's offer, but given his own feelings, and the informal alliance he had with the tree sprite accompanying him, that was the only offer he could give right then. Nestor's offer still held some appeal, though. Make it look like he was killing the man, but in actuality, take him as a prisoner, then squeeze him for everything that he knew of the work that went on here in the research facility.

As they ran, Leon didn't let on even a little bit about what on his mind, and his party moved on in silence, Apati's attempted extortion and Leon's refusal making it look like the expedition was already a failure. It wasn't until they heard the sounds of battle further down the halls that they were able to pick themselves up a little bit.

They found Helen, Anshu, and Valeria fighting against three labor golems. Leon was grateful for something to take his frustration out on and threw himself with great vigor into the fight. In moments, all three labor golems were lying in pieces at his feet, their internals shattered beyond repair.

Helen reunited with her sister, Anshu was respectful enough to everyone else, and Leon embraced Valeria, taking a moment just for them. They pressed their lips against each other, shared one meaningful look, but didn't say a word. They didn't need words for what they wanted to say, and when they got moving again, they were on the same page with each other. Leon gave another quick run-down of their situation, and the party got moving again.

He eventually found the lift that led right to the control room at the bottom of the facility, but just in front of the hole he'd cut through the door were four labor golems, all of them in pieces. Two showed signs of having been crushed and gnawed on by something quite large, while the other two had been dismantled by clean cuts.

The sight calmed Leon considerably, for in this carnage, he could sense Maia's power. His river nymph lover had come through here, and from what he could sense from their connection, had traveled into the lift shaft.

Leon launched himself through the hole in the door, the rest of the party close behind him, and looked up. He was able to see a water dragon a few floors up, trying to chew through the bottom of the broken lift stuck above them.

[Maia...] Leon whispered through their connection, and the water dragon metaphorically froze as Maia's head and shoulders materialized sticking out of its hide.

[Leon!] she ecstatically exclaimed. She ejected herself from the water dragon and literally fell into his arms. Their embrace was a little more passionate than Leon and Valeria's, but that was only because Valeria had been a more conscious of everyone else and their missing comrades. With everyone else having been accounted for but the Princess, Leon let himself indulge a bit more with his river nymph mate.

However, the stares of the Evergolden mages weren't easily ignored, and after a few seconds of hovering there in the air, his arms around his mate, Leon let go. Maia was more reluctant, but Leon's bitter smile was enough to convince her to put their situation first.

“Do you know where the Princess is?” Leon asked. He nodded to the hole in the door and added, “Looks like she got a couple of those golems out there...”

[She went down,] Maia said. [We agreed to look for an exit—and for everyone else—and she decided to look down, first.]

Leon lightly frowned. It was easy enough to know that they were underground, and going down was hardly the most logical course of action in looking for an escape. It wasn’t totally illogical, though, since a path to an exit could be anywhere, but since the lift shaft was easy enough for him to cut through with his fire scalpel, he would’ve assumed Sunlight wouldn’t have had too much trouble with the lift, had Cassandra cared to try.

With a steadily growing pit of uncertainty and apprehension growing in his stomach, Leon did the only thing he could do right then: lead the expedition downward, toward the control room at the bottom.

Upon reaching the bottom, he found the same door that he’d had to use a maintenance code to access having been bisected—undoubtedly by Sunlight—allowing easy access to the other side. And the battle that was taking place on the other side.

More than two dozen golems were arrayed against Cassandra, along with three Lance-like weapons hovering in the air close to the door, though these were smaller than he was used to seeing. At the far end of the hall, covering the final door leading to the control room, was a powerful shield of translucent white light.

Busy cutting her way through these golems was Cassandra, the evidence that the golems used to be more numerous strewn in pieces all over the floor.

“To Her Highness!” shouted the sixth-tier Evergolden mage, and the three remaining members of the Evergolden squad that had accompanied the Princess into the Protia Forest charged.

Leon couldn’t very well allow them to charge on their own, so they had barely taken a single step before he was following and ordering his retinue to do the same.

[Careful, Leon!] Nestor shouted as Leon ripped into the first golem in his way. [Those two in the back are war golems!]

Leon spared the two Nestor called out a look. They didn’t seem too different from the labor golems, both being quite large with almost exaggerated masculine shapes, but what was clear was that their heavily-armored exteriors were covered in elaborate lightning and wing-shaped decorations. These weren’t just war golems, they were built to impress and intimidate.

Still, with Leon, Maia, and Cassandra, plus the combined efforts of everyone else, they cut through the labor golems like carving a cake. Only then did the war golems charge.

They moved surprisingly quickly for constructs more than twice Leon’s height and made of steel, and as they charged, they each clenched their left fist, and Leon sensed an enchantment activate.

He barely had time to himself react, let alone warning the rest of his people, and a moment later, a wave of lightning erupted from both golems.

Leon was almost comically unaffected by this power, but everyone else was hurled back. Fortunately, everyone was still heavily armored, and this attack didn't penetrate their defenses. Still, it interrupted their counter charge, and the war golems capitalized as much as they could. Leon knew that his blood prevented them from targeting him, so he wasn't surprised to see both focus on Cassandra.

One lunged for the Princess while the other halted a few paces away and clenched its right fist. Cassandra dodged the fist, but the second golem let loose with a directed lightning bolt that hit her so hard it smashed her against the wall. By Leon's reckoning, it was an attack that an average seventh-tier would've had to put all their readily-available magic into to create, but they could've matched it. As a result, Cassandra wasn't hurt that much.

The golem that had lunged, on the other hand, was immediately swept up by Maia's water dragon, which wrapped around it and squeezed, preventing it from moving.

Leon, at the same time, lunged past, and slammed into the other war golem. On contact, he exploded in fire, and he opened himself up to the black flame as much as he could. Most of his fire was still the usual color, but a few licks of black could be seen within, and he could feel his blood resonating in its expression.

When the fire died out a few seconds later, the second war golem had been rendered slag on the ground. The first, almost completely immobilized by Maia, was run through by Cassandra, who hadn't even tried to spare it for study, directing cutting it, and Maia's water dragon, in half.

Maia looked affronted, but Cassandra hardly seemed to care, turning to Leon as he picked himself back up and shouting, "It's about time you showed up!" Unlike her usual challenging attitude, this was pure anger. Leon, however, had only enough time to look at her with a mix of surprise, anger, and offense before a bolt of golden lightning shot past him from behind—one of the small Lances had fired.

Leon watched as Cassandra, who the bolt had been aimed at, tried to dodge, her eyes wide in surprise and shock, her aura spiking as she tried to conjure something to protect herself. The bolt, which would've hit her in the chest if she hadn't moved, instead struck her right arm and exploded in a shower of sparks.

Cassandra screamed as she fell, her right arm from just a bit below her shoulder simply gone, disintegrated by the lightning bolt. Sunlight, which had been clasped in her right hand, clattered to the floor.

Leon spun back around, cursed himself for his complacency, and swung his blade, sending a wave of wind magic against the Lances, knocking them back. He was then on the closest one in a heartbeat, cleaving right through it with ease. Next to him, Maia's water dragon lunged and devoured a second Lance, crushing it within its body. The final Lance was destroyed when Cassandra, looking like she was barely able to remain upright, hit the final one with an intense ray of light, splitting it in half. With all the active threats dealt with, she collapsed.

"Your Highness!" the sixth-tier Evergolden mage screamed as she ran forward and pressed an expensive-looking healing spell against Cassandra's burned stump, and Leon ran over to aid in Cassandra's healing with the tau pearl.

Unfortunately, there wasn't much either of them could do. They could ensure that Cassandra didn't die of shock or blood loss, and they could repair the damaged flesh that remained, but they couldn't regrow her arm without more powerful magic.

As they worked, the rest of the group secured the hall, and Valeria went to examine the shield of light covering the door.

"I don't think we're going to get through this that easily!" she called out.

Leon glanced up, not needing to spare too much attention with the tau pearl active. He didn't immediately respond, but his mood had worsened considerably. Whatever their disagreements, he didn't like seeing Cassandra go down like this. She was beautiful, strong, and confident, and he liked that about her. Her arrogance, sense of entitlement, and disregard for others were less attractive qualities that he'd become fairly familiar with during this expedition, but still, seeing her unconscious, less her sword arm, had turned his boiling anger quite cold.

He was going to get through that shield, and Apati was not going to be able to stop him.

A moment later, all that he could do had been done. The tree sprite had come forward looking like it wanted to help but had been waved away by the worried Evergolden mages, so, when Leon started walking toward the door, the sprite, Maia, and the rest of Leon's retinue followed him.

"Leon," Apati said as his ball of emerald light appeared again, "this is your last chance. I admit, you've pressed me right up against the wall, but I'm not done yet. Turn back around, or more of your people are going to die."

Leon didn't dignify that with a response.

"I've closed the loopholes that we used to get in," Apati pointed out. "No using maintenance codes to access this control room. You're going to have to break in, and that's not going to—"

Before the dead man could finish, Leon retrieved a spell from his soul realm. The spell was simple, composed of only a single rune—a single *ancient* rune: 'open'.

Recognizing the shield as not particularly dangerous, simply in his way, Leon slammed the spell into the shield, silencing Apati immediately.

Leon was angry. He was furious. He was feeling every synonym of those words, and then some.

But he was focused—focused on one thing: getting that damned shield out of his way. In this furious focus, the image of what he wanted crystal-clear in his mind, the open rune functioned perfectly, and in less than a second, it punched a hole right through the shield of light.

Leon was through in a second, but it snapped shut behind him, separating him from everyone else.

Valeria, looking panicked, began banging on the shield. Maia sent questions through their connection. The tree sprite stared at him, its alien face completely inscrutable.

Leon simply waved at them, his cold anger bringing him to a strange sense of calm. Then, he walked through the door and into the control room.

“Please!” Apati shouted as Leon walked in and began descending the stairs leading to the platform with the control consoles. “Please! Please! I’ll give you everything! Don’t kill me! Please!”

With every entreaty, he sounded more and more desperate. But his words swayed Leon not at all. He calmly walked down the stairs, then paused as he stepped onto the control platform. He confirmed that Apati was still right where he’d left him: plugged into the platform’s enchantments.

[Nestor,] he whispered, ignoring Apati’s continued pleas for mercy, [how do I shut off that shield?]

[Do you remember where those consoles were that controlled the wards?] Nestor asked.

Leon responded affirmatively.

[Go over there,] Nestor continued. [I’ll walk you through what you need to do.]

Leon did as instructed, and in the minute or so it took him to lower the shield, Apati had gone silent.

A moment after it was done, Leon began walking ominously toward Apati’s emerald, which had already started to crack a bit. It wasn’t like Nestor’s ruby, which had been specifically tailored to imprison a magic body, and so was starting to fail under the strain of containing Apati’s remains. Leon could’ve done nothing at all, and Apati probably would’ve been dead in a matter of a day or two, by his estimation.

But he wasn’t going to get that long. Leon’s retainers, along with the tree sprite and the rest of the Evergolden contingent—carrying a barely-conscious Cassandra—spilled into the control room.

There were a few gasps of amazement, but everyone was far too focused on getting down to Leon and the control platform.

“I’ll admit, Apati,” Leon said as they arrived, “the temptation to keep you alive was strong. But this is it for you.”

Leon ripped the dead man’s emerald right out of the control console it was plugged into, and he thought he heard Apati start to weep.

He stared at the gem in his hand for a long moment. It would’ve been so easy to simply destroy the gem—flood it with so much lightning that it was rendered little more than dust. But instead, Leon had a better idea.

Before he went through with it, though, he had just one question left for the man.

“Why?” he asked. “Why betray me like this? Was it not enough that I was going to take you out of here? You’d already concocted a good enough cover story, and, if you were telling the truth, you had everything I’d come here for. You could’ve ingratiated yourself to me so much that I would’ve given you quite the high position within my retinue. Why lose it all to try and force me to kill some tree sprites?”

The question hung in the air, everyone silent as they waited for the dead man’s reply. It almost seemed like none would come, but then Apati simply said, “It killed me.”

Leon frowned, then nodded in understanding, remembering the cerebral root that Apati had been attached to when he'd found the man, and the skull that it had sprouted from—undoubtedly Apati's own skull. He supposed in a similar situation, he might've tried something similar.

But here they were.

Leon looked to the eighth-tier tree sprite and said, "A shame the job wasn't finished. Care to fix that for us?" He held out the emerald, and the tree sprite walked forward, its wooden face impassive, its massive black eyes locked firmly on the emerald containing Apati, the 'Pain-Bringer'.

Without the slightest sign of hesitation, it took the emerald, and in a flash of white light, shattered it.

Apati screamed. Once. Loudly.

His scream was cut off, and no more was heard for a long time as everyone stood there, staring at the tree sprite, not saying a word.

"Was... was that it?" Alix asked. "Is that shitheel dead?"

The tree sprite didn't look at her—instead turning to Leon—but spoke once more through a chunk of amber.

"Yes," it said.

Leon slowly nodded, unsure of exactly how to proceed. The facility was in his control now, it seemed, but there was still some business left to conclude now that Apati was out of the picture.

"So... what now?" he asked the tree sprite. "Should we just go back to killing each other? Or can we give peace a chance?"

The tree sprite, in what was becoming clear was its usual manner, paused a moment, and with nothing else occupying his attention, Leon studied its aura and guessed that it was communicating with something.

*'Probably the ninth-tier sprite,'* he surmised.

Eventually, it repeated, "Yes."

It continued to stand there and stare at him, though, so after an awkward moment, Leon asked, "Are there any conditions? Can we loot this place? Are you going to... watch us the whole time...?"

Again, the tree sprite paused. "Your presence is requested," it eventually replied. "You will move unharmed through this forest. Please come back to our grove immediately."

Leon glanced around at the control room. "Think we could get a few minutes here, at least? Turn everything off, you know?"

The tree sprite answered immediately this time. "Acceptable," it said.

Leon, working in silence, with all the rest of their party watching him head about shutting down all the wards, none saying a word, all filled with tension. Once finished, he said to the tree sprite, "All right. Let's get this thing done."

## Chapter 756: The Ninth

The ninth-tier tree sprite looked much like Leon had last seen it: huge, powerful, but rather timid in what body language Leon could parse. However, perhaps as a sign of its growing trust, instead of bringing Leon inside of its tree where he assumed it was most powerful, it met with him out in the open.

Or, Leon wondered, perhaps it was a sign that it didn't trust him at all, given the fragility of soul realms and the probability that it had last met him in its soul realm.

Regardless, he found it hard not to read that something had changed given the change in locale.

Following the fight through the research facility, Leon and the eighth-tier tree sprite accompanying them reaffirmed their tentative alliance, and not long after, everyone, including Leon this time, found themselves being teleported back to the goat man village. Unlike the last time they were here, however, they weren't swarmed by hostile monsters controlled by the tree sprites. They were still watched like hawks by the other eleven eighth-tier tree sprites, but the one that had accompanied them into the research facility escorted Leon to the central ethereal tree. There, amongst its gargantuan roots, Leon again met with the ninth-tier tree sprite.

It was hardly the most auspicious of meeting locations, but at this point, with the expedition having essentially failed, Leon wasn't going to be too picky. He just hoped that maybe he might be able to get something, anything, out of this meeting, even if that was just a fragile peace deal.

Last time, the ninth-tier tree sprite had communicated with him through thoughts, not using language but instead using darkness magic to transmit images and associated feelings. It was an efficient enough method of communication, but it still left certain things open to interpretation.

This time, instead of communicating in such a way, the eighth-tier tree sprite remained, and acted as a translator for the ninth-tier sprite.

"We thank you for the destruction of the Pain-Bringer," the eighth-tier sprite said on behalf of the ninth, the rich orange amber gem that it had created resonating, emitting the sprite's alien voice.

"No need," Leon replied. "He was a mutual foe, so I would've killed him anyway at some point, I'm sure. Even if he continued with his deception..."

He waited a moment for the ninth and eighth-tier sprites to get on the same page before he received a response. He could already tell that this was going to be a very stop-and-start conversation if he had to wait for every response.

"Intentions matter less than deeds," the eighth-tier sprite said. "When interests align, that is when good events are brought about. Why you aided us in the killing of the Pain-Bringer matters less than the fact that you did."

Leon smiled. "A fine philosophy, I suppose. Thank you for helping me get through that place, it can't have been easy to be in a place that represents such horror to your people."

He waited again for a response.

"We do what we must when an enemy reveals himself," the tree sprites replied.

Again, Leon smiled in appreciation. However, his smile thinned as he asked, “How about me? Am I an enemy? Are my people considered enemies?”

“That depends on you. We are not of the mind to continue hostilities, so long as such attitude is shared.”

“It is. I would like nothing more than to continue this alliance.”

The wait this time was longer than usual, and Leon couldn’t help but think they were debating the prospect of a more permanent partnership. He began to quietly prepare arguments why working with him would be better than staying here alone, as well as trying to school his attitude to not seem overly desperate. He *really* didn’t want this expedition to be a waste of time, and an alliance with a ninth-tier tree sprite and its powerful kin would be a huge boon to his growing power.

Unfortunately, the tree sprites soon replied, “We will not leave this forest. We wish only to be left in peace. We’ve been harmed enough by your kind.”

Leon chuckled self-deprecatingly to himself. *‘Of course they don’t want a permanent alliance,’* he thought. *‘They were slaughtered by my Clan.’*

Aloud, he said, “That’s disappointing. I was hoping that we might be able to mend fences, but I understand your decision. Personally, I’m more than a little jealous that that’s even an option for you. I grew up far to the north in a forest much like this one—even with its own local tree sprites—and I never thought much of leaving until it became a necessity.

“Anyway. The last time I spoke to you, I brought up the possibility of salvaging what’s left of the research facility, but I never got an answer from you before we were so rudely interrupted. Have you given the idea any thought?”

“You wish for the works of that place to be yours?” the tree sprites asked. Leon couldn’t quite tell what emotion they were trying to convey given just how inhuman the amber voice was, but he treaded a little carefully around his response.

“I have my own goals,” Leon replied. “My Clan’s crimes led to its downfall. I wish to rebuild it, better than before in every way. I don’t know if that’s even possible, but I have to try. And to do that, I need all the help I can get. If there is anything down in that wreck that might be able to help with that goal, then I have to try and find it. Even if all that’s left are a few broken golems and the power crystal.”

The ninth-tier tree sprite began walking forward, approaching Leon as he explained his motive. Given its height, it towered over him, but it was so nervous that Leon never once felt the need to take even a single step back as it approached.

As it drew to within arm’s reach, it slowly, hesitantly, extended an arm toward him. Leon felt no hostility from the creature, so he didn’t react too much even as the tree sprite laid its hand upon his shoulder.

He felt power swirl about them, and he briefly saw glimpses of other tree sprites in a forest much like this one. It took him a moment to realize that it was a vision of the forest as it was before the arrival of his Clan, when the tree sprites lived peacefully undisturbed by the rest of the plane.



As he saw the tree sprite's past, he felt certain that the tree sprite was seeing his, too. There wasn't any proof that he could see of it happening, he just *felt* that it was true, as if the gentle power around them had linked the two of them together, joining them, letting them understand each other better than they could if they relied only on speech and body language.

After a few moments, the tree sprite pulled its hand back, and the visions that Leon saw ended. The tree sprite took a few steps back, settling into a more comfortable distance, but still stayed close enough to show how much its trust in him had grown.

The eighth-tier sprite stepped forward and again offered its amber for speech. "We are old," the sprites said. "There are few of us left here. It's gratifying to see that some of our cousins in the north have survived to this day, though it is only small comfort in the light of our losses after your people came here. We wish for peace. That is why we exert our control over so much of this forest: to ensure our own serenity, and the serenity of the forest. All who live here fall under us, and with us, they know peace.

"We understand now that you don't want to disturb our peace, you merely seek your own. Peace... and justice. Peace... and vengeance. Such feelings, we understand.

"Our alliance was meant to be short-lived. We wanted you gone. We wanted our peace returned to us. It seems to us, however, that the best way to ensure that you leave us to our peace is to give you what aid we can and wish you the best in your endeavors."

"You'll let us salvage the research facility?" Leon asked, his heart accelerating in excitement.

"We will do better than that," the sprites replied.

The ninth extended an arm again, but it was too far away to touch Leon. He almost stepped forward to make it easier until he realized that that wasn't the sprite's intention.

Instead, power gathered around its arm, and a white, translucent flower, resembling a beautiful, ethereal lotus, glowing in the gloom of the early evening down in the roots, bloomed upon its arm.

"A bud," the eighth-tier sprite explained. "One that wished to leave and found a new forest. One who wished to understand the people without, rather than its kin within. We are not all in consensus that remaining within the forest with our peace is desirable. We wish to extend our alliance to this bud, and have it join you when you leave. Show our bud the outside, help our bud to understand."

The flower grew and grew at an alarming rate, until the ninth-tier tree sprite seemed to have turned its own arm into another small tree. The flower's roots reached down into the soil at their feet as its petals reached upward, toward the meager light seeping down to the roots. When it finished a few seconds later, a tree sprite stepped out of its long, thick stem.

It appeared very similar to the other two tree sprites, though without such exaggerated height. It was about Leon's height and possessed of all the same features—or rather, lack thereof—of its kind: two enormous black eyes set in a roughly triangular head; long, thin limbs; and bark-like skin. From its head sprouted a hair-like mass of vines and wide leaves. It radiated an aura of about the sixth-tier.

It was powerful, though not so much as to be alarming, or to pose much threat. It stood before Leon as the flower behind it wilted, then dissolved into motes of light that quickly faded into the growing

evening darkness. Sap emerged from its arm, then congealed and hardened into amber on its wrist, allowing it to speak just like the eighth-tier sprite.

"Greetings," it said in a softer, though still in a resonant and completely inhuman voice.

"Hello," Leon politely replied.

The eighth-tier sprite continued, "Our alliance shall stand so long as our bud remains with you. We hope this alliance proves fruitful." The sprite seemed like it was through speaking, but a moment later, added, "And one more thing. For aiding us in the destruction of the Pain-Bringer, whose demise warrants greater reward given the potential you sacrificed in carrying it out."

The ninth-tier sprite, still holding out a hand, conjured something from its soul realm, the object appearing in its hand with a flash of arcane light. As far as Leon could tell, it was some kind of wood, little more than a roughly-hewn chunk with reddish bark still coating one side.

However, contained within that chunk of wood was what he could only describe as a startling amount of lightning magic. As he stared at the wood, it rumbled with contained thunder, and then flashed as lightning arced through the cracks in its bark.

"This is one of the things that the Pain-Bringer studied," the sprites explained. "We stole it upon our escape. Though the Pain-Bringer is dead, and all his knowledge lost with him, this is one of the objects of his study. We hope that any knowledge he sought, you might discover."

Leon reached out, his fingers trembling with muted excitement, and took the chunk of wood. As soon as his fingers closed around it, he felt the lightning contained within it surge through him, the wood connecting with him almost like it was an extension of his body. Putting it into words was difficult, but it was a similar sensation to how his new pseudo-Adamant armor and his genuine-Adamant sword behaved. But those pieces of his gear had been made with either his blood, or the blood of the Thunderbird herself, and contained their shared power. It acted like a part of his body because, in a certain respect, they *were* extensions of his body.

But this piece of wood did so without any of his blood, and he stared at it in awe. The thing contained so much power... On its own, it wasn't a game-changer, but he'd never seen such magic packed within something without it being enchanted.

"How did... How?" he asked, his awe keeping the words from properly forming upon his tongue.

"It was made a long time ago," the tree sprites explained. "A freak event. A bolt of lightning struck a tree and was captured within. The bolt lingered on in that tree until your kind found it and chopped the tree down. Only that piece of it remains, but the excitement they displayed upon finding the tree is a strong memory. We see that their excitement is now reflected in you..."

Leon smiled and nodded like a child given a much-desired gift, though he'd not consciously wanted such a thing until this moment. But what this represented was a material that, if he could create more, might prove just as powerful and useful as Adamant, without the need to bleed for it, or to expend great time, effort, and resources in the creation of it.

Or, at least, not the blood. He supposed creating more of this kind of wood might take up much of the latter, but for the moment, he allowed himself to dream big.

His eyes then drifted toward the patiently-waiting sixth-tier tree sprite and wondered if there wasn't some way they could synergize their skills. The ninth-tier sprite was captured by his Clan for its mastery of nature magic, after all...

And then he remembered the Hesperidic Apples just waiting to be grown back in Occulara, and his smile grew wider. Elise was a fantastic herbologist, and Helen was a great alchemist, and here was a being that could amplify both of their skills greatly, if it were amenable. At the very least, so long as it stayed with him, he would certainly have plenty of work for it to do.

"Thank you," Leon said, showing nothing but sincerity. "Thank you." He took a deep breath and relaxed slightly. While adding a strong tree sprite to his retinue and potentially gaining access to a new crafting material were already enough to make this trip worthwhile, even if they weren't what he originally expected to walk away with, he felt like he shouldn't entirely monopolize the gains made here. "Is there anything that can be done for the others?" he asked. "Many were killed here in the forest, and the Princess who led them lost an arm. I don't want to seem ungrateful, for that would be the furthest thing from the truth... but I'm wondering if any help can't be extended to them after all of this."

As he spoke, Leon thought of Cassandra. The Princess had lost consciousness again shortly after being teleported to the goat man village, with her three mages and Helen seeing to her as best as they could. As he thought of her, his own left arm fiercely tingled, and he recalled those few days when he'd lost an arm to a vampire attack. He knew that such injuries weren't permanent for those with great resources, and he didn't think for a moment that her loss of an arm would last once she returned to Evergold, but still, he couldn't help but wonder if there wasn't anything that could be done now.

"The power to restore the dead to life is not one we possess," the tree sprites said. "We cannot help you."

Leon grimly smiled and decided not to push his luck too far.

"Are there any more questions you would like answered?" the sprites asked.

*'On the other hand...'* Leon thought with a sly grin as he looked up toward the ancient runes entwined with the upper branches of the central ethereal tree.

"You seem quite adept at using the ancient runes," he observed. "How did you learn? Would... would you be willing to teach me how it all works?"

"We cannot," the sprites answered simply. "These works were given, not created by us."

"Given? By whom?"

The sprites didn't answer him.

"OK," he said. "Fair enough. I suppose I only have one question, then. What's going on between you and the local manticores? They seem hostile to you..."

"These beings resent and reject our peace," the sprites answered. "We do not force it upon them and try to maintain our peace with them anyway. They consistently refuse to abide by our peace, and so we are dragged into conflict time and again with them."

“But you don’t wipe them out?” Leon asked. “You seem perfectly capable of it, so why not just run them right out of the forest? Like you do with humans?”

“Peace with humans is a difficult thing to maintain, and we do not believe that it would be maintained. It would also require giving up part of our forest again and again. The manticores, for all that they resist our peace, do not destroy our land. Your kind would not do the same.”

Leon shrugged. “Fair enough,” he said again. “So, is there anything that you wish to ask me?”

“When are you leaving?”

Leon almost reeled like he’d been slapped. “Right now, if that’s what you want. I’d just like to poke around the research facility, maybe pick up those destroyed golems and other bits, and then we’ll be on our way.”

The ninth-tier sprite nodded, though it was stiff and looked uncomfortable doing such a thing, and then turned around and walked into the darkness of the central tree’s extensive roots, not sparing even a goodbye as it did. The eighth-tier sprite said, “We will allow you one day. Begone by the second.”

It was Leon’s turn to nod, and after an awkward pause, he turned around and began walking away with the sixth-tier tree sprite, seemingly his ninth retainer, in tow.

## **Chapter 757: Exotikos**

Leon sighed as he finally collapsed into a seat in his portable villa back in the expedition’s camp.

Following his meeting with the ninth-tier tree sprite and his gaining of a new ‘retainer’, he’d led the remnants of his expedition back to the camp where Cassandra and the rest of the Evergolden squad were seen to, and the bodies of their fallen were collected. Leon hadn’t stopped to rest, though, the one-day time limit he’d been given weighing heavily on his mind. So, he’d led his retinue back to the research facility to start combing through it as much as they could for anything they could possibly salvage.

Unfortunately, they didn’t find much. A few bits and pieces of the weapons that Apati had used against them, and Leon had done his best to transcribe the enchantment scheme that covered the inside of the control room, but other than that, the only real salvage they’d managed to find was the facility’s power crystal. It seemed that Apati had been telling the truth when he’d said that all research documents had been destroyed, only existing in his head.

And Leon had let the tree sprites kill him.

He didn’t regret his decision, even though he’d had to endure Nestor’s castigation for something so ‘foolish’. Xaphan, thankfully, took his decision in stride, reasoning that Apati was ‘an untrustworthy fuck boy’.

So, by the time Leon called off their salvage run, it was turning light outside. It was clear there was nothing there except for fragments of golems and Lances—there weren’t even any other intact golems and weapons of any sort kept in storage, Apati apparently having called all he’d had available into service.

Now, Leon sat back, his mind exhausted from the trying day. It hadn't even been twenty-four hours since they'd breached the inner warded zone, and he was ready for some rest. Unfortunately, it seemed that rest would have to wait, for he had a new retainer to see to.

He wasn't alone; the sixth-tier tree sprite was with him, a chunk of amber glistening on its wrist that would allow it to speak with him in a more conventional manner.

"So," Leon said, wishing he could do nothing more than pass out for a few hours, but resigned to dealing with business first, "do you have a name? I would feel quite awkward just calling you 'you', or 'tree sprite'."

The tree sprite stared at him with what Leon thought was curiosity. Its head even cocked slightly as if in thought. It eventually answered, "My name isn't one that's translatable..."

"But you *have* a name?" Leon asked. "Something that your fellows used to identify you?"

The twigs and leaves that made up the tree sprite's 'hair' fluttered and for a moment, Leon smelled something vaguely sweet. "... Yes," the tree sprite said. "We don't speak like this normally. We use other methods of communication..."

"I figured as much," Leon replied. "Pollen, something akin to pheromones, and darkness magic, right? And I'm sure more, besides."

Again, Leon smelled sweetness as the tree sprite's 'hair' fluttered. He guessed that was something of an equivalent to an affirmative head nod.

"That's interesting," Leon said. "My and my people's working theory heading into this place was that everything here was being controlled by some kind of hive mind. It's interesting, then, to see that your people aren't as united as we'd thought, and that you even have methods for identifying each other, indicating that you're all individuals."

"We impose order upon the forest," the tree sprite responded, "and to do so, we must act in concert. The... First Growth? The First Growth dictates, and we execute. Peace is thus maintained."

"Except when it comes to the manticores."

Sweetness and fluttering; a tree sprite head nod.

"So, you don't have a name that you can translate, but we're still going to need to refer to you somehow. How would you like us to do that?"

The tree sprite thought for a moment, and eventually said, "Exotikos. That is the name I will choose."

"Exotikos it is, then," Leon replied, smiling.

At that moment, the door opened and Elise, Maia, and Valeria came in, the latter two looking about as exhausted as Leon felt. Only Elise seemed particularly energized. She hurried over and practically draped herself over Leon as the other two collapsed onto nearby sofas.

"Husband!" she exclaimed. "It's about time you got back!"

Leon smiled and held his wife, then filled her in on Exotikos' choice of names.

"A beautiful name," Elise said, and the tree sprite bowed slightly. "What can you do?" Elise then excitedly asked.

Exotikos remained silent for a moment, then answered, "I can order nature."

"Does that mean you can make things grow?" Elise asked, a predatory smile spreading across her face. "Can you tend to tree groves and the like? Make sure that herbs grow well?"

Valeria added, "Can you fight if you need to? Or would you need to be protected if brought anywhere else?"

The tree sprite shrank back a little, looking a little overwhelmed. Leon smelled something slightly acrid as the tree sprite's 'hair' flattened.

"Take your time answering," Leon said soothingly. "We're in no real rush. Are we? How're our Evergolden partners?" The latter question he directed at Elise, who'd been interfacing with the Evergolden contingent of their expedition while Leon and the rest of the retinue were off salvaging what little they could from the research facility.

"The Princess will be fine, though her ego's more than a little bruised," Elise explained. "Her arm... is going to be fine. The arm itself was lost entirely in the blast that severed it, but back in Evergold they'll have the magic to regrow another one."

Leon's left arm tingled again, and it seemed Elise sensed his slight discomfort, for she took his left hand and guided his knuckles to her lips.

"That's good to hear," Leon whispered.

"Physically, she'll be fine," Elise continued. "Mentally, though? That remains to be seen."

Leon nodded, and it seemed that this short tangent was enough for Exotikos to relax slightly and answer Elise's questions.

"Fighting is... not a strength," Exotikos hesitantly said. "Violence is not something taught by the First Growth. Power should be used to nurture and grow, not harm and destroy."

"An admirable philosophy, for those that can afford it," Leon observed. "Unfortunately, my retinue and I aren't so rich. We'll protect you as best as we can, but if need be, are you at least willing to use your power in self-defense?"

Sweetness; Exotikos answered affirmatively.

"As for other powers..." Exotikos continued, "I can help things grow. If that is what you wish of me, that is what I can do."

"What about these?" Elise asked as she pulled the container with the Hesperidic Apple seeds out from her soul realm. Given that she was the one in charge of finding a suitable site for the apple orchard, she'd been holding onto the seeds until the location could be found.

Exotikos looked the seeds over for a long moment. "They are old," it observed. "But they can still grow. I can help with that."

“Wonderful,” Elise said. “How about other herbs? Can you aid in alchemy? Can you help with raising other herbs?”

“I think Exotikos has already answered that,” Leon said as Exotikos shrank back slightly again. “We have a good idea of what the sprite is capable of now, so let’s wait until we get back home to start running them through their paces.”

Elise frowned slightly, but accepted Leon’s mild admonishment.

“Now, Exotikos,” Leon asked, “we know what you’re bringing to the table. What are *we* bringing to *your* table? Why would you leave this forest with us?”

“Curiosity,” Exotikos replied. “I’ve always wanted to see the world outside the forest in closer detail. The First Growth always forbade travel beyond the limits of the forest. Humans kept trying to enter the forest and killed many lesser kindred. The same would happen to me if I strayed, the First Growth told me. But with you, I have a chance to see what’s outside. That is what I want.”

“Well, we can certainly do our best at letting you see the world,” Leon said with a smile, though he was trying quite hard not to think about the tree sprite they’d killed on the way into the forest. Fortunately, Exotikos didn’t seem too upset over that particular event, and he wasn’t going to question it. “My only real concern is that you might turn around when you learn about my current status in this world...”

Leon quickly filled Exotikos on his political situation with the Director and the Emperors. Exotikos already knew that he was a member of the Thunderbird Clan, though, so Leon counted himself fortunate that he didn’t have to deal with any prejudices there changing their current agreeable situation. He just had to worry about any prejudices that might crop up in the future.

“That sounds... complicated,” Exotikos responded when Leon was finished. The tree sprite hadn’t said a single thing during Leon’s entire spiel, though he’d smelled a few things indicating its change in emotion several times during the explanation. “However,” Exotikos continued, “it is a better thing to be with you than to be on my own, to my understanding.”

[You understand things correctly,] Maia said. [Humans don’t typically take too kindly to nonhumans. Surrounding yourself with humans is the best way to not be killed by them.]

“Then I’m glad I’m here,” Exotikos said.

With that, their brief introduction to the tree sprite was essentially over. Everyone, of course, had more questions, but Leon was fine with putting off their asking until later. Right now, he just wanted to rest and get ready for the journey home.

Exotikos was dismissed, but the tree sprite didn’t go very far. Instead, it just walked outside, rooted itself into the ground, and seemed to turn into a small tree right next to Leon’s portable villa, which still surrounded the Evergolden palace-tree.

Once the tree sprite was gone, Elise said, “You know, if what I’m hoping comes about, then we might’ve made more gains here than are readily apparent...”

"I hope so," Valeria replied. "As it is, it doesn't feel good coming to a research facility operated by Leon's old Clan, and leaving with little to show for it other than broken bits of golem and a bit of tree sprite charity."

"Blame me for that," Leon said as he leaned back in his seat. "I had the chance to take Apati prisoner and gain everything that might've been in his head, but I made the choice not to."

"Why not?" Elise asked. A moment later, she added, "I mean, I understand why I would've done the same after your story, but I'm curious to know why you decided not to claim Apati? Didn't you do something similar for Nestor?"

Leon sighed again. "Nestor... was a special case."

[You say like it's a bad thing,] Nestor grumbled from his soul realm.

Leon, ignoring him, continued, "He was a Prince of the Clan. His knowledge of enchanting is great. What's more, the Thunderbird herself recommended that I take Nestor as a retainer to preserve his knowledge. I received no such recommendation for Apati."

[Is *my* recommendation worthless, then?] Nestor asked indignantly.

[Yes,] Xaphan simply replied.

Tuning them both out, Leon added, "Apati wasn't a member of the Clan—at least, not by blood. He was more of an employee. Not quite a vassal like Koukouva or the Blood Thunder Jaguar, but instead directly integrated into the Thunderbird Clan's administrative structure. He just didn't carry our blood or power."

"It can't have been for that alone," Valeria said. "I know you, you wouldn't have turned down the knowledge he promised just for the fact that he wasn't a true member of your Clan..."

"No, I wouldn't have," Leon agreed. "So, consider that he lied to me with every breath he took, and tried to manipulate and blackmail me into doing what he wanted. He may have claimed to be one of the old researchers at the facility, and Nestor backed that up, but what guarantee did I have that he actually had the information that he was promising? I could've taken him prisoner, only to learn that he had nothing of value to share—that he lied about that, too."

"Now remember that we were accompanied by an eighth-tier tree sprite. I don't know how their senses work, I don't know how much they can see or not. If I wanted to take Apati prisoner, then I would've had to contend with it, and all the others in its camp. Eleven other eighth-tier tree sprites, and one that was ninth-tier. None of them fight well, obviously, but that's still a *lot* of power to try and overcome."

"Nestor and Xaphan both assured me that I could've tried to take Apati if I wanted, but it was a two-fold risk: that of the tree sprite missing it when I captured the dead man, and that he had anything to share. Imagine if I risked everything just to try and take him prisoner, only to discover that he had nothing to share? Imagine if I tried to take him prisoner and the tree sprite noticed, destroying our alliance, and becoming hostile again. What if all that happened, and Apati still had nothing to share?"

"These were risks I was unwilling to take for someone so untrustworthy, someone so duplicitous and manipulative. Someone so... so *dickish*."



"I saw what Apati did to the ninth-tier sprite. *Felt* it. I wasn't going to bring someone like that into my retinue. I wasn't even going to let someone like that live, not with their affiliations with my Clan. If I did, then how could I claim that was building something better?"

When he finished, Elise smiled and squeezed his shoulder, while Maia and Valeria smiled at him from where they were resting. Leon felt sure that he'd made the right decision, though he couldn't help but deeply regret not gaining access to what Apati offered. But, to retain his pride, he considered it a small price to pay.

Besides, he figured as he glanced out of the nearest window and saw the tree that Exotikos had become, it wasn't like he was walking away from this expedition without having made any gains. It would just take some time for these gains to flower.

His smile deepened as he thought about the piece of thunderous wood that the ninth-tier sprite had given him. He may not have the research his Clan had done on it, but at least he had two of the things they were studying with him. Who was to say that, especially with Nestor, Elise, and Helen at his side, he couldn't recreate that research? It would be hard, time consuming, and likely extremely expensive, but if what Apati had claimed about the potential of these things was true, then every second, every coin invested, would be worth it in the end.

—

As Leon stepped out into his soul realm, he could practically feel Nestor's discontent.

"What's wrong, dead man?" Leon asked as he approached the table that held Nestor's ruby. One of the librarian golems—though not the Librarian itself—stood nearby, ready to dictate anything that Nestor needed, and judging by the sheer number of papers littering the table, Nestor had needed quite a bit of help in the past few hours.

The reason for that help lay on the table next to all those papers: the chunk of red wood that sparked and vibrated with contained lightning and thunder.

"You let Apati go," Nestor grumbled. "Against my recommendation! And then went and slandered me to your... *wives*."

"Were you going to say something other than 'wives'?" Leon asked.

"What? No, of course not!" Nestor exclaimed, though Leon didn't believe him. He made his displeasure known by unleashing a hint of his killing intent, and Nestor's ruby dimmed slightly for a moment.

"My attitude towards you, dead man," Leon said, "shouldn't make you bitter. It should make you reflective. 'Why would Leon hate me?' is what I want you to ask yourself."

"Be careful going down that road, Leon," Nestor replied. "Go too far and you'll be made a hypocrite. That reasoning can be easily abused."

"This reasoning suits my current purposes, and that's all that matters," Leon shamelessly replied as he started leafing through the papers, skimming through the golem's perfect handwriting. "What have you found?"

Nestor sighed, clearly not wanting to move on just yet. However, he acquiesced to Leon and responded, "I've found much. That piece of wood is quite something, I have to say..."

"What are its capabilities?"

"I can't say just yet, only that it holds an incredible amount of magic power. In fact, it seems to take in and contain power in a way that I haven't seen any unenchanted, unrefined material *ever* do."

"Is it unenchanted and unrefined, then?"

"As far as I can tell, yes. No runes, no signs of magical tampering... It's no wonder our Clan's researchers wanted to get ahold of this and figure out its secrets. Something like this can be a powerful weapon in the right hands..."

"A weapon, you say?" Leon asked, looking at the piece of wood with great interest. It was a fairly small piece, but he could certainly make a sword handle out of it if he so wished—which he didn't. What he wanted to do was learn how to make more of it, then decide what to do with his greater supply. He even already had a few ideas on that front...

"Yes," Nestor replied. "The stored magic can be released in a great burst. I even think it might synchronize with a mage holding it, drawing in their magic and acting as a kind of battery. Anything more than that would require more rigorous testing."

"Then make sure to get that testing done as soon as possible," Leon said. "We'll have some weeks ahead of us on the return to Occulara, and I want to know how useful this wood might be by the time we return home. I'll want others to study this thing, too..."

"Don't rush science, boy," Nestor admonished. "It moves on its own time, and bringing in more people won't necessarily make it go faster!"

"Then hopefully it'll move fast enough to be useful," Leon said. He had enemies enough without adding the Director to his list, and it was just about time to find out just how welcome he was in Heaven's Eye, now.

And then, what to do next. No matter which way the Director blew in this wind, there were going to be some changes when Leon got back to Occulara.

## **Chapter 758: Broken Confidence**

The journey back to Evergold started off with great excitement. Leon's retainers, as well as those who remained among the Evergolden escort, were quite eager to leave the forest behind. They'd been in it for a couple of weeks, but that was already far too much for everyone, it seemed. The Evergolden palace-tree was dismantled in a matter of minutes the morning they left, ensuring that this camp wouldn't become an open invitation for bandits or monsters, and the walls were destroyed.

In this, Exotikos proved itself to be quite useful. The Evergolden mages were quite proficient with the required nature magic to reduce the palace-tree to little more than a seed that could be regrown anywhere, but Exotikos, once it realized what the Evergolden mages were doing, sped the process up immensely. All Exotikos had to do was make contact with the tree, and the sprite's own power quickly had it rotting and falling over, leaving only the initial palace-tree seed behind.

Hours before midday, Leon's expedition had taken off into the air once more. Their pace was much the same leaving as it was heading in, though there weren't any massive flocks of mind-controlled eagles attacking them this time. However, Anna's snapper was still cumbersome, slowing their pace down quite a bit.

This was a good thing, though, as Exotikos needed some time to adjust to flight. Leon had given the sprite a spare flight belt with the understanding that he would create new gear for the sprite once they got back to Occulara.

However, a related issue that weighed on Leon's mind came to the fore when they landed at the edge of the Prota Forest in the same camp they'd used on the way in. They weren't heading into civilization quite yet, so Leon decided to tackle this issue head-on, and after getting the camp set back up—his portable villa *not* surrounding the palace-tree like a wall this time—was to seek out Cassandra. The Princess would be key to solving the issue that now took his attention.

The Princess was in a pretty bad way since the end of the expedition. Leon hadn't known quite *how* bad it was, as the Princess had gone into her palace-tree the moment she returned to camp after losing her arm, and essentially hadn't left since. It had fallen to the remaining seventh-tier Evergolden mage to take charge of the remaining escort force and to coordinate their return with Leon.

That had concerned Leon a bit, but it wasn't until Cassandra finally exited the tree to 'lead' her people back to the Sacred Golden Empire proper that he'd gotten a good look at just how badly she was taking the loss of her arm.

The Princess was exceptionally pale and haggard. Her clothes were wrinkled, and her empty right sleeve hadn't been secured, so it blew in the wind. Her red eyes were bloodshot, her hair had been unbraided and simply pulled back into a loose ponytail, and she looked like she was barely able to stand. She looked sick, and for that, Leon couldn't blame her. He remembered his own despair and extreme discomfort at losing his left arm, even though the medical magic that he'd had access to even back in the Bull Kingdom ensured that he was pain-free all the way until it came time to get his arm back.

Cassandra had to know that her current condition was only temporary, but she looked like she'd been told that her arm was gone for good. She looked so bad, in fact, that Leon almost suggested they give her another couple of days of rest before they departed the Prota Forest, but the Princess, as if expecting him to make such a suggestion, angrily scowled and ordered her people into the air, leaving Leon little choice but to do likewise.

Besides, he figured that the sooner she got her arm back, the better her mood would be.

Fortunately, despite her poor mood, she didn't seem all that perturbed at having to slow down for Exotikos and Anna's snapper. If anything, though she tried to hide it, she seemed relieved that she wasn't the cause of the slowdown.

Leon didn't try to speak with her much throughout that day's flight, but once they'd landed and set up their camp for the night, he knew that had to change. He made for Cassandra's palace-tree after linking up with Exotikos and ensuring that the tree sprite had had a good flight—it had, fortunately—and making sure that his people were organized.

The Evergolden mages guarding the palace-tree didn't resist him too much, but still held him at the door when he asked to see the Princess. He wound up waiting for more than ten minutes before the Princess finally let him up to her quarters.

When he was shown into her surprisingly spacious living room, the Princess was sitting back in an armchair, her bloodshot eyes glaring at him as the door shut behind him. She wasn't alone, either, the seventh-tier Evergolden mage sitting close by at one end of a long sofa.

"Leon Raime," the Evergolden mage said as he took a few tentative steps further into the room.

"Evgenia," he said with a strained smile. They'd not been formally introduced before they returned from the tree sprites' warded zone—an oversight on his and Cassandra's part, he recognized—but they'd still gotten to know each other a little better with Cassandra recovering from her injury.

"Why're you here, Leon?" Cassandra growled.

Leon awkwardly stood behind a chair for a moment before deciding to just sit down, invitation notwithstanding.

"I was just wondering what kind of reception I would receive with bringing a non-human retainer back through your Empire."

"It's not the first non-human in your retinue, is it?" Cassandra asked, sounding annoyed that he would even ask.

"Exotikos looks more nonhuman than most of the rest of my retainers," Leon responded a little coolly. "Anna's snapper and my griffin Anzu are both clearly not human, but it's also clear that they're war beasts. Neither are particularly interested in walking about, too. Exotikos is different; they're leaving the Prota Forest for the express purpose of seeing and experiencing the outside world. Compounding that is the fact that tree sprites are known creatures; they're dangerous monsters, hostile to humans. I can't just let them walk around without escort given that—deserved, admittedly—reputation, but I also want to know if I'm going to have any trouble bringing them through your Empire even with my escort."

Cassandra sighed, then glanced at Evgenia.

The dutiful seventh-tier mage said, "You shouldn't have any problems, Leon Raime. Heaven's Eye gets its own privileges, and as a Hand of the Director, those privileges extend to you. So long as you or one of your representatives is there to vouch for the tree sprite, then there'll be no official problems."

Leon cocked an eyebrow at that specific choice of words. "What about *unofficial* problems?"

"They'll be unofficial, so who can say?" Cassandra said with a hint of venom in her tone.

Leon glared at her, and at first, it seemed like she was more than willing to glare back. But after a moment, she looked away and steadfastly refused to meet his gaze again.

"Torches and pitchforks?" Leon asked through clenched teeth. "Are your people going to be coming after me and mine for having a tree sprite amongst us?"

Evgenia, perhaps sensing the rapidly increasing tension, said, "There shouldn't be a problem on that front either, Leon Raime."

"Then what kinds of 'unofficial' should I expect?" Leon asked with an upbeat, though no less frustrated tone.

*'Getting them to talk is like pulling teeth, Ancestors damn it,'* Leon thought in irritation.

"Tree sprites are valuable," Evgenia explained. "There may be attempts from those in less legal occupations who will try and kidnap your new pet—"

"They're not a pet," Leon corrected with iron in his tone.

Evgenia, to her credit, nodded her head in what seemed like genuine apology. "Of course not. But you'll want to keep an eye on it all the same."

"Thank you for the warning," Leon replied, his tone dripping with frustration.

An awkward silence fell between the three, and Leon soon got the impression that they wanted him to leave, but weren't quite ready to ask him to do so. While Leon wouldn't mind bailing on this meeting, there were a few more things that needed some discussion, and besides, this short exchange had laid bare a few more problems that he wanted to get to the bottom of.

"How are you doing, Your Highness?" Leon asked as the awkward tension grew thick enough to be cut with a knife.

Cassandra finally glanced back at him, and her gaze was sharp. "Why are you asking?" she demanded. "Are you looking to rub this in? Show off what you've gained in that forest while throwing my own failure back in my face?"

"Your Highness," Evgenia whispered in alarm, "please, we are—"

"Out," Cassandra spat, her eyes locked on Leon, but he didn't think she was talking to him. Evgenia looked equally confused, but fell silent. Cassandra then glanced at her and repeated, "Out. I would have a *private* word with Leon."

Evgenia grimaced, but did as commanded and left the room. Every step she took toward the door felt like a thousand years to Leon, who grew tenser and tenser the closer he and Cassandra grew to being alone. He could practically feel the pressure welling up within the Princess, readying to explode as soon as the seventh-tier mage had left.

As soon as Evgenia left and the door shut behind her, Cassandra sprang to her feet, her eyes wide with anger and her aura wild. Leon was alarmed for a moment, but her aura didn't have a single thread of killing intent, so as angry as Cassandra was, it didn't look like she was going to get violent.

"What the fuck are you doing here, Leon?!" she shouted. "You lied to me on the way here, and then you watch as I get injured, as my people get picked off one by one, and then come to parade your own survival in front of me?!"

"Would you rather I died back there?" Leon asked, his voice low, though no less threatening.

"Yes!" Cassandra shouted. "No! Of course not!"

"Both?" Leon asked.

Cassandra almost snarled at him, then rubbed her right shoulder. A little more quietly she said, "No. I don't want you dead. I'm just..." She sighed and collapsed back in her chair, suddenly looking exhausted and like she'd suddenly put all the weight of her Empire on her shoulders.

"... Frustrated?" Leon asked. "Angry? Maybe a little scared?"

Cassandra glared at him and didn't respond. Instead, she turned away from him as if just looking at him was painful.

"I lost one of my arms, too, you know," Leon explained, and Cassandra glanced at him with a skeptical look. "It's true," Leon continued. "About... fourteen years ago, maybe? Thirteen? No, it can't have been that long... Well, I was sent out on a werewolf hunt, and the hunt was crashed by a powerful seventh-tier vampire. I was only fifth-tier at the time and was forced to call on my contracted demon's power. My demon was able to kill the vampire in question, but channeling his power through me incinerated my left arm. What little charred bone and meat that was left had to be amputated as soon as I got a hospital."

As Leon explained this part of his history, he waved his left arm at the Princess in demonstration.

"Obviously, it was a temporary thing; my wife was able to help me regrow my arm with the help of an herb whose name I can't hope to remember. Still, I spent a few days without an arm, barely containing my fear and anxiety at missing such a big and crucial part of my body. It was... *distressing*, to say the least."

By this point, Cassandra had turned fully back toward him, and as he paused, she said, "I... lost people on this expedition. Valeria shouted at me about it right before our attempt to escape from those sprites' grove. She said I... that I was a bad leader. Not in so many words, but that's what she said. I... can't... I agree with her. It might've been different if there were more gains made, but I'm going home with nothing. Nothing but bodies." She went quiet a moment as she glanced at her right arm. "What am I now? No friends, no respect, no skills... no sword arm... I'm a fai..."

Her voice caught before she could finish, and Leon saw unshed tears in her eyes. However, she went quiet, slammed her eyes shut, and he sensed her expressing a bit of her power. If he had to guess, she was using water magic to get rid of her tears without letting them fall.

Leon didn't interrupt her at all as she did her best to maintain her dignity. When she opened her eyes, however, he asked, "Want to be friends?"

With a shaky and not-at-all confident voice, she tried to deflect by quipping, "W-What's wrong, Leon? Trying to work y-your way into my pants?"

Leon just grimaced slightly, but understood that she was still trying to protect what was left of her ego.

"No," he simply replied.

She blinked rapidly at the bluntness of his reply, her uncertain smile frozen on her face. "I-I was going to say, you blew your chance when my grandmother offered my hand in... y-you know. It's better that you know that you're... that you..." She went quiet again, though this silence lasted only the span of a heartbeat. With a deep sigh, she said so quietly that he almost didn't hear, "I understand. I'm not a good catch, so of course you're not interested."

Leon just waved his hands in the air as if her attitude was something he could dissipate like smoke. "Who said I wasn't interested? Well, I suppose I did back then, didn't I?"

Cassandra shrugged noncommittally.

"Look, you're beautiful and driven. Yeah, you did a lot wrong here, but the fact that you see that you did wrong, and the fact that you're owning it does you a lot of credit. It's not equal to what you've lost, but you've at least gained experience. Don't let something like this happen again."

Cassandra slowly nodded.

"And I do mean it," Leon continued, "I'd like to be friends. You and I are probably not going to see eye-to-eye on a lot of issues, but I enjoyed those times when we sparred, and that competition with the wyverns was fun. So what if I don't want your hand in marriage? That doesn't mean I don't want to spend more time with you."

She stared at him, her expression rapidly morphing into something like disbelief. Then, she smiled shallowly and chuckled.

"Look, I'm not good at this," Leon said. "This whole 'making friends' thing isn't something I put much time into. But at the very least, I can listen if you need to talk about anything."

"Thank you," Cassandra murmured. "I... don't think I'll need it, though."

Leon frowned slightly, then shrugged. "I just hope you talk to *someone* about all this."

"I will," Cassandra said.

"Well, then. Good. Splendid." Leon trailed off a bit, unsure of where to go from there. So, after several excruciatingly long seconds, he said, "Should we iron out our plans to get back to Evergold? I'm in a bit of a hurry to get back to Occulara, so I'm hoping that the fastest we can... do that... the better..."

Cassandra nodded, looking at least marginally more cheered up, and together, they went over the best route to head south. It was essentially the same route they took to get north, but they spoke in fairly fine detail about what they'd see on the route that, by the end of it, Cassandra was smiling again, though her smile didn't quite reach her eyes.

—

The journey south went smoothly. Leon's concerns about people's reactions to Exotikos weren't quite unfounded, but they weren't as bad as he was expecting. As they made their way further into civilized territory and back to the long forest-city along the Neilos River, Exotikos drew quite a few looks, but with him, Maia, Cassandra, and all the others there with them, no one's gaze lingered unduly.

Their progress was fairly slow even by their standards with Anna's snapper and Exotikos' unfamiliarity with flight. The cause was Cassandra leading them down to the ground while they were still crossing the farms just outside the city's suburbs. Once down there, Evgenia retrieved a carriage from her soul realm, which Cassandra immediately got in.

“Can’t have the people seeing their Princess disarmed,” she’d said to Leon in explanation, and he couldn’t help but smile in response. If she was joking about her injury, then he felt like she’d be fine, eventually.

They reached the city quick enough, though, and Leon led his people straight to the local Heaven’s Eye enclave. Once there, his people went to rest, and Exotikos planted itself in the guest house’s courtyard. From there, it grew into a tree several dozen feet high in an hour, and its leaves began to glow blue. When Leon asked what it was doing, it replied that it was exploring the city through the other local trees and its other senses.

Leon was relieved that he didn’t have to take Exotikos exploring in a more conventional way, but he was still just a little unnerved by the display.

They didn’t stay long in the city, fortunately, and after only one day of rest, their party was back on the Neilos River sailing southward. Their journey back to Evergold would go much faster now that they were going with, rather than against, the current. Unlike their journey north, Cassandra, while still escorting them south, didn’t join them on Leon’s yacht. Instead, she stayed on her own ship, receiving medical attention that would prepare her for getting her arm back.

And, soon enough, the massive grove of trees that was the Palace of Evergold came into view. Leon felt some kind of relief at seeing it, recognizing that they were soon going to be back in Occulara, and he could finally put his disagreement with the Director behind him, one way or another. Very soon, no matter what would happen, he wouldn’t have to keep stressing about what *might* happen, he’d just have to deal with what *was* happening, something he was much more comfortable with.

However, his good mood quickly turned slightly sour when his yacht pulled into the local Heaven’s Eye docks. About a mile further down the river, in a massive complex that was, judging by the banner and architectural style, the Ilian embassy, an enormous ship was moored, along with many escort ships, none of which had been there when Leon had first arrived in Evergold several weeks ago.

It was clear enough that someone important was in the city, and it became clear who a moment later when, as if cued up for when he’d noticed them, he felt someone’s weighty attention fall upon him. It wasn’t that hard to track it given their seeming disinterest in hiding their power, and Leon saw sitting in a private courtyard within the sprawling Ilian embassy, Lord Protector Anastasios, grinning back at him and raising a glass of wine in greeting.

## **Chapter 759: Awakened Strength**

Leon stared back at Anastasios for a long moment, shocked at the Lord Protector’s appearance. However, after several seconds, propriety kicked back in and he raised a hand in greeting, returning the Lord Protector’s casual acknowledgment.

For his part, Anastasios seemed amused more than anything at Leon’s shock, and briefly smirked before returning to the conversation he was having with someone who looked quite important. Leon didn’t think it was too important of a conversation, else they’d have been speaking in a place where he wouldn’t have been able to see them, but he could tell that the topic was shifting in his direction when the important person, an eighth-tier mage formally dressed, glanced in his direction.



Feeling awkward and on-edge, Leon turned around and, as gracefully as he could, hurried into the nearby Heaven's Eye guesthouse where the wards against magic senses would keep him out of sight until he regained his composure.

As he worked on that, he hurriedly made his way to where his family was settling back in and told them of who was in the city.

"Why would the Lord Protector come here?" Elise wondered, sounding just as shocked as Leon had felt. "There aren't any particularly important religious festivals or political conferences happening—at least, as far as I'm aware of..."

"Could be he's just here on vacation," Valeria suggested, though her own doubtful tone indicated how little she believed it.

"Has something happened recently that would prompt the Lord Protector to come here?" Elise wondered further.

"If anything *had* happened," Leon said, "then we probably would've heard about it on the way south. Something big enough to draw a man of his power and position this far north would've had all the Empire talking about it."

[*You're here,*] Maia said, giving voice to what was on all of their minds.

Leon, grimacing, responded, "But would he come all this way just for me? More than ten years since we've last spoken; if he wanted to speak with me, then I was just down the Scamander River. But instead—if he's here for me—then why wait until now? When I'm so much further away?"

"He might've waited until you were outside of Heaven's Eye's direct influence," Valeria whispered.

"Somewhere the Director can't necessarily reach," Elise agreed.

"The Director is not all-powerful within Occulara," Leon pointed out. "The city is still within the Ilian Empire, and any authority the Director has within it has been leased to him by the Ilian Emperor. He has no authority to stop the Lord Protector himself from arriving for any reason, nor could he stop Anastasios if he tried to force the issue."

Elise frowned lightly. "Just because there's nothing *preventing* him from coming to our home in Occulara doesn't mean that doing so is the best course of action, politically. Better to meet on neutral ground."

Leon frowned to match his wife. "I *really* hope he's not here for me. I do *not* want to deal with him right now."

"Unfortunately," Valeria whispered, "that might not be up to us. If he comes here, what are we going to do? Turn him away?"

"Right," Elise concurred. "Besides with us back in the Empire, I'm sure we'll receive some kind of invitation to the Imperial Palace for a party of some kind. It might be a couple of days so that Princess Cassandra can heal, but I can see it coming. And if *we're* invited to a get-together, the Lord Protector isn't going to be snubbed at the same time."

[We can leave,] Maia suggested, and Leon agreed with the sentiment, even if he knew it wasn't a good idea.

"That would be rude," Elise replied. "Better to wait a few days to ensure that if the Evergolden Empress wants to summon us, then we're in the city. Leaving before then makes it look like we're running away, and our hosts might be insulted. It's not a good thing to do just to try and avoid Lord Protector Anastasios."

"Like cutting off a foot after stepping in glass," Valeria said. "Yeah, that glass isn't bothering you anymore, but you've done yourself more harm than good."

Maia frowned and shrugged.

Through clenched teeth, Leon said, "We'll stay. We can play the game. No need to let a lack of desire to speak with the Lord Protector push us into doing something stupid. We don't even know *why* he's here at all. Could be he's just here on vacation, like you said."

"I doubt I was right, though," Valeria replied.

It was Leon's turn to shrug. "We'll find out eventually, I think."

"That we will," Elise replied. "That we will."

—

Whatever Anastasios' reason for being here, it clearly didn't immediately involve Leon—or if it did, then the Lord Protector seemed like he was going to wait. So, without much else to do except wait around for a while, Leon decided to spend some time meditating.

During the expedition, he'd used black fire more consistently than he'd ever had before; exciting on its own, but it paled in comparison to the realization he'd had on the way back to Evergold.

He could now use his black fire just about at will.

The Heaven's Eye guest house in Evergold came with plenty of room for private training, so Leon soon found himself in a secluded meditation chamber, sitting cross-legged on a cushion on the floor. His hands were in front of him, and above his up-raised palms was a small black flame, roiling and churning in the air as Leon marveled at what he was now doing.

Just as with his silver-blue lightning, his black flame had come so easily that he was astounded that he'd had so much trouble with it before. The Great Black Dragon's suppression was clearly slipping hard, he figured.

When he'd first made the realization of what he had to do to call upon this power, he'd felt almost like a sleeping dragon just waiting to be woken up. That metaphorical dragon had woken up in the Prota Forest, and now it rested within him, patiently waiting for him to call upon it.

It felt amazing. Leon stared at the small burning ball of black fire hovering in the air. He poked his finger at it, and it felt kind of like he'd stuck his finger in a bowl of warm water. However, a moment later, he stuck a shard of scrap iron into the fire, and it just about liquified. He was taken off guard and had to pull it back to keep molten iron from dripping all over himself and the floor of the meditation chamber.

But still, he was ecstatic. This power, so long denied him, was now in his control, and with so little fanfare. He wasn't sure how long he could maintain it or the scale at which he could consciously produce it, but he knew that in terms of sheer destructive potential, black fire quite possibly outclassed his lightning. His lightning, of course, was something he was far more adept at using and it was much more useful in general, but if he wanted to kill something or destroy it utterly, then his black fire might just be what he used from now on.

He restrained himself as much as he could from reveling in this turn of events. It represented such a huge boon to his personal power that it was incredibly difficult to hold back his emotions, but he did his best, knowing that there were some problems that might crop up now.

So, Leon stopped channeling his black fire and cast himself down into his soul realm. Once there, he saw Xaphan immersed in absorbing the Mists of Chaos, and Nestor was busy seeing to the piece of thunderous wood that Leon had received from the tree sprites. The one he was far more concerned about was perched nearby, watching him with as much of a smile as her avian face could express.

With a flap of her wings, the Thunderbird took off, making a beeline for the mountain within which lay Leon's transformation enchantment. Without hesitation, Leon took off after her.

When they both landed, the Thunderbird transformed back into her human body, and the first thing Leon noticed was the smile that her beak couldn't make, now spread across her bronze face so wide that he was almost afraid her head was about to fall off.

"You did it," she said, pride dripping from her voice as she strode forward and pulled Leon into a deep, motherly hug. "I always knew that that power was yours to command, and it's so gratifying to be proven right!"

Leon chuckled as he returned the hug, his usual discomfort with physical contact nowhere to be seen.

"It feels far better to actually *use* this power," he responded as he pulled back from his ancestor.

"Describe it to me," the Thunderbird demanded, though her enthusiasm and glee was obvious enough that Leon wasn't in the least offended.

"I think..." he murmured as he searched for the right words. "It's kind of like I've been sleeping for a long time. My slumber has been getting lighter for years, and I've nearly stirred several times, but now, it feels like I'm finally awake! I'm still a little sleepy, but..."

His heart thumped in his chest, his grin was unwavering, and he could barely contain his laughter. His excitement was so great that he couldn't even finish his description.

However, as the Thunderbird just watched him try to maintain his composure with a look of pride and amusement on her face, his mind drifted back toward the problem that now presented itself, and his demeanor quickly changed to something much more serious.

"Ancestor," he said, his tone heavy with consequence, "how able are you to do me harm here?"

"Hm?" the Thunderbird responded, now looking a little confused.

Leon's eyes drifted in the direction that hers always pointed whenever the Great Black Dragon was brought up, and he repeated, "If you wanted to harm me, how capable are you of doing so? This place is

my soul realm, right? The place where I'm both most powerful and most vulnerable. You are... *dead*, but you still have some power at your disposal. Are you able to turn that against me?"

The Thunderbird followed his gaze, and when understanding came to her, she replied with a conciliatory smile, "Yes and no. My ability to harm you here is limited, as your soul realm is the last place that I can even exist within. If it were to be destroyed, I would have nowhere left to exist, and so I would dissipate into nothingness. I don't know what might happen after that, but suffice it to say that while I *could* turn what remains of my power upon you, I would never do so.

"But I suppose to fully answer your question without conditions: *yes*, if I wanted to, I *could* do damage to your soul realm. I might even be able to go so far as to kill you if I were to really put my mind to the task."

All traces of Leon's smile vanished as she spoke, and his gaze turned sharp. Before he could interrupt, the Thunderbird continued.

"You don't need to worry about too much, Leon. It's not only my existence that relies upon your continued well-being, but my legacy, as well. If there's one thing that all Ascended Beasts value, it is their legacy."

Leon glanced at her, skepticism dripping from his countenance. "I'm the last member of your Clan yet living." He said no more, his point made.

The Thunderbird looked a little uncomfortable, and an awkward silence settled over them for a moment.

"The Great Black Dragon takes these matters much more seriously than I do," the Thunderbird eventually said, her voice quiet with emotion that her stony face didn't betray. "That he has other descendants doesn't matter. He postures and he threatens, but he won't act against you."

"How certain are you?" Leon asked.

"Relatively," she replied.

Leon stared at her, trying to pry more answers from her without saying a word. However, his pressure paled in comparison to hers, and it soon became clear that this conversation was over.

"Now, then," the Thunderbird said, "shall we do some training? These were some heavy matters, and I'm eager to put them behind us. What do you say?"

Leon was about to agree when the pit that housed the transformation enchantment caught his eye.

"I have a few more questions, if you'll indulge," he said.

"So long as you indulge me during training," she responded with a sadistic look, and Leon had to suppress a shiver. His Ancestor, while generally lax and permissive, could be quite the taskmaster when she wanted to be.

So, after taking a moment to steel himself, Leon glanced at his transformation enchantment and asked, "Can this thing be adapted to stimulate my dragon blood? Is that even a wise thing to do?"

"I'm sure it *could* be adapted," the Thunderbird replied. "Much of my own knowledge of such magic comes from the Great Black Dragon himself, from back when he actually deigned to answer my questions and when the idea of you transforming was still theoretical. As it is now, he'll render me no more aid, and I don't have enough knowledge on the particulars of his bloodline to properly tune this enchantment to target it.

"So, I suppose, the answer is 'yes', but you'll have to find your own way to adapt it."

"I'll just add it to the list of things to study," Leon whispered.

"That list must be extensive by now," the Thunderbird wryly stated.

"It's a good thing for a man to have goals," Leon shot back. "Would you rather I wile away my days doing nothing at all? With no hopes and dreams besides some vague notion of rebuilding the Clan?"

"No need to be so touchy, boy," the Thunderbird responded, her smile back on her face. "You have other questions, don't you?"

"Yes," Leon said, moving on. "That tree sprite—the ninth-tier one from back in the Prota Forest—gave me a piece of wood that contains a ton of lightning magic. Do you have any idea what it is or how it can be used? Or how it can be reproduced?"

"Had I the Iron Needle still in hand, such knowledge would be easy to acquire," the Thunderbird stated. "With that Universe Fragment, and especially when combined with the Storm Diamond, all the secrets of lightning were laid bare to me. After mastering them, I would only have to ask, and the Universe Fragments would teach me. Unfortunately, they are lost to us."

"Right; one in the north, and one in the Clan's vault, right?" Leon confirmed.

"Possibly. Probably."

Leon nodded. "But... your knowledge of lightning is still unparalleled, isn't it? Surely you have *some* insight, even without your toys?"

"Universe Fragments are not toys, boy." The Thunderbird sounded mildly affronted but didn't dwell. "I'll have a look at what you've found. It's not something native to the Nexus, but it does... seem rather familiar..."

"Familiar how?"

The Thunderbird went quiet for a long moment, her eyes narrow and wistful, as if lost in memory. When she spoke again, she showed that that was an accurate description.

"A long, *long* time ago," she quietly narrated, "before my Clan had been established, and before I'd even made a name for myself in the Nexus, I saw an ark built of strange wood. I didn't know it at the time, but it was the personal vessel of a Primal God—or one of its highest-ranked angels, I honestly can't remember. The ark was beyond powerful, and I never quite knew *how* such a thing had been built. It was almost as if the wood contained all the lightning within the fiercest of storms, and could discharge it without enchantment. Such was my impression, at least. This wood feels similar. The ability to channel lightning without enchantment... and to store power without gems... As an enchanter, I'm sure you know the implications of what that would mean?"

Leon nodded. If such a material existed—and he had to force himself to remain skeptical even though the wood was now in his possession—then it could completely revolutionize the way he made his enchantments. Steel would never be completely replaced, and he'd certainly never make a sword completely out of wood, but such a material would be worth far more than its weight in gold.

At the very least, he'd gone years without a new bow, and it was about time to get one. If he could replicate this material, then he might be able to make a bow that might rival a Flame Lance, if not exceed one, in power. If he used this wood as a power source for his Lightning Lances, then he could potentially increase their power as well.

He couldn't wait to explore the possibilities.

Leon looked at the Thunderbird. "Will you take a look at it for me?"

"You couldn't stop me from examining that thing if you tried."

Leon smiled again. "I'm looking forward to your findings."

"You can look forward to them *after* you finish your training. Come now, boy, let's see what that black fire of yours is capable of."

Without another word, the Thunderbird assumed an aggressive posture, and Leon was forced to do likewise. Like a lightning bolt, the Thunderbird exploded at him after a moment of quiet tension, and he was forced to fight hard to keep himself from being instantly beaten.

Unfortunately, despite her statement implying otherwise, it seemed to Leon that the Thunderbird didn't actually want to test his black fire, but rather wanted to show him just how much better lightning was as an element. The speed she attacked him with was something he simply couldn't match with fire coursing through him. He was forced to use his own lightning to keep up and didn't once manage to land a hit on his Ancestor with black fire, to her obvious amusement.

So, when he left his soul realm, he did so just a little bit less excited about his black fire, but the knowledge that it was now his to command still buoyed him up more than he ever thought it would.

## **Chapter 760: Retainer's Autonomy**

After his exchange with the Thunderbird, Leon returned to his meditations and continued reveling in his command of black fire. For hours, he gave all responsible parents everywhere a headache by playing with fire, and when he finally left his meditation chamber, he still had a few black sparks dancing around his fingers.

However, his jubilant mood was slightly marred when he heard what sounded like a whispered argument not too far away. Upon investigation, he found Alix and Alcander locked in what looked like a heated conversation next to the guest house's main courtyard.

"... and I'm telling *you*, just because Tikos is a sprite doesn't mean he's a lady!" Alcander insisted.

"Tikos can grow seeds!" Alix countered. "Sure, she doesn't 'have babies' like we do, but by definition, she's a girl!"

"Not a chance," Alcander insisted as he emphatically shook his head. "If he were human, Tikos would hang *low*, without a doubt. Like down-to-his-knees low. A real man's man, that's what Tikos is. The seeds thing is just because he's like half-tree or something."

Any worry Leon had about their disagreement being about something that carried deadly importance faded with every word they spoke, and he calmly walked over to them. As soon as she noticed his approach, Alix seized upon it.

"Leon!" she whisper-shouted. She glanced back into the courtyard where Exotikos had rooted itself, then turned back to Leon and asked, "Tikos. Boy or girl?"

Leon stared at her with mild amusement. "Why ask me? Also, why're you calling them 'Tikos'?"

"Oh, well, 'Exotikos' was a bit of a mouthful, so I asked her if I could shorten her name to something easier to say. She said it was fine."

Leon nodded, then asked the more relevant question. "You can ask them about their name, but you can't ask if boy or girl?"

Alix frowned and Alcander pointedly looked away.

"Well, you see," Alix mumbled, "it's embarrassing to have to ask, you know? Like, I get that Tikos isn't human so it isn't apparent, but what if that's a sensitive question? I don't want to offend her..."

"You don't want to offend your newest comrade," Leon said, "so instead, you're just going to make an assumption? That's... that sounds like a good way to offend someone. Who knows how they might take it?"

"Or, better yet," Gaius said as he appeared behind Leon, "why not just get to know them, and ask later when you're more familiar? Until then, don't assume?"

"I can't do that!" Alix replied, sounding scandalized. "That makes it more embarrassing! Imagine if I had to ask you right now if you were a man or a woman! Wouldn't you take offense?"

Gaius shrugged. "I think I'd tell you, and only be kind of mildly amused. Maybe I might think of ways to make it more apparent, but *offended*? I don't think I would go that far..."

"It's still embarrassing..." Alcander muttered.

"Hardly," Alcander boastfully countered. "Why do we need to ask when the answer is obvious? If Exotikos were human, he'd be the kind of man who'd make the rest of us look like children! Muscular and handsome, and probably completely oblivious to the effect he would have on women!"

"Al," Gaius wondered, "do you want to fuck the tree sprite?"

Alcander went quiet, though from shock or something else, Leon couldn't quite tell.

"W-What? Of course not!" Despite his protestations, Leon, Alix, and Gaius all stared at him. Alcander didn't even make it three seconds before he cracked. "Oh, come on! Don't tell me all of you aren't at least *a little* curious how these things do it!"

"I'm not," Gaius said.

"Neither am I," agreed Leon.

Alix paused, then conceded, "Maybe a *little*."

"See? It's fascinating, isn't it?"

Leon stared at Alcander for a long moment. "The first tree sprite you've ever met that'll speak with us, and you're wondering how to fuck it?"

"I'm wondering *if* it fucks!"

"*And* if you can get a little action, too," Gaius riposted.

Alcander shrugged.

Leon sighed. "All right, then why don't I lead you all in a new mission? Follow me. No need to guess their sex, gender, or whatever else when we can just ask. Anything else you might want to do with them is between you and them. Just remember that they're sixth-tier equivalent, so if you get pushy, you'll be in for a world of hurt."

"A little pain can spice things up, but I'm no masochist," Alcander said mostly to himself. Alix and Gaius remained quiet.

Leon confidently strode into the courtyard and made a beeline for Exotikos. Alix and Alcander, each looking rather mortified, followed, with a curious Gaius right behind.

As he approached Exotikos' tree, Leon called out to his newest retainer. "Exotikos! Do you have a moment?"

Without any apparent hesitation, the upper half of Exotikos' body emerged from the tree like a strange roughly human-shaped growth out of the trunk. It held out its hand and a small piece of amber congealed in its palm again.

"Leon," it said. "Is there something wrong?"

"Not wrong, per se," Leon replied. "Just a tiny issue with regards to our differing biologies, and the hope that you could clear something up that we're a little unsure of."

"Anything I help to do."

"Thank you," Leon said. "I'd like to apologize first off if this is a sensitive question; it's just that as humans, these things can be hard to determine in some cases without asking first."

"Does this have to do with the speaking that Alix and Al had in yonder?" Exotikos asked as its leaves fluttered with the scent of something mildly spicy.

Alix immediately went beet-red and Alcander suddenly found the grass in the courtyard *very* interesting.

"Yes," Leon replied.

"Then allow me to easy make," Exotikos offered, and it exuded a scent of calming sweetness. "My kind possess parts that humans might call 'male' and 'female'. We make no distinction. We are but growths



of the main, budding each other with." As it spoke, the tree sprite held out its left arm, the one that didn't contain the amber piece, and a number of flowers sprang from the cracks in its bark skin.

"Tikos..." Alix muttered with both curiosity and concern, "are you flashing us right now?"

"I am using none light magic," Exotikos replied.

"Not what I was asking, but I think that's a 'yes'," Alix replied.

Something smelled slightly damp, but fresh. "I'm unsure of what you mean. My flowers are how I make new buds."

"Interesting," Leon responded, not feeling much embarrassment at the tree sprite showing off its equivalent of reproductive organs. "So you have no real defined biological sex?"

"No."

"In that case, is it all a matter to you how we might refer to you?"

Sweetness again filled the air, and Exotikos responded, "Alix asked if she could refer to me as 'Tikos'. That will do, but in other cases, it to me makes difference none."

"Thank you," Leon said as he looked back at the others. When he looked back at Tikos, he asked, "Have you been seeing enough from here? We can head out into the city if you want..."

"There are enough trees here to see," Tikos replied. "If there are trees none elsewhere, then I would need to travel there to see. Here, I can see just fine."

"All right. Well, if you need anything else, just let me know."

With that, Leon left Tikos to its own devices, and Alix, Alcander, and Gaius followed him out of the courtyard, the former two looking beyond mortified.

"Oh, that was even worse than I thought it would be," Alix moaned.

"At least it's over," Alcander croaked.

"Oh, come on," Gaius responded. "It wasn't *that* bad, was it?"

"If I never do that again, it'll be too soon," Alix replied.

Alcander grunted in agreement.

"Well, now you know," Leon said. "I get the feeling that we might have to get used to asking these questions if we make it a habit of encountering other non-human beings that don't fit human archetypes. You didn't have this much trouble with the stone giants, did you, Alix?"

Alix frowned and shrugged. "I never really spoke with them, I couldn't speak their language" she reminded him. "Though, I have to admit, I was always curious..."

"They didn't have any genders or sexes, either," Leon explained.

Further down the hall, a door opened, and Anshu came strolling out, looking rather bored. However, when he noticed them walking towards him, he seemed to hesitate for a moment, then approached.

“Leon,” the Indradian said as he nervously stroked his moustache. “Mind if I speak to you in private?”

“Sure thing,” Leon replied. He glanced at the others, and when they told him they had nothing else that needed his attention, he went off with Anshu. Given that they were in a guest house for visiting Heaven’s Eye dignitaries, a private sitting room was easy enough to find.

As the two made themselves comfortable, Leon watched Anshu. The man seemed somewhat on-edge, and over the past few weeks, had been even more aloof than usual. So, recognizing that something was on his mind, Leon didn’t press him for information, and simply waited for him to get comfortable and finally give voice to what was going through his head.

He wound up waiting an almost painfully long couple of minutes.

“Leon...” Anshu slowly said, “do you have any plans for heading to the Raj anytime soon?”

Leon frowned lightly and replied, “No. My current plans are to shore up my support in Heaven’s Eye. Why? Has something changed that would make your business more time-sensitive?”

Anshu softly scowled and, after a moment’s hesitation, replied, “No.” He rubbed the back of his head and continued, “I just... nearly died out in that forest.”

Leon nodded in understanding. Anshu had been poisoned by a lesser tree sprite, which meant he’d probably experienced quite a bit of pain and possibly other symptoms before Helen was able to administer the antitoxin.

“I’ve been thinking ever since then,” Anshu said. “I have my own enemies in the Raj, and every day they continue to live brings shame upon me. I still have a few friends there, though, and I was hoping to try and make regular contact with them again.”

“You haven’t been in regular contact with them so far?” Leon asked.

“Not since you confronted me about my correspondence with the Prince of Tosali.”

“That was more than a decade ago. You haven’t gotten any word from your homeland since then?”

“Nothing from unofficial sources,” Anshu replied. “I’ve relied entirely on public news brought back from traders that have gone to the southwest.”

Leon felt some doubt, but he gave it benefit to Anshu. “Well, what are you asking for specifically? Greater leave to conduct your business? Or are you asking me to get directly involved in Raj politics?”

“I don’t think the latter would be necessary,” Anshu replied. “Besides, if you’re looking to shore up your connections within Heaven’s Eye, then getting political would hardly be the best thing to do, would it?”

“My concern exactly.”

“I won’t put you in that kind of situation. What I’m asking for is more from the former: a little more autonomy to act as I need to, with you and the rest of your retinue providing support and backup to me if I need it.”

Leon nodded again, then switched to a more negotiating demeanor. “For this support, what would be the benefits for me and my retinue?” he asked. “After all, we’d be losing you for at least some of the

time, so what would be our compensation? You are still under contract with me, after all—unless you wish to formally end our contract?”

“No,” Anshu hastily replied. “Having your connections is paramount in my mind, even if I never actually use them. Having you in my corner will be critical for my chances of actually pulling off the revenge I’ve so long for craved.”

Leon smiled. He already had an idea of what he might ask in return for giving Anshu more leave and autonomy.

“Tell me, Anshu, you were a smuggler, yes?”

“Yes,” Anshu answered. “I was never a pirate. I never took part in piratical activities. I just moved things from place to place under the noses of governmental authorities.”

“Have you have ever heard of the Saltwater Road?”

Anshu stared at him in mild surprise, then nodded his head. “It’s not really a road—most of it is run by boat, as a matter of fact. It’s a smuggling ring composed of several allied groups that moves contraband between the Empires and the Kingdoms of the southwest—mostly the Raj. Their route mostly takes them along the western coast and goes through the Illumerian Wetlands, though when Jormun called up the favors I owed him and had me travel to the Serpentine Isles, there was talk of them expanding south to include the southern coast of the Tam and the Pegasi States. I can’t imagine they’ve had much luck, though, as the Imperial Fleets plying the Argonaut Sea and the Veins of Vigilance between the southern islands are *very* hard to avoid.”

“I’ve heard that there’s been quite a bit of naval build-up down there, as of late,” Leon observed.

“That would make it even less likely that they’ve expanded that far,” Anshu said.

“All right. Have you, then, ever heard of a man named ‘Stelios’?”

Anshu’s frown deepened slightly, and he confirmed, “Yes, I have. A man named ‘Stelios’ is rumored to lead one of the bigger smuggling groups that compose the Saltwater Road. Once smuggled goods enters Imperial Territory, it’s usually handled by the Wings of the Tau smuggling ring, which would be Stelios’ group—or so I’ve heard. I mostly handled contraband on the other side of the road, moving goods from the Raj to the Wetlands where some other group would take over.”

Leon nodded again. “The reason I ask all of this is because, when I consulted with Emilie about what my next steps should be shortly before we left for this expedition, she recommended that I speak with this Stelios. He openly operates a handful of vineyards in Occulara. Given his rumored real occupation, she was sure that he would have information on vampires living within Imperial lands.”

It was Anshu’s turn to nod, and he concurred, “That wouldn’t surprise me. There aren’t many jobs that a vampire can get once their condition becomes too severe to hide. Their choices become either hide out in the brush where there aren’t many sacrifices to be had, or join an illegitimate business where they get more support in exchange for some of their demonic services. Given that slaves are one of the most common and profitable goods to smuggle, it makes some sense that vampires would choose to ally with smugglers and slavers who can get their hands on good sacrifices fairly easily.”

“Such was Emilie’s thinking, too,” Leon replied. “I’m, as I’m sure you can understand, rather reluctant to make contact personally. But... if someone else were to make contact in my stead, to act as a go-between so that any connections between myself and these smugglers can be easily denied, then we might be in better shape.”

Anshu smiled as the realization of what Leon wanted him to do became obvious. “And you want *me* to make contact with Stelios in your stead?”

“Yes,” Leon immediately answered. “You act my information gatherer within the Saltwater Road. Find me actionable intel on vampires, and in return, you can hunt down any information you need on your enemies within the Raj. You’ll still be considered part of my retinue, so I’ll continue to pay you, and you’ll stay in regular contact with me. If I ever need you for anything, I’ll recall you, just as I’ll be there if you ever need me for anything.”

“If I were to make contact with Stelios on your behalf,” Anshu began, “what authority do I have to negotiate for you?”

“Not much,” Leon replied. “For now, it’s just ‘making contact’. We can work on something a little more committed later. I’m mostly just concerned about vampires and don’t want to get drawn into Stelios’ work too deeply. If Stelios requires some kind of price for that information—whether monetary or as a ‘favor’—then you’ll relay that to me. I’ll tell you right now: I will not honor any promises made on my behalf if I don’t give the OK. OK?”

“I can roll with that,” Anshu said as he stroked his moustache in thought. “It’ll be good to check back in on some of my friends in other ports, too... I think this deal will work, Leon.”

“That’s fantastic to hear,” Leon replied.

He and Anshu went over a few more details, and by the time they parted ways for the night, they’d worked out a workable plan. Anshu would be attempting to contact Stelios when they returned to Occulara while Leon was busy with Heaven’s Eye.

Leon thought that this was going to be a good deal for everyone. He needed intel on the vampires, and it was clear enough that Anshu wasn’t fitting in well with his retinue. Giving the man some room to breathe and collect himself was probably for the best, and after more than ten years, Leon was fine with affording him a bit of trust.

Hopefully, once all of this was over and Anshu no longer had his vengeance weighing on his mind, he could integrate better with Leon’s retinue. And Leon *did* want the man in his retinue—he had a wealth of experience in a critical field that Leon was a rank novice at: naval matters. Leon didn’t know the first thing about commanding ships, and if it weren’t for the range of his magic senses, he thought that he’d get completely lost at sea and have little hope of successfully navigating anywhere.

Anshu, however, would be his answer. Or at least, Leon *hoped* that Anshu could be his answer. He needed someone who knew ships, regardless.

He felt good about the meeting, as a result. The deal he and Anshu had worked out had great potential, and he looked forward to seeing how much, if at all, it paid off. However, that good mood was spoiled slightly when he received word that the Empress had found the time to formally invite his people to the

palace the following night. It didn't seem to be an invitation to a party, feast, or religious ceremony, though, so Leon wasn't sure what to make of it.

The only thing he was certain of, however, was that Anastasios was undoubtedly going to be there, too.