

Storm King 761

Chapter 761: New Attitude

When Leon walked into the throne room of the Sacred Golden Empire's Imperial Palace, he did so much as he did about a month before: flanked on both sides first by Elise, Maia, and Valeria, and then by several Imperial guards. Unlike the last time he was here, however, the massive courtyard surrounded by trees was nearly empty, driving home just how big it was without people to fill it. More than that, they clearly weren't readying for a feast to celebrate a religious holiday, leaving the entire area looking strangely eerie.

The small river on the other side of the throne room still flowed, though, and the stone throne on its high platform was empty. The Empress and a handful of additional guards—including two who were of the ninth-tier who stared daggers at Leon and Maia from the moment they were escorted in—were at the foot of the throne's stairs, though.

The Empress was dressed in typical sumptuous Evergolden style, so Leon could assume that this wasn't an informal event. However, as soon as they walked in, the Empress began walking forward, and as it had the previous time, the enchanted stream parted around her, with not a single drop of water daring to sully her vestments.

"Welcome," she greeted warmly. "Welcome. Please, come on in."

As she welcomed them in, she nodded to the guards who'd escorted them in, and they bowed deeply and left, leaving Leon's small party alone with the Empress and her guards.

"Your Majesty," Leon said, bowing only as low as he needed to in order to not seem disrespectful of the Empress in her own throne room. His lovers at his side the same.

"No need for formalities today, Leon Raime," the Empress said. "Please, come with me, I was hoping I could speak with you for a while."

"Of course." The Empress began walking down another path through the forest within the massive chamber formed by the Imperial palace-tree's intertwined branches and thick canopy of leaves, and Leon followed closely.

As he did, though, he did his best to keep his head on a subtle swivel, constantly on the lookout for the man that he was certain would be here until the moment he entered the throne room and saw that he wasn't: Anastasios, Lord Protector of the Ilian Empire.

It seemed he wasn't subtle enough, as the Empress asked him, "Looking for something? Or someone?" Her tone was teasing, and while she'd hit the nail on the head, he wasn't quite sure she was talking about Anastasios.

"I just find it a little strange, is all," Leon replied. "I figured there'd be more people around. This *is* your Imperial Palace, isn't it? The center of your Imperial government..."

"Most of the day-to-day business happens elsewhere within our palace complex," the Empress helpfully explained. "Our throne room is seldom used, actually. Maybe only three or four times per month."

“Huh,” Leon grunted in surprise, drawing several disgusted looks from the guards around them for his lack of formality. He just ignored them.

The Empress led them to the same meeting room that the Grand Druid had led him to the last time he was here, telling him that what they were going to discuss was going to be private. His guard went up a little bit, but that Elise, Maia, and Valeria were brought with encouraged him.

The guards were left outside as the Empress escorted them into the private meeting room. Leon found this just a little strange, but the Empress herself was a ninth-tier mage, and when he walked in, he found that the Grand Druid herself was waiting at the opposite end of the table, the crown of Nestor’s sister Penthesilea glittering on her head. She grinned like a fisherman who’d just hauled a fat fish out of the sea as Leon walked in.

Leon did his best not to seem unnerved at her demeanor, but it wasn’t the easiest thing to do. However, his eyes did drift to her crown, and a muted sense of indignation helped him on that front.

“Welcome back to our Empire, Leon Raime,” the Grand Druid drawled, before giving similar greetings to Leon’s ladies.

“It’s good to be back,” Leon politely, though not quite truthfully replied. “I’ve always loved the wilderness, and have to admit that the overly artificial urban zones of Ilion don’t even have half the appeal of Evergold.”

The Grand Druid smiled again, though this time her expression seemed much more natural.

Before anyone could say anything more, someone else walked in just as Leon and his party were taking their seats: Cassandra, still without her right arm, which her golden dress seemed almost designed to show off. Her shoulder was wrapped in bandages, though, so her maiming, while almost painfully obvious, was also hidden from view.

“Apologies for being late,” Cassandra said as she hurried over to sit with her mother and grandmother.

“Cassandra,” the Empress said affectionately, throwing Leon a quick look of concern as she did, “it’s best if you return to the healers and ensure that your restoration goes well...”

“I’m not going to miss this,” Cassandra defiantly replied. “I took part in this expedition, and I want to be a part of providing a report on how it went!”

“How it went is pretty obvious,” the Grand Druid said as she used her magic power to levitate Cassandra into the air, much to the Princess’ shock, and carried her closer to her grandmother. As the Grand Druid set the Princess down, the older woman gently brushed against Cassandra’s armless shoulder. “Are you in any pain?”

“Mother,” the Empress said chidingly, “perhaps now isn’t the time for this? Business and—”

“This is the perfect time for it,” the Grand Druid almost snapped. “Leon Raime, do you have any problems with me showing my granddaughter some affection?”

Leon thinly smiled at being put on the spot, and quickly replied, “None at all. Please, don’t mind me.”

He supposed the Empress was concerned with 'their side' showing weakness in front of him, but he was there when Cassandra had lost her arm, so it wasn't like this was a surprise. In fact, the only thing he was surprised about was that Cassandra hadn't yet been healed; he'd assumed that in the hours since their return to Evergold, then the Princess would've already had her arm restored.

Despite his platitudes, the Grand Druid didn't spend too much longer doting on Cassandra, and soon enough, they got to the point of their meeting.

"What happened out there?" the Grand Druid asked Leon. It was a refreshingly blunt question, and he answered with only as much detail as he thought appropriate.

He started first with their journey north, with Cassandra eagerly jumping in for part of it. Then, the two alternated telling the story of their expedition from their perspectives, and the Grand Druid made sure to pause every now and then to get Elise, Valeria, and Maia's perspectives. Maia was the only one who didn't readily respond, which the Empress seemed insulted by, but the Grand Druid shrugged off.

At this point, knowing that there wasn't anything at all to be salvaged from the research facility anymore, and knowing that the tree sprites were more than willing to defend themselves with their magic, Leon didn't hold much back in his explanation. Besides, he figured if he wasn't upfront about this expedition, Cassandra would be, so he might as well get his own story out there first. His only real concern was what the Grand Druid, the only tenth-tier mage in the entire Sacred Golden Empire, might do upon learning of the tree sprite commune living within her Empire.

"... Interesting," the Grand Druid said as he finished his explanation up through his first meeting with the ninth-tier tree sprite. "I had no idea such a creature lived within the forest; I'd assumed it was just the usual predators preventing us from venturing further in..."

She didn't sound particularly hostile, which Leon took to be an encouraging sign.

The Grand Druid continued, "Did this tree sprite seem at all inclined to making any alliances, in your estimation?" She asked the entire room, but her gaze was focused only on Leon and Cassandra.

"Not at all," Leon answered. "Those sprites just want to be left alone. I can't imagine anyone entering their forest would be welcomed at all."

"What about those with those runes you made?" the Empress asked. "Those 'truth' and 'open' runes? Wouldn't any more of those work?"

"Why are you asking?" Leon bluntly wondered, drawing a look of muted anger from the Empress and a quick pinch of warning to his arm from Elise. Ignoring both, he asked, "Are you looking to invade the forest to try and run those tree sprites out of your Empire?"

"They represent a clear threat—" the Empress began, but the Grand Druid cut her off.

"We're not looking to try and exterminate any tree sprites, Leon. All we want to know is if we can make an alliance with them. A mutual support treaty, at the very least. Tree sprites are known to have great skill in nature magic, and we'd be more than willing to learn from them. If they're not that willing to work with us, then we have no problems leaving them be. It's not like the Protia Forest has some great resource that we're in desperate need of, anyway."

"I'd argue against invading the forest, too," Cassandra said, any traces of the arrogant attitude that she'd shown off only a month before nowhere to be seen. "They clearly have the support of something powerful, given the level of enchantments they showed off. I mean, those ancient runes in the branches of that ninth-tier sprite's tree show that it has quite a bit of power it never called down upon us..."

Leon grimly nodded. He agreed with Cassandra's statement wholeheartedly.

"Leon," the Grand Druid said, drawing his attention back to her. "Is there anything left in that forest other than the sprites?"

"No," Leon immediately replied, recognizing the look on her face; she was done with the report and was far more interested in the results at this point.

"So, in other words," the Empress said, "you're the only one that gained anything from this whole endeavor? What was the point of allowing you access to the forest in the first place, then?"

"Now, now," the Grand Druid responded with an admonishing look, "let's not get too worked up over who's bringing what back. Here, have something sweet, keep yourself calm." The tenth-tier mage waved her hand and some kind of roll drenched in sparkling golden sauce appeared in front of the Empress, who looked about as willing to eat it as she might a live snake.

"Leon," Cassandra said as the Empress turned to glare at her mother, who grinned back rather provocatively. Leon looked to the Princess, who continued, "Come with me, I'd like to have a few words. Ladies Elise, Valeria, and Naiad should come, too."

"We're not done," the Empress insisted.

"No, let them go," the Grand Druid said. "We have a few things to go over, ourselves, before we're ready to hear the results of this expedition."

Leon could see the rising tension growing between the two, and he and his lovers followed Cassandra out the door about as quickly as they could.

Once they'd left the meeting room, everyone breathed a deep sigh of relief, and Cassandra led them further down the path toward a small square surrounded by trees not far away. It was similar to the meeting room, though instead of a stone table surrounded by thick enchanted hedges, the place was mostly open, with only a few stone benches around the perimeter. Along the way, Leon noted that they were followed by one of the Empress' ninth-tier guards, though he couldn't say it was unwarranted with them heading off alone with the Princess.

Cassandra immediately sat down on one of the benches and sighed with obvious fatigue.

"Are you doing all right, Your Highness?" Elise asked.

"She's fine," Valeria replied in Cassandra's stead. The Princess glared at her, but Valeria smiled challengingly back. "We've sparred enough that I can see the difference between pain and exhaustion. You're just tired, you're not in much pain."

"I'd punch you if you weren't right," Cassandra grunted. To Elise, she replied, "I'm doing fine. Our healers here are *very* good at their jobs and made sure that I was well taken care of. If the arm wasn't *gone* I'd almost swear that nothing was wrong."

"Then, you're tired because...?" Elise whispered, nodding back toward the meeting room.

"My mother and grandmother have rarely seen eye-to-eye," Cassandra explained without too much obvious concern. "I've grown used to it, but they usually get on the same page *before* they meet with someone together. Honestly, I'm surprised you had to see them disagree like that."

"It was hardly much of a disagreement," Leon said. He shrugged and added, "Not like I'm going to judge them; I don't much care what page they're on so long as they're not trying to worm their way into my business."

"That's exactly what they're trying to do," Cassandra responded.

"Yeah, yeah, I thought so," Leon groaned. "It sounded like your mother expected something of value to be both found, and then turned over to her from all of this. Care to explain?"

"You never would've gotten far in this Empire without our consent," Cassandra elucidated. "Given your lineage, I can't imagine at all that you expected we'd just let you walk around without our eyes always on you."

"I didn't," Leon admitted. "That was part of the reason why I accepted you acting as escort."

"Mm. Thanks for that." Cassandra averted her eyes for a moment and appeared to unconsciously rub her armless shoulder again. "It was good to get out of civilization for a while, even with how things ended. But anyway, my mother was under the impression that I was going to take at least a part of whatever you found for the Empire. Since you basically only brought back a tree sprite, it's not like I can do that, can I?"

Leon smiled and nodded, grateful that he hadn't brought up the lightning-infused wood or the research facility's power crystal.

"So," Cassandra continued, "it should go without too much explanation that my mother is rather unsatisfied with how this went. I'd like to think much of that was because of my injury, but in truth, I'm not so sure..."

Leon shared an awkward look with Elise, and both silently agreed not to dig too deeply into that admission.

"My grandmother is less concerned," Cassandra said.

"Why's that?" Elise asked.

Valeria answered with something approximating an amused grin. "She wants Leon to join this Empire. And preferably marry the Princess at the same time."

"Right," Elise responded. "Then, whatever Leon found would also de facto belong to the Sacred Golden Empire..."

Cassandra shrugged as Elise turned in her direction. "I won't lie and say that I'm not a little irked you don't want to marry me," she said to Leon. "It's nice to feel desired, you know?"

Leon smiled and mirrored her shrug.

"But," the Princess said, "I suppose being your friend is good enough. I want to thank you, Leon Raime. And all the rest of you."

"What for?" Leon asked.

"For helping me to get my priorities straight," Cassandra explained. "Despite how I've ended up, after doing some reflecting, I realized that I don't much regret my own participation in this expedition. My feelings about losing so many of my people are... *different*, to say the least, but that's something I have to deal with on my own. But going out on an adventure... well that was something I've been craving for a long time! And thanks to all of you, I was able to finally dip my toes into the adventuring lake. And I want more."

"More?" Elise asked as a self-deprecating smile spread across her face. "I have to admit that I'm quite done with adventuring for a while. This kind of excitement doesn't quite agree with me..."

"It's not for everyone," Leon said comfortingly.

"But it is for me," Cassandra responded. "I've decided to do some digging and look into the civilizations that were here before your Clan arrived, Leon. Maybe I can find something no one else has before, just like you found in the Serpentine Isles."

Leon grimaced. "Be careful about stuff that old... There're a lot of dark things hidden on this plane."

"I'll be as ready as I can be," Cassandra said. "For now, I think it's best if I follow my mother's instructions and concentrate on my healing, but after that, I'll be heading back out. I'm not just going to sit around the palace mindlessly training anymore!"

Leon smiled in appreciation of her new attitude, but it was Valeria who responded first. "Just make sure you're more careful about the lives of those follow you."

Cassandra's demeanor darkened. "I'm not going to make those mistakes again," she declared. "I can't... I *won't* lead my own people to their deaths like that again. I was... I was wrong to do that in the first place. It was exhilarating, but it wasn't a game, and nine women who followed me into that forest had to be carried out, their spirits gone to the Ashen Fields. No more of my people will follow them because of me."

A brief silence settled over everyone as Cassandra's words echoed in their ears, punctuated only when Valeria said, "Good. They're putting their lives in your hands. Now you know how delicate they can be, and how much trust they're putting in you. Don't let them down again."

Cassandra nodded.

No one spoke for several more seconds, until the ninth-tier guard keeping an eye on them poked her head into the courtyard.

"Her Majesty has gone back to the throne room, Your Highness, and requests your presence."

"Why?" Cassandra barked, clearly annoyed at the interruption.

"It seems that Lord Protector Anastasios has arrived," the guard replied.

Cassandra nodded, then said to Leon, "Then I guess I'll be seeing you around, Leon Raime. Will you be staying in the city for a while?"

Leon opened his mouth to answer, but the guard quickly cut in, "The Lord Protector has requested Leon Raime join you, as well."

Leon froze a moment. It seemed he was going to get that meeting with Anastasios today, but the Sacred Golden Empress, and probably the Grand Druid would be there, too.

Chapter 762: Wolves Fighting Over a Bone

When Leon walked back into the throne room with Cassandra, Valeria, Elise, and Maia, they found that Anastasios was already there, a handful of powerful guards in Ilian colors standing not too far away. He was busy enthusiastically greeting the Empress and the Grand Druid, both of whom had beaten Leon's group there.

However, as soon as they walked in, Anastasios turned toward them and exclaimed, "Leon! What a coincidence that you're here, too!"

Leon smiled awkwardly, but before he could respond, the Grand Druid chided, "Don't act like you learned he was here when you arrived, Anastasios!"

The Lord Protector glanced at his Evergolden counterpart, a smile playing at the corners of his lips. He didn't respond, though.

"Lord Protector Anastasios," Leon said as he walked over. "A surprise to see you here. But a welcome one, I think."

"You 'think'? Shouldn't you be a little more concrete?" the Lord Protector asked teasingly.

"Why should he be?" the Grand Druid interjected again. "Surely he sees you as a threat, and I wouldn't blame him at all."

"Oh, not at all! Why Leon Raime and I are quite friendly with each other, aren't we?"

Anastasios locked Leon in his pink, nebulous gaze, and his aura settled around Leon like a blanket. It wasn't as heavy as it was the last time they'd met, but Leon could still feel it pressing down on him.

However, instead of bowing to this pressure, Leon simply replied, "I have no idea why you're here, Lord Protector. And I wouldn't want to interrupt; your conversation with the Grand Druid and Her Majesty looked quite engaging."

"I was just thanking them for their hospitality and patience," Anastasios replied. "Say, why don't we catch up a bit? Let's head out, if you're free for a little while, and we can talk somewhere more private."

"Hold on," the Grand Druid indignantly responded, "you're trying to pull this boy right out from under me!"

"He doesn't look like he's under you," Anastasios countered. "In fact, he's standing right over there, clearly not *under* you. Unless you were hoping to take him as a concubine, in which case I consider it my

duty as a fellow man to rescue my endangered brother from your greedy clutches!” As he spoke, Anastasios moved to Leon’s side and laid a hand on his shoulder.

At the same time, the Grand Druid made her way to Leon’s other side and took his arm. “I have no idea why Leon would ever want to go with you; what do you have that could ever offer him? A rich life? He already has that. Leon, why don’t you stay here and get to know my granddaughter better?”

“Nonsense,” Anastasios said, cutting Leon off right as he was about to reply to them both. “Leon, have I told you that I have cousins and other female relatives of mine that have been asking about you? I know it can be a little awkward, but I think it’s still something we ought to discuss—”

“Enough!” Leon shouted, cutting the Lord Protector off and drawing quite a bit of attention from all the guards in the room. He quickly shook off both the Lord Protector and the Grand Druid and took a few steps away to get a bit of distance from them both. Then, he forced on a smile and said to the Empress, “Thank you for your invitation today. But I still have a bit of work that I must see to, so I’m going to take my leave.”

The Empress stiffly smiled and nodded, though with the Grand Druid staring at her, she didn’t audibly respond.

“If you’re leaving, why don’t you stop by my place—” Anastasios began, but Leon cut him off again.

“I’d rather not wait around,” Leon said. “I have no doubt that whatever business brought you here is important and will take some time to work out. As I just said: I have some work to see to, and I can’t possibly take up any of your *important* time. So, I must decline your invitation. But please do call upon me at the Heaven’s Eye enclave, I’d be more than willing to break a few words with you there.”

With that, Leon turned to his ladies, and together, the four of them made for the exit, leaving Anastasios and the Grand Druid glaring at each other, the Empress looking utterly mortified, and the Princess just looking confused.

Leon didn’t stick around and hurried them all out of the palace-tree and back to the guest house as quickly as dignity would allow. And then, he started to prepare for Anastasios’ inevitable visit.

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“That was dirty,” the Grand Druid growled as she sat down in the nearest armchair.

“It was necessary,” Anastasios replied as he sat down next to her.

They were meeting now in a small private chamber set aside for the Grand Druid’s personal use instead of the meeting room that Leon had been twice now taken to. They were alone together, with not even their guards present. What they had to discuss wasn’t for any ears but their own.

“You still blatantly tried to steal him away from me!” the Grand Druid indignantly cried, though her indignation didn’t quite reach her scarlet eyes, which still stared at the Lord Protector with a great deal of affection.

“I can’t just let Leon Raime fall into your clutches so easily, can I?” Anastasios inquired. “I have to admit though, that it took me by complete surprise that you arranged to meet with him so quickly. In my experience, Leon Raime turns down anyone who tries to recruit him like that. So I have to assume that

he's turned *you* down, too... which would also mean that I can still grab him. It's not snatching when he's not yet yours."

"No, you won't," the Grand Druid smugly replied. "I have something far more valuable than anything you could possibly give him: a beautiful granddaughter. The Thunderbird's blood will belong to my line, not to your people over in Ilion."

"They didn't seem all that affectionate today," Anastasios countered as he reached over and laid his hand atop the Grand Druid's and entwined his fingers with hers. "Besides, your granddaughter seemed to be down an arm. Are you so sure that she's as great of a catch as you profess?"

"She's *my* granddaughter," the Grand Druid retorted as she held the Lord Protector's hand tightly. "She's as great as they come. I've already made my offer to him, and while dear Cassandra wasn't that thrilled about it at the time, she's since come around. If I were to order it, she'd take Leon Raime as a husband."

"But he refused, didn't he?"

"He refused before he left on his ill-fated expedition. He has yet to refuse me a second time. And *no one* refuses me a second time."

"I seem to recall refusing you several times..." Anastasios gave the Grand Druid a cheeky smile, and she squeezed his hand hard enough to cause just a little bit of pain.

"Regardless, I suppose it doesn't matter, does it? Which of us gets him. So long as that cretin down south doesn't. I shudder to think of what might happen if that boy were to fall into the possession of the Sunlit Emperor..."

"Nothing good," Anastasios concurred. "It might even be preferable if he were to be given to the Sky Devils, though that would hardly be ideal. Better to keep him here, where we can benefit."

"Would it be 'we'? Or are you just angling for yourself and your Empire?"

"It would be 'we'. *If* we work together, of course. But if I manage to recruit him by myself..."

"You won't." The Grand Druid squeezed his hand again. "If we enter into a partnership on this, then we have to be of one mind. That boy's blood can do a lot of good in our hands. We can't let him slip out of our grasp!"

"That might be difficult," Anastasios replied. "As I heard it, the Director of Heaven's Eye has been busy alienating Leon—quite foolishly, I think. And he's been getting himself mixed up in some of the darker powers of our universe. If we are to recruit Leon Raime, then now is the time, but this is also a critical juncture. We can't let him be killed by vampires, or by the Director, or be snagged by the others. This requires a delicate touch."

"Is my touch not delicate?" the Grand Druid asked as she stroked Anastasios' palm for a moment.

"It's plenty soft," Anastasios smilingly replied, "but it's not quite what Leon needs, I think. He needs someone who can treat him like a partner, not a vassal or a seed dispenser."

"That rules you out, then," the Grand Druid sniped.

“We’ll see,” the Lord Protector replied. “I still have my offer to make, after all.”

—

“What did you three make of all that?” Leon asked as he and his family collapsed in the guesthouse’s dining room.

Elise was the first to answer. “The Empress and the Grand Druid aren’t in agreement about us, so we shouldn’t press our luck by staying long in the Sacred Golden Empire. Cassandra seems a little older and wiser now than she did a month ago. And the Grand Druid and Lord Protector both *really* want you to join them, for reasons that we can only guess at.”

“The reasons are clear enough, though,” Valeria responded. “The both have things—‘legacies’ others have called them—that would respond to Leon’s blood, so they want Leon’s blood to activate these legacies. They’re trying to lure him in like a fish with whatever bright, shiny lures they can get their hands on.”

[Do you intend to join either of them?] Maia asked Leon.

“Not as yet,” Leon replied. “While it wasn’t the main purpose in coming here, I suppose I have seen enough of the Empress and Grand Druid to know that I don’t feel particularly strongly about siding with them, though I suppose they are still a valid option in case the Director drops the ball. I still don’t feel all that welcomed, though. The Empress, at least, clearly assumes that everything I find within her Empire is hers to take, while the Grand Druid has been eyeing me up like a prized bull she wants to sacrifice to her granddaughter.

“The Lord Protector meanwhile... well, I suppose we’ll just have to wait and see what he has to say for himself, but at the very least, the last time we spoke didn’t leave me with a glowing impression of him.”

As if on cue, a knock came from the door, and a moment later, Talal poked his head into the room. He looked a little nervous, but still professionally stated, “Lord Protector Anastasios has arrived, Leon. He says he wants to talk in private.”

—

Leon stared at the Lord Protector sitting opposite from him, his golden eyes unwavering.

Anastasios stared right back, his nebulous eyes narrowed slightly by the confident smile he wore.

The two sat in the dining room alone, the guesthouse’s enchantments ensuring that whatever they spoke about, they’d not be overheard.

“You know,” Leon said after several excruciatingly long seconds of silence following them taking their seats, “when I said you could call on me anytime, I kind of assumed you’d do so in the next couple of days, not immediately after leaving the Evergolden Imperial Palace.”

“I was eager to enjoy your hospitality, see how it compares to mine,” Anastasios cheekily replied. “I have to say, it’s not quite as warm as I envisioned.”

“You thought I’d welcome you in?” Leon asked, his tone incredulous.

“Why not? Am I not a man worthy of welcome?”

“Most men who threaten me aren’t,” Leon replied. “You’re no exception.”

“What threats? I’ve levied no threats...”

“Let’s not play these games, they’re beneath us.”

Anastasios smiled at Leon, but didn’t respond, to Leon’s immense chagrin.

With a sigh, Leon asked, “So, what brings you here? An eagerness to taste my hospitality can’t have been the only reason.”

“Admittedly, it wasn’t. What I want is far more important. Far more consequential. Leon, I understand that you’ve been having some problems with the Director of Heaven’s Eye.”

Leon’s heart skipped a beat, but not out of surprise. The Grand Druid had already let loose that she knew of his current circumstances back in Occulara, and she was much farther away than Anastasios was. Since Occulara was within the Ilian Empire, he guessed that Anastasios had likely heard of his current disagreement with the Director even before the Grand Druid.

Anastasios continued, “Vampires are rotten creatures, not worthy of having in a civilized society, don’t you think?” Leon offered nothing more than an impatient smile as a response. Anastasios didn’t seem fazed at all, though. “Well, I believe that they’re unworthy of having in a civilized society. Leon, I want you to join my Empire. We can protect you from your enemies, even if that includes other Empires...”

“Nothing comes without cost,” Leon replied noncommittally.

“Indeed, nothing does,” the Lord Protector agreed. “If you don’t want to play games, that’s fine with me. There’s no one here for us to perform for, so why don’t I just get down to business? You’re of the Thunderbird Clan, the ancient enemies of this plane from eighty-thousand years ago.”

Leon smiled again, remaining silent.

“For those less educated, that might make you an enemy,” Anastasios stated. “For someone like me, that makes you a powerful potential ally. The simple fact of the matter is that the Thunderbird Clan hasn’t been a threat to our plane in an incredibly long time—so long, in fact, that I’d hardly consider them an enemy anymore, so long as they don’t show themselves to be one.

“Rather, what I’m more interested in are the things they left behind. Eighty-thousand years ago, they invaded our plane with magical technology so far beyond what we even have today that it boggles the mind. I want my Empire to have access to that technology. We have many samples that we’ve inherited from our forebears and have achieved great results in studying them. However, with your assistance, I think even greater strides can be made. And with great progress come great rewards—not just security guarantees, but power, wealth, support, whatever you might need, we can provide.”

“What kind of support?” Leon asked, his tone kept carefully neutral. If this was to be a negotiation, then he didn’t want to give anything away.

“The kind that is commensurate with what we might receive from you,” the Lord Protector replied.

"I'm an enchanter; I prefer to work with harder numbers than that. Let's get specific: what assistance do you need from me, and what would you give me for that assistance? If the terms are good enough, then I might give you some aid even if the Director and I reconcile..."

"So you and the Director *are* having something of a spat?"

Leon gave the Lord Protector an exasperated look. "You already knew, don't start playing coy. It's going to take more than that to throw me off right now."

Leon was in no mood for these political games. With the strength of both black fire and silver-blue lightning within him, at his fingertips, his tolerance for manipulation like this was at an all-time low.

Anastasios simply shrugged.

Restating his question, Leon said, "Let's get specific, then. What do you have that you need help with?"

"Leon, I'm not going to spill my Empire's national secrets so easily..."

"That's a shame," Leon sarcastically replied. "I was under the impression that you were actually asking for my help. Let's say that I agreed to your proposal and signed on with your Empire. What powers over me would you suddenly have access to if I decided to spill your secrets that you don't possess already? If you were to tell me your deepest, darkest secrets right now, and I were to betray your trust and start talking to other Empires or whoever-the-hells, then you could kill me or imprison me or confiscate my property or who knows what else, and I'm not yet a part of your Empire. So why are you playing so damned hard to get?"

"Because I want your agreement not to say anything," Anastasios replied. "I want you to swear on your Mana Glyph."

Leon shook his head. "That's a heavy thing to ask. How am I to know if what you offer is worth such risk? You're not even wetting my tongue, here..."

Oaths made on Mana Glyphs were incredibly rare—if such an oath was broken, then a Mana Glyph could be shattered, severely destabilizing a mage's soul realm, usually to the point of preventing them from making any more progress at the very least. Since the connection between the body and the soul realm was anchored in the heart and the Mana Glyph, the consequences could even be *much* worse. Naturally, not all oaths are easily kept, and some could even be worded so as to be impossible to keep. As a result, oaths made on Mana Glyphs were rarely, if ever, sworn by anyone with even half a brain.

"Make this an attractive offer and I'll actually give it its due consideration," Leon said.

Anastasios stared at Leon for a long time, then retrieved from his soul realm two items. The first was a furled scroll, sealed with some kind of enchanted wax, some specific variation on the ancient rune for 'lock' pressed into the wax. The second was a severed hand, not at all touched by decay and pale from lack of blood, but still carrying with it just a hint of demonic power, enough for Leon to identify it as the hand of a vampire.

With a wave of his hand, Anastasios unsealed the scroll, revealing it to be the design for something that Leon couldn't immediately identify, but had Nestor cry with some measure of enthusiasm, [That's an ark engine! Looks incomplete, and what's there is rather primitive, but it's still unmistakable!]

"This is interesting," Leon said as he tapped the corner of the blueprints for an ark engine with his finger, "but why don't you explain the hand a little bit more?"

"It's something I had taken from a vampire we drove out of its hole just a few weeks ago," Anastasios replied. "Our internal security forces are *very* good at their jobs; vampires rarely find purchase within my Empire..."

"They found enough purchase to infiltrate Occulara," Leon pointed out.

Anastasios grimaced, but added, "What you found was but a small operation compared to what has been discovered and dealt with in the last year alone. Vampires, being monsters of human origin, are an ever-present threat, and we've grown skilled in finding and dealing with them. Far more skilled than Heaven's Eye, judging by what happened just a few days ago..."

Leon's eyes narrowed as Anastasios deliberately trailed off, clearly trying to draw him in a little more.

With limited patience, Leon asked, "What happened?"

"Oh, nothing much. Are you familiar with Narses, Chief of Security for Heaven's Eye?"

Leon nodded, remembering the giant blond man he'd specifically thrown party to get close to just before leaving for the Sacred Golden Empire.

"He was attacked in his home a few days ago," Anastasios explained. "I don't have too many details, but it's clear that vampires were involved."

Leon's countenance darkened. Narses was a man he was hoping to draw into his corner, to support him against the Director. But it seemed in his absence, Narses was attacked by vampires—assuming Anastasios could be taken at his word, and Leon didn't see any reason not to.

'Did the Director have the man attacked by his vampiric allies?' Leon wondered. 'Or is this just a coincidence? Is it something the vampires did of their own accord?'

Aloud, he asked, "Are you giving these to me, or are you just showing them off?" Accompanying his question was a vague gesture at the hand and the ark engine schematic.

"You may have them," Anastasios replied. "Not like they'll do much good outside of our support, anyway. For now, I'll leave you with my offer. Security, wealth, and privilege await you in my Empire, Leon. All for an oath of limited alliance." He punctuated his statement by retrieving another scroll from his soul realm, this one unsealed. "When you make your decision, whatever it may be, do be sure to let me know. I'm unaccustomed to waiting for a response

Chapter 763: Stormwood

"... and he just straight-up asked you to join the Ilian Empire?" Elise asked incredulously.

"He did," Leon confirmed.

He was with his family in his, Elise, and Maia's bedroom in the guesthouse, going over the meeting he'd just had with Anastasios, and finishing up their conversation in the aftermath of the brief meeting in the Evergolden palace.

"I'm surprised he was so up-front about it, given his veiled threats the last time we saw him," Elise murmured. "More concerning is what's happened in Occulara since we left..."

"Yeah," Leon said. "It's hard not to think that this is some kind of response to our moves against the Director. We meet with Narses just before leaving, and the next we hear of the man, he's apparently been attacked by vampires."

"Did the Lord Protector say what specifically happened to him?" Valeria asked.

"He was rather light on details," Leon admitted. "I'm not even that sure if Narses is still alive, though I find it hard to imagine he isn't. Still, I think we should hurry back as soon as we can. If Narses can be attacked, then anyone can be..."

Leon gave Elise a meaningful look, and the worry that flashed across her face showed him that she understood what he was trying to communicate. Narses was the Chief of Security for Heaven's Eye, and likely had the most heavily guarded individual in the entire guild—or so Leon thought, anyway—aside from the Director himself. If Narses could be attacked, then not even Emilie was safe.

"I'm going to head into the main offices here tomorrow morning and see if any news has reached them," Leon said. "In the meantime, I want all of us ready to leave. We're heading out before sunset tomorrow."

"That might seem a little rude to the Evergolden court..." Elise replied, though from her tone, Leon could tell it was a token gesture more than anything. She wanted to leave, too, but her propriety demanded at least this much resistance.

"I think they'll survive a little rudeness," Leon replied. "Besides, if they haven't told us what happened in Occulara, I think it's safe to assume that they don't know. So once they find out, I think they'll understand."

"Even Cassandra?" Valeria asked.

"She has her arm to worry about, not us," Leon replied. "I know from experience that being down an arm is deeply unsettling and uncomfortable. She'll want to get that fixed as soon as possible."

A brief quiet settled over them as they all processed what they needed to do the next day. Elise was the one to break the silence first.

"What do you think of her, so far?" When Leon gave her a questioning look, Elise clarified, "Cassandra, I mean."

Leon frowned in thought for a moment. "She's beautiful, powerful, and driven, but self-centered and arrogant."

"With an emphasis on 'arrogant'," Valeria added, a hint of venom in her voice.

"She says that she wants to change, but I suppose we'll see," Leon continued. "Why do you ask?"

Elise gave him a serious look. "The Grand Druid offered her hand in marriage to you. That's not something easily turned away."

"I don't want to marry her," Leon said with exasperation. "I'm really *not* looking to build a massive harem here, love."

"And I'm not trying to pressure you into doing so."

"Good," Valeria interjected. "I might have something to say if you were trying to cut down on Leon's already highly-taxed time. I wouldn't want to give him up to a spoiled Princess who got a huge chunk of her people killed."

Elise smiled at Valeria. "Even so, you have to see the value in having her associated with us, right? Especially if the Lord Protector of the Ilian Empire is making overt moves in our direction..."

"That would only drive us into Evergold's camp," Leon said. "I wouldn't want to deny the Lord Protector's patronage because I want autonomy, only to turn around and start getting closer to the Grand Druid. Besides, while my opinion of the Lord Protector isn't great, my opinion of the Grand Druid is even lower. At least the Lord Protector isn't dangling one of his relatives on a hook trying to lure me in." Leon paused a moment. "Wait a minute, he actually *did* do that, didn't he?"

[Both are terrible,] Maia muttered. [If it were an option, I'd say kill them both. They can't see beyond their own lands.]

"That's a little... extreme," Leon replied as he glanced at his river nymph lover. "They're only looking out for their people. That they're trying to manipulate me into joining them draws my ire, but I can't really bring myself to hate them for what they're doing. And they—hang on, why am I defending them? Fuck them both!" Leon went quiet, crossed his arms, and frowned.

Elise sighed and responded, "If you don't want to have Cassandra as a wife, then I suppose that's fine. I just wanted to bring it up with all of us. As I said, what she could bring to our house isn't something that should be turned away so flippantly..."

"I'd rather you didn't expand your roster of wives," Valeria said, looking at Leon. "Elise and Maia, I can live with. There aren't many others that I can say the same about..."

"But there *are* others?" Elise asked, suddenly sounding both intrigued and teasing.

Valeria gave her nothing more than an innocent smile.

"Filing *that* information away for later..." Elise said with a smile.

"Getting back to Cassandra," Leon said, "as I told her, I'm more interested in being her friend right now than her lover, let alone anything more than that. Do you object to that?"

Elise frowned. "No, but I really hate the idea of leaving something so beneficial on the table like this..."

With a sigh, Leon replied, "Let's not boil this down to just what benefits can be had. Taking a wife is more than just getting access to her family's connections and power. We'd have to live with this person for, potentially, the rest of our lives—which might be immeasurably long. They'd be sharing my bed at the very least, and possibly have some of my kids. They'd be living with us, sharing in our power and resources. All of this isn't necessarily a bad thing, but it's a huge commitment that we have to take seriously. And any incompatibilities have to be taken seriously, as well."

“As I’ve said, there’s some attraction there between me and Cassandra, I think. But not enough for me to ignore the friction that she’s already shown amongst us. Unless something changes, I don’t see her joining our family.”

“Fair enough,” Elise said, though her disappointment was palpable.

Leon walked over and took her into his arms. “Less time with Cassandra is more time with you,” he whispered.

That brought out her radiant smile, and she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him in closer. “There’s a silver lining I can deal with...” Without another word, she pressed her lips against his, and then began doing her best to remove her clothes without disentangling herself from Leon.

Valeria just smiled, pulled a promise out of Leon to visit her when he was done with Elise, and then took her leave. Maia, however, stayed seated, watching quite intensely as Leon and Elise divested themselves of their clothing and made their way to their bed.

—

Leon sighed in fatigue as he opened his eyes in his soul realm. Several hours spent satisfying his ladies had left him fairly tired, but he couldn’t take much time to rest. With vampires making their moves while he was gone, he needed all the advantages he could get. When he returned to Occulara, he needed to deal with the Director first, but the vampires would come right after.

To that end, he made his way over to Nestor’s table where the dead man was pouring over the schematics for the ark engine that Anastasios had given Leon, while the Librarian and two other caretaker golems were busy running what few tests they could with Leon’s supplies on the piece of petrified wood that the ninth-tier tree sprite had given him.

“How’re things going over here, dead man?” Leon asked.

“Well enough, I suppose,” Nestor said with a hint of bitterness in his voice.

“Cool it there, Nestor, you’re overwhelming me with your enthusiasm,” Leon sarcastically replied.

“What enthusiasm? There’s little to be had here.”

“So things are going that well, huh?”

Nestor quietly grumbled for a few seconds just loudly enough for Leon to pick up on a few derisive curses thrown the Ilian Empire’s way.

“This engine is almost painfully primitive,” Nestor finally explained. “It will do you no good. Even if you had the materials to build it, with me here, you’d be able to build something much better. Well, you would be able to do so eventually, after several centuries of thorough education...”

“So that thing’s useless?” Leon asked, looking pointedly at the engine design.

“Not entirely,” Nestor objected. “It provides a window into what the savages here can build. Or at least, what the savages feel comfortable giving to you—I’m sure what they actually build is more advanced.”

“That would make some sense,” Leon agreed. “No reason to give out the good stuff to someone like me. This was only meant to be a taste, a hint of what I could gain from joining Anastasios’ Empire. Still, I would’ve figured he’d give something tasty, at least. How unappetizing is this taste?”

“About as much as a carcass that’s been rotting on the side of the road for several weeks. As I said, it’s hopelessly primitive. Ark engines are primarily tools that ensure magic power gets to where it needs to go. There are a few—there *were* a few arks in our fleet advanced enough to generate their own power rather than having to rely on charged gems and crystals or their post-Apotheosis operators, and those functions were mostly contained within arks, but for the most part, the vast majority of arks only use stored power, or power supplied by mages. Regardless of the power source, though, the engine is what directs that power to the proper enchantments.

“*This* engine is hopeless. Barely able to handle the kind of power that would be needed to push a small ark two thousand miles without needing to stop for maintenance.”

“That’s strange,” Leon said, remembering the ark ride he took to the Scorched Fields. “Given what I’ve seen so far, the arks of this plane are better than that.”

“Which just goes to prove the point that this isn’t even close to the best they have. This is like baby’s first designed engine. This is something I’d expect you to be able to design in a couple hundred years.”

“Your faith in me astounds, dead man.”

“My faith is earned, not given freely. As for this engine, about the only thing I can see it being used for is an example of what *not* to do. It’s a useful tool showing the myriad inefficiencies that often crop up when the incompetent design such intricate machines.”

“Is that all?” Leon asked, his disappointment growing rapidly.

Nestor paused a moment to think, then responded, “Not quite. It’s a fairly small piece of information, all things considered, but I can at least confirm that Titanstone is being used by these primitives. I doubt they are able to use it to its full potential, but its use is rather obvious in this design.”

“That’s the stuff that allows for a completely lossless transfer of magic power, right?”

“Yes,” Nestor confirmed. “I mentioned that we found Titanstone deposits when we conquered this plane. Well, to be honest, we found a *lot* of Titanstone here. The stuff is almost completely absent on most planes, being incredibly rare to find in nature. However, we found so much of it here that it was almost hard to believe. Enough that we would’ve directly administered this plane instead of giving it to a vassal if we’d had more time to consolidate our hold over it.”

“That’s interesting,” Leon replied. “But I’ve never seen *anything* resembling Titanstone coming through Heaven’s Eye. I think it’s safe to assume that Titanstone is a carefully controlled substance under the Imperial thumb. I suppose that makes Anastasios’ willingness to hand over this blueprint a little more understandable, then—even with it, it’s not like I can build an ark, can I?”

“No, you’d need far more specialized tools and a certain amount of experience in constructing such complex magical machines. For something like this, it would be even harder given the amount of poor design choices made to solve certain problems, but only exacerbate other problems. This thing is more patchwork fixes than proper magical engineering, to be honest...”

“Appropriate; that sounds exactly like what most engineering is.”

“Eh, I suppose you’re not wrong, but there’s a certain elegance to it when done by someone who knows what they’re doing. *This* is not elegant. If I taught you how to build arks, and you came back to me with *this* as your design, I’d just about die from embarrassment as your teacher.”

“Good thing you beat me there.”

“Ha. Ha. Funny boy makes funny joke.”

“Oh, thank you, I’m very proud of my prodigious wit.”

“Strange to take pride in something that’s mediocre at best.”

Leon shrugged, having not been serious at all for these last few exchanges. “So, if this engine design is unworthy of your consideration, then how’s the testing for this wood going?”

“This material completely overshadows this garbage engine,” Nestor gushed, his excitement palpable. “Such contained power I’ve never seen before. It’s practically indestructible, yet the lightning magic within it is channeled so efficiently as to only be exceeded by Titanstone. Leon, if this stormwood can be mass-produced, then it would be a construction material on par with Adamant and Lumenite.”

“That’s pretty incredible,” Leon replied. “Just one small thing I’d like to add: we’re *not* calling it ‘stormwood’.”

“It’s wood that contains the wrath of a storm; what’s wrong with it?”

“I don’t want to run ‘storm’ into the ground. Call it ‘thunder wood’ or ‘tempest wood’ or something. Anything else but ‘stormwood’. Ancestors, what an uncreative name.”

“Yours are hardly better, boy.”

“But they haven’t been used to death by the Clan, have they? How many things have been named ‘storm-X’ as opposed to ‘thunder-X’ or ‘tempest-X’? A little variety is nice sometimes, Nestor.”

“Fine, have it your way. This *thunder wood* is a miraculous material. We need as much of it we can get our hands on.”

“Do you have any conceivable method for creating more? To my understanding, this was created when a bolt of lightning struck a tree and got somehow ‘stuck’. I don’t quite know what that means, but if it’s true, then might it be possible to freeze a lightning bolt in a tree artificially? As it is, one small chunk of thunder wood isn’t going to do us any good at all, save for mocking us with its usefulness and unavailability...”

“That’s what’s giving me some trouble. I don’t know how the lightning got in there, or why it hasn’t left...”

“No theories or anything?”

“I’m an enchanter, and not one specializing in nature magic—this is really pushing the boundaries of my expertise.”

Leon nodded and thought about the issue. This piece of thunder wood couldn't have been produced by a mage, as far as he was concerned, but the fact that it existed at all meant it could be reproduced. But as Nestor just indicated, he wasn't all-knowing. Leon needed other specialists to take a look at what he had.

And he might just have those other specialists.

"What tests are you running right now?" Leon asked.

"Anything that comes to mind," Nestor replied.

"Halt them, for now," Leon ordered as he approached the table. The Librarian dutifully stepped aside, and before Nestor could respond, Leon took the thunder wood.

"What are you doing?" Nestor asked.

"Taking this to someone who might know more," Leon explained as he made his way back to his throne.

The brightest minds of his Clan at its peak were studying this thing and, as far he knew, didn't get too far. So, if he wanted to make any headway in analyzing it, then he needed the best he could find, and the best that he could trust. Right now, that meant only a few people...

—

"What even *is* this thing?" Helen asked in wonder as she stared at the piece of thunder wood.

"Lightning," Tikos answered, speaking through amber within its wrist. "Lightning struck an oak tree many thousands of years ago and was trapped."

"That long ago, and it's still stuck in there?" Helen said in wonder.

"Why do you think my Clan was studying it so intently?" Leon asked. "This thing has great potential, but what I need most right now is a method for potentially recreating it."

Elise then looked up, the final one of the three people that Leon had specifically sought out to look over the piece of thunder wood. Valeria, Maia, and Anna were also present, but they were mostly just watching from the side.

"Capturing lightning in a tree sounds more like your area of expertise, husband..."

"Yeah, but if even Nestor is stumped, then this might be a job that's beyond the scope of enchantment. Or at least, the kind of enchantments that I've been studying lately. I'm good at lightning and fire, but when it comes to something like nature magic, I'm a rank novice. And that's why I'd need a *lot* more help."

"How much did your people study this, Tikos?" Elise asked.

"If it was studied at all, then I was not informed," Tikos replied, its leaf-hair flattening slightly as the smell of mild embarrassment filled the room. Leon then learned that, apparently, embarrassment smelled rather like bananas.

"Then we're working from scratch?" Helen muttered as he prodded the thunder wood with a spoon. The thunder wood vibrated and nearly shook the table it sat upon to pieces, while a bolt of lightning arced out and burned the spoon, causing Helen to drop it with a cry of pain.

"Careful!" Anna shouted as she rushed forward.

"No, it's fine," Helen insisted, waving her sister off, a wide grin on her face. "This is looking like it's going to be quite a bit of *fun*..."

Leon smiled nervously at the manic look in Helen's eye, but between her, Elise, and Tikos, he felt like the thunder wood would be in good hands. He just had to make sure they understood the necessity for secrecy, and he'd have to give Helen's workshop back in Occulara another few passes to ensure her security was up to the necessary standard, but he felt confident that results would come soon.

Chapter 764: The Director's Choice

Leon and his people departed from Evergold quickly. Leon had gone to the headquarters of Evergold's Heaven's Eye enclave, but word of Narses being attacked hadn't been shared with them. Despite this, he was still deeply concerned about the political situation back in the city, and whether or not the Chief of Security had actually been attacked by vampires as Anastasios claimed, Leon still wanted to settle matters back there as soon as possible.

To that end, with barely even a goodbye to anyone in the city, he and his family and retinue boarded their ship and set sail down the Neilos, the only regret he left behind that of a proper send-off with Cassandra. He felt like they'd see each other again, though, so he could only hope she wouldn't be so offended that he couldn't explain when that next meeting inevitably came.

And so, he turned away from Evergold, content at least that they were willing to harbor him and his family if worse came to worst, and focused instead on the problem of Heaven's Eye...

—

Occulara was much the same as when Leon left a few months ago. The city itself was old, so he wasn't exactly expecting it to radically change as soon as he left, but it still felt rather strange. It wasn't quite like a homecoming, emphasized by the party of Heaven's Eye officials waiting for him as his yacht pulled into the docks. They were looking quite serious, though he was at least encouraged to see that none of them were stronger than the seventh-tier.

So, feeling like he had some time, he took a few minutes to get his last few affairs in order.

He met first with Anshu. The Indradian's role within his retinue was to change, and as soon as they left his yacht, he was going to assume a far more autonomous role. He'd be able to take care of some of his own personal business in that role, but only if he acted as a go-between for Leon and the Saltwater Road smuggling rings. Leon, now more than ever, needed actionable intelligence on vampire whereabouts, and smugglers were more likely than just about anyone else to have that intelligence.

After confirming with Anshu one last time as to what he was to do, Leon went to Elise, Helen, and Tikos. Those three were in charge of the Hesperidic Apples and the thunder wood. Elise had had some of their household continue to look for land for the apples, while the thunder wood was going to be taken directly to Helen's workshop, where she and Tikos would begin their experiments with it immediately.

Leon simply had to remind them that until he and the Director got onto the same page, they had to be ready to leave at a moment's notice.

To add to their security, Leon had the rest of his retinue ready themselves to return to his home. He would meet with the delegation waiting at the dock, and then make his way to the Hexagon accompanied only by Anzu.

With all that taken care of, Leon walked out onto the deck of his yacht, made something of a show of looking directly at the delegation, acknowledging without a shadow of a doubt that he knew they were there. He took a quick measure of their response—rather tepid, in his opinion, though tinged with some impatience—and leisurely walked over, only speeding up a bit when crossing the gangplank.

“Leon Raime!” the seventh-tier mage in charge called out in greeting.

Leon recognized the man, though only vaguely. He worked directly for the Director as an executive assistant as far he knew, so while he'd had some reason to speak with him before, they'd never interacted enough for the man to have made much of an impression.

“That's my name,” Leon flippantly acknowledged.

“The Director requests your immediate presence,” the assistant declared. “We're to escort you there without delay.”

“Do I look in need of an escort?” Leon asked challengingly, taking their measure again.

Impatience flashed through the assistant and those behind him again, but with a few hints of fear and surprise in those who were weaker and less in control of their expressions. As far as Leon could tell, they weren't sent here to take him into custody, otherwise they would've better prepared for his resistance. In fact, aside from the assistant, they all seemed rather surprised by his attitude.

“If that is your preference,” the assistant said through clenched teeth. “We will not stand in your way. But please, we have much business to go over, and—”

“We can handle that later,” Leon said, annoyed as he was at the assistant's presence. He pushed his way through the delegation, with the group hurrying to get out of his and Anzu's way, and then hovered a few feet in the air. “I'll speak with the Director first, so don't worry about that. I'll move faster unencumbered, anyway.”

Without a backwards look, Leon turned and began flying in the Hexagon's direction, Anzu running along at his side.

After being so long in the Sacred Golden Empire's rural regions, he felt rather constrained at having to remain so close to the ground, but he enjoyed the flight anyway—at least, until he started getting into the congested traffic a few streets deeper in the city. Despite this, he still made good time, reaching the Hexagon about a quarter hour after leaving the docks.

He kept his magic senses trained on his people, their route, and his home almost the entire time, ensuring that if anything at all happened while he was gone, he'd know and could return at a moment's notice. Fortunately, it seemed that everything was fine.

The reason why everything was fine became at least somewhat apparent when Leon was brought by the floating lift up into the Hexagon. There wasn't another delegation waiting for him, but walking toward the lift was Narses the White himself, the Chief of Security and the man Anastasios claimed had been attacked by vampires. He was surrounded by a larger entourage than he'd brought to Leon's party, though he had no sign of any injury that Leon could see.

"Leon Raime!" Narses boomed as Leon and Anzu stepped out of the lift.

"Narses," Leon replied with similar, though more subdued enthusiasm. "It's good to see you, I'd heard you had some excitement while I was away..."

Narses' eyes widened for a moment, then with a pointed smile, he said, "Nothing could be further from the truth! Just the usual problems we've been dealing with, nothing at all that we couldn't handle. So don't worry, the Security branch isn't in need of the Director's intervention..."

As he spoke, his eyes told a completely different story. Narses stared hard at Leon, and with such intensity that Leon could only surmise that he was telling Leon to shut up or change the subject. Leon complied and chatted with Narses for another couple of minutes before the Chief of Security begged his leave, promising to invite Leon to a party of his own in the near future. Leon took that 'near' to mean 'within the next couple of days', and 'party' to be 'meeting to discuss what happened', so he readily accepted the invitation before Narses and his entourage exited the Hexagon, though not before he and Narses shared one last deadly serious look filled with deadly meaning.

Somewhat relaxed now that he'd seen Narses alive, if acting a little secretive, Leon hurried on to the Director's office.

He was waved in as soon as he showed himself, and it was only then that he had Anzu stay behind. He would meet with the Director alone.

Or so was his intention; when he walked in, he found that Penelope was there with her father, waiting for him.

"You took your time getting here," the Director growled, though from the way his shadowed face bent, Leon could tell he was smiling.

"I would've been here later if I allowed myself to be escorted by those you sent to the docks."

"You're still here later than I'd like," the Director replied.

"Leon," Penelope said in polite greeting, interrupting Leon before he could respond.

"Penelope," Leon replied with equal politeness. "I heard that Occulara's been an exciting place to be in the time I've been gone."

"Have you?" the Director asked. "Funny, I thought I was giving off a completely business-like aura here. No excitement for anyone to talk about. I assume Anastasios told you about Narses, then?"

Leon smirked and shrugged noncommittally.

"I'm sure it was the Lord Protector," the Director continued. "Always sticking his nose in where it doesn't belong and flapping his lips to those who don't care... Anyway, Leon, I've made my decision."

Leon blinked in surprise. "So quickly? I thought I was going to have pull some teeth when I got back here." That it was brought up so casually had him reeling slightly, but he decided to roll with it.

"No teeth need be pulled," the Director said.

"Not ours, at least," Penelope cut in. She stared at Leon with an expression of the utmost seriousness.

"Leon, those vampires my father was working with overstepped their bounds. They forced his hand."

"My hand was *not* forced," the Director insisted. "I simply made a decision."

"They *forced his hand*," Penelope repeated venomously. "I'm sure they knew of the ultimatum you gave to my father, and then they saw you with Narses... I don't think they thought they had much of a choice in the matter, and attacked Narses with the intent to kill. They wanted him out of your camp as quickly as possible. Or maybe they attacked him for some other reason, I can't really say. Obviously, they failed, and in failing, they've become a liability and have to be cut loose."

Leon smiled quite thinly and glared at the Director. "So what you're saying is that you didn't make a choice between me or them, they simply became too dangerous to remain attached to? That hardly gives me confidence in our future relationship—assuming I even want that relationship to continue."

"No," the Director replied. "I made my decision not long after you left. I think the reason why these vampires attacked my old friend was because they already knew what I was going to do. Leon, I'd rather have you with me than them. Makes my life much less dangerous, and it potentially secures my future more than they possibly can."

"You speak of me like I'm no more than a tool to be used."

"Everyone's a tool to be used by everyone else. If you think otherwise, I suggest you think a little harder on the nature of human relationships. They're all transactional. In your case, you benefit me more than the vampires."

"And if that should ever change? You seem quite willing to abandon them now, is that how I should expect to be treated in the future? You made a whole damned show out of not choosing me to begin with, and I can't help but find this entire thing unpleasant."

"Would you rather I choose the vampires?"

"I'd rather you explained to me what the vampires were providing you with in no uncertain terms, and what you expect to get out of me."

"Arks," Penelope interjected.

Leon cocked an eyebrow at her. "What?"

"We have several arks from your Clan. They're quite big and could be quite powerful, *if* we were able to activate them. The arks require a bearer of the Thunderbird's power to be properly powered up, but the vampires were able to use their mastery of blood magic to give us a degree of access to these arks even without Thunderbird blood."

“What did you provide them in return?” Leon slowly asked as he did his damndest to control his surprise and greed at hearing about surviving arks of his Clan. He could even feel Nestor suddenly paying *much* more attention to this conversation than he had just a moment ago.

“Security,” Penelope said. “A certain degree of freedom under the aegis of Heaven’s Eye. This whole thing with Narses was quite explicitly off-limits, though.”

Leon took a deep breath, then bitterly smiled again. “If you want to convince me that you’re *really* choosing me over them and not just being forced to by political circumstance, you’re doing a terrible job.”

“I’m trying to be honest,” Penelope replied. She glanced at the Director and added, “I want us *all* to be honest. There’s some bad blood here between us, and I want to mend that.”

“Show me the arks,” Leon demanded.

“What?” the Director growled.

“Show me the arks,” Leon repeated. “If you want my cooperation, you’d have to show them to me anyway, wouldn’t you? I want to see them. I want to assess for myself whether or not you’re lying to me again.”

Silence followed his demand, and after a few seconds to think, Leon calmed his racing heart down. He had to batter away his greed, anger, and pride, but he was able to regain some element of humility and respect.

“Look,” he said, “I agree that we have some bad blood. Enough that I’m not going to just walk back into my position as a Hand after all of this. If you want my help with these arks—and we’re going to have to have a *long* discussion about them later—then we’re in this as partners. Not as a master and subordinate. In either direction.”

The Director leaned forward, the shadows hiding his chiseled, yet aged face falling away. “I can work with that.”

“Then tell me what it is that you want,” Leon said. “The arks are just a means to an end, aren’t they? If all you wanted was arks, then you would’ve built them, wouldn’t you? But these are arks of my Clan, and they have to represent certain capability that you don’t have right now...”

The Director scowled, but after a chastising look from Penelope, he explained, “I resent this Empire. I resent this status quo. I resent this whole plane. I became the Director of Heaven’s Eye because there are no higher positions to attain on this plane without being born into the right family or throwing yourself to the zealots in the east. This is it. I reached the pinnacle of power on this plane and have languished here for centuries. I want *more*. Not power, but just more *life*. I want to see new things, have new experiences, reach new heights in the magical arts, and leave this plane behind. That’s why I’ve kept and maintained these arks as best as I could. And that’s what I want in the end: to leave this plane and continue my magical journey.”

“If that’s what you want, why don’t you try for Apotheosis?” Leon asked. “For a man in your position... well, I won’t say it would be *easy*, but relatively speaking, it would be easier for you than just about anyone else, wouldn’t it? Why not go for it?”

“There’s a whole tier of magic between me and Apotheosis,” the Director explained. “If I were to try, the Empires would take notice and likely make moves against me. The chances that they’d actually allow me—and, by extension, Heaven’s Eye—to surpass them in power, is next to none. They simply won’t *allow* me to ascend safely. If I were to try, I’d be inviting the destruction of all Heaven’s Eye. And I can’t do that.”

Leon’s eyes narrowed and his smile turned almost mocking. “Strange thing to hear, coming from a man who just professed such lofty goals.”

“I’m not a monster, Leon Raime. Or at least, I try not to be. My ambition might blind me on occasion, but I don’t want to leave a smoking crater behind me when I... *if* I ever achieve Apotheosis. This place is my home, and I love Heaven’s Eye. I won’t destroy either for the sake of my ambition.”

“Admirable, if true,” Leon said, emphasizing his distrust of the Director. “But I still want to see those arks.”

“They are my one piece of leverage,” the Director bluntly stated. “I’ll not reveal them so easily.”

Penelope quickly cut in as Leon scowled. “But there are still some things we can do, Leon, that I hope will bridge at least some of the gap between us...”

“Oh? Such as?”

“When the vampires attacked Narses, they came in fairly large numbers. Most of them were killed, and those that weren’t were either captured or driven off. As a result, we have quite a few corpses to identify and investigate, as well as several prisoners to question. Are you interested in seeing them for yourself? We managed to capture one who seems quite important... *eighth-tier* and all that...”

“You captured an eighth-tier vampire?” Leon asked incredulously. “In my experience, whenever a vampire loses a fight that catastrophically, the contracted demon kills the vampire. How did you manage this?”

“A great deal of luck and, I assume, an indifferent patron,” Penelope explained.

Leon wasn’t convinced, but after a few moments of thought, he gave Penelope an affirmative answer. At the very least, he might be able to suss out a few answers if he were to speak with the captured vampires, and with some input from Xaphan, he might even be able to figure out just *why* Amon—if Amon was even their patron—wouldn’t kill them as he had all the other vampires that Leon had killed.

He felt like there was something else going on here, but for now, it seemed that the Director wanted some measure of peace between them.

“I think we’ll need to have a more in-depth conversation about our relationship going forward,” Leon eventually stated, “but for now, I can accept this as the peace offering it’s supposed to be.”

“Good,” Penelope said. “Speak with Narses at your convenience. He’ll direct you to where the vampires are being held.”

Leon nodded, then turned to leave without another word. However, Penelope stopped him before he could walk out of the door.

“And Leon? Thank you for being at least a little understanding...”

Leon glanced back at her. “I don’t think I’m being all that understanding, really. But I’d rather us be friends than enemies.” His gaze drifted in the Director’s direction, who stared at him from behind his desk like a King watching a retainer leave his throne room. “So long as we all operate under that philosophy, I think we’ll accomplish great things together. But if that were to change...”

He let that statement hang in the air for a moment, then left the Director’s office without giving voice to the silent threat.

For now, at least, it seemed the Director was on his side. But this was hardly an alliance he could trust, and he knew that he still needed friends in Heaven’s Eye and elsewhere. On top of that, the whole ‘captured’ vampires thing fiercely stank to him. On the surface, it seemed like everything was fine, but as he walked away from the Hexagon with Anzu, he couldn’t help but feel like his position wasn’t that different compared to before his expedition to the research facility.

He needed more power, and he needed it as soon as possible.

Chapter 765: Narses’ Briefing

“So, how does it look?” Elise asked.

Leon frowned, knowing that the question was rhetorical. He knew next to nothing about this, and even if he tried to catch up on knowledge, Elise would always blow him out of the water with her expertise.

They were now standing at the edge of a fifty-acre field that had lain fallow for several decades. They’d had to travel about two hours outside even further south of Occulara to find so much unused land, but their assistants that had remained behind in the city while Leon had led his retinue northward hadn’t slacked in their duties.

“It’s fine, I guess,” Leon said with a shrug.

If he’d had his way, he wouldn’t have even come here. He trusted Elise entirely to find a suitable plot of land for the Hesperidic Apples, but they weren’t alone—Helen, Anna, Anzu, Gaius, Talal, and Exotikos had all accompanied them, the latter the reason why Leon had felt the need to come with.

While his ‘alliance’ with the Director was still unofficial, Leon was still technically one of the Director’s Hands, and that entitled him to quite a few privileges. Those privileges made getting Exotikos I.D.’s quite easy, and with that official identification, the tree sprite was legally allowed to stay. However, given its inhuman status and rather passive nature, Leon wasn’t quite ready to let it loose in Occulara just yet. Given what Exotikos was able to do, Leon knew that it was a huge target for the less scrupulous.

“You could sound more excited, husband,” Elise chastised.

Leon just shrugged again. “If you think it’s suitable, then it is, as far as I’m concerned. I’m more worried about how we’re going to defend such a place.”

The estate broker accompanying them piped up saying, “This area is very safe, I don’t think that there’s much need for defense!”

Leon stared at the man, the broker paling slightly as Leon's eighth-tier aura settled around him. "I take my apple growing *very* seriously," he intoned.

"R-Right..." the broker croaked.

Elise quickly interposed herself between them, though not before she and Leon exchanged cheeky smiles, and the deal was sealed. The broker soon left, though not without one last questioning look at the rather blatant tree sprite standing with them. Not even an hour later, Leon and Elise stared out at their new plot of fifty acres, and Leon began to measure and map out proper defensive enchantments while Elise, Helen, and Exotikos began walking out into the grassy fields.

Leon watched with interest as Elise and Helen paused as Exotikos ventured just a little further out, then rooted itself into the ground. It raised its arms into the air, bark and wood grew around it, and a tree seemed to spring out of nowhere all around the sprite. Once it was complete, the tree looked completely indistinguishable from just about any other that Leon could see in the distance, the only noteworthy thing being how solitary it appeared out in the middle of a grassy field.

However, Exotikos did not remain alone out in that field for long, as a moment later, Leon felt its power rush through the earth. The grass that filled the field shrank before his eyes, and in its place, trees began to rise. It took nearly an hour for these new trees to grow and reveal what they were: apple trees. Unlike what many other orchards had a tendency to do, however, these trees were not evenly spaced, with the orchard instead taking on a much more natural forested feel, which Leon greatly appreciated.

He quickly walked into the orchard and marveled at the scale and power of the nature magic he was witnessing. It was certainly not something any human could do without the benefit of powerful enchantments.

Even then, he did his best to keep in mind the fact that these were mundane apples, merely meant to screen what they were actually going to grow, and without that vast power that Hesperidic Apples contained, these could be grown quickly.

"How is it?" Exotikos asked Leon, its alien voice resonating from the nearest apple tree.

"Incredible," Leon honestly replied as he grabbed a low-hanging apple, the fruit looking particularly delicious. He took a bite and sighed in joyful surprise. "I wasn't expecting it to taste so good when it was grown so quickly!"

"The grass was repurposed; without the raw material, these trees would've taken longer to grow," Exotikos explained. "How would you like the wall to be set up?"

Leon continued munching on the apple as he refocused on the task at hand: defending this place and keeping any prying eyes away from their treasure.

He began to direct Exotikos to build a series of walls, each one more secure than the last. The outermost wall was nothing more than magic. Leon didn't want their defenses to be too obvious, so he had Exotikos use its earth magic and its presence throughout the orchard to set up a ring of stone buried about two feet beneath the surface of the orchard's edge, upon which were inscribed several simple, though large-scale enchantments, not the least of which was one to block the use of magic senses.

Further in, where the apple trees were denser and could hide it from physical sight, was another wall, though this one was made only of hedges. It looked about as secure as a curtain, but with Leon's enchantments and Exotikos' attention, Leon didn't think anyone would get past the wall unnoticed, even if the wall itself was no obstacle.

The final wall was far more conventional, being made of thick stone and even thicker enchantments, behind which the Hesperidic Apples would grow.

These walls secured the orchard fairly well from the outside, though its defenses were still fairly light—especially anything that might protect the orchard from the air—but Leon was still working on the warding scheme. Unfortunately, this was as much as he could do right now as there was another important duty that called his attention.

So, with the orchard now set up and the walls in place, Leon's retainers mostly left to return to his home, while he, Anzu, Gaius, and Talal all made their way back into the city. He needed to meet with Narses and get to the bottom of this most recent vampire attack.

—

"Leon!" Narses the White boomed as Leon arrived just outside of his home.

Narses' palatial estate wasn't that far from Leon's, relatively speaking, but it was much larger and far more filled with servants, who scurried about tending to the endless duties that massive estates had. Narses himself had been sitting on the edge of a fountain in his massive front courtyard tending to his business when Leon arrived, allowing him to be the first to offer his greetings.

Leon smiled in response, but his smile was partially marred by concern as he could see evidence of a battle having been fought on Narses' property not long ago. There wasn't much, but he could see a few blackened craters in Narses' otherwise immaculate lawn, and several enchanters patrolling his estate's outer wall. The wall would've looked little more than decorative to a mortal, but Leon could sense great magic flowing through its perfectly-cut and painted bricks. That magic, however, was a little more discordant than he would've expected for someone as important as Narses, but that discordance was being slowly fixed or catalogued by the patrolling enchanters, showing that this discordance was damage from the vampire's attack not long ago.

"Narses!" Leon called out, hurrying forward to clasp the larger man's arm as Narses surged forward with arm outstretched.

The two clasped wrists just inside of Narses' open gate.

"Wonderful to see you, my friend!" Narses exclaimed without a shred of dishonesty to be seen.

"And you," Leon replied with more enthusiasm than he was used to expressing.

"Not that I disagree with your presence," Narses said, "but what brings you here? Does the Director need anything?"

Politeness: that was why Narses was asking. Leon could see from the way the man's eyes had narrowed and from the anxious strength in his grip that the man knew exactly why Leon had arrived.

"Business, but my own," Leon answered.

"Then come on in, we can talk in private!" Narses thundered, and the two ventured into the sumptuous estate. Given its sheer size, it took several minutes of walking for them to come to a private meeting room, making small talk all along the way.

Once they sat down and got down to business and the room's robust privacy enchantments fired up, however, Narses let all pretenses drop.

"You're here about the vampires?" he asked.

"I am," Leon confirmed.

"How much have you heard?"

"Not much, just the fact that the attack happened at all. No other details."

Narses nodded, then sat back as he explained, "It was about three weeks ago. They came for me in the night, about a dozen strong. All sixth-tier and higher, led by an eighth-tier."

Leon's eyes widened in surprise. He'd dealt with strong vampires, but never quite *that* strong. It made him wonder just what kind of resources Amon still had on this plane, and why he wasn't devoting more of those resources to getting rid of Leon and Xaphan.

"They took the stealthy approach first," Narses continued. "They didn't just break down my front door and come for me, but instead subverted a few outer wards and climbed over the outer wall. They made it all the way to my home's main building before they seen and challenged. A fight broke out that damaged my estate quite fiercely, but once I and my personal guard got involved, most of the vampires were killed."

"Most? I remember you telling me that you'd taken some prisoners, but how many did you get?"

Narses smiled deviously. "We took the eighth-tier vampire prisoner, along with two of her weaker companions."

Leon sat back in surprise and admiration as a smile crept across his face. He let that knowledge simmer in his mind for a moment before asking, "Have there been any interrogations done?"

"Of course," Narses responded. "I even took care of questioning the lead leech myself, but to no avail; they haven't even told us their names. However, that hasn't stopped up from identifying them." Narses' tone fell as he narrated these recent events, transforming from one of excitement and indignation at having been attacked and fighting a good battle, to one of anger at having been betrayed. "The weaker two were no one of any consequence, but the eighth-tier vamp was one of ours."

"She worked for Heaven's Eye?" Leon asked.

Narses nodded. "She'd been hiding her power somehow, so we didn't know that she was so powerful, but her blood couldn't lie, and we later verified her identity by covertly bringing in several of her coworkers."

"Who was it?"

"A researcher named Valentina Vilorio Volorova. One of Rufus' people."

Leon nodded, recognizing the name of the Chief of Magical Research and Development within Heaven's Eye. Emilie had called him one of the Director's most loyal supporters.

"What was she studying under Rufus?" Leon asked.

"Blood magic," Narses growled, surprising Leon not at all.

"Do we know anything more specific than that?"

"Not as yet," Narses replied. "I was ordered by the Director to take this investigation very seriously, but not to publicize it too much. As a result, while I have been empowered to investigate, my progress has slowed due to this order for discretion."

Leon frowned. "Is the Director trying to hide something, or is he afraid of looking weak in front of everyone? It seems strange that you, one of the highest-ranking people in Heaven's Eye would be the target of violence and he isn't rushing to your defense..."

"He is, though, in his own way," Narses replied. "The problem lies more with Rufus."

"From what I understand, Rufus is the Director's creature, through and through."

"You're not wrong, and Rufus has been using his position to stall me with bureaucracy, sending me far more material than is needed and forcing my people to sift through it all looking for information. Otherwise, he's been hiding behind meetings and official forms and locking down Valentina's labs for 'containment' reasons. I haven't even been able to get into her house, yet. I've made *some* progress with the investigation, but without getting greater access to Valentina's personal life, I'm afraid I'm reaching the end of my rope."

Leon picked up on Narses' implication. The man was giving him a knowing look, and even though they were in complete private, he was still speaking like his words were innuendo.

With a smile, Leon asked, "Would you like me to help you out? Obviously, I have some pull with the Director and with Lady Emilie. Why don't you give me the locations of Valentina's lab and her home, and I'll see what I can. All above the board, of course..."

"Of course," Narses said, his tone obviously deliberate. "You know, obviously, that I can't condone any illegal actions, so my hands are tied. I've complained to the Director about Rufus' obstructionism, but so far, all the Director has said is that he would 'take of things'."

"And he hasn't?"

"He's been slow to keep his word."

A predatory smile spread across Leon's face. "I'll see what I can do. Now, before we get to her lab and house, there's one last thing that I wanted to cover with you, now that I have the chance..."

"What is it?"

Leon smiled and conjured the vampire's hand that Anastasios had given him back in Evergold. "I was given this by the Lord Protector of Ilion, and it might be a lead that you can chase down."

Leon handed the hand over, and after Narses took it, their short meeting came to an end. It was time for them both to get to work.

—

“This place looks dead,” Marcus said as he poked around in the fireplace.

“No one’s been in here a few weeks at least,” Alcander replied as he wiped his finger along the top of a bookcase. “Unless this Valenta girl didn’t have servants who kept the place clean. And she *is* a vampire, so who knows?”

“No,” Gaius disagreed, “there *were* servants in this manor. The gardens outside clearly show signs of having been cared for, and most places are reasonably clean. It’s just that the staff hasn’t come in in a while. I’m guessing when Valentina was arrested, they all got spooked and quit while they still could.”

Leon slowly nodded along as he looked around.

They were all in Valentina’s stark, extremely uninviting seven-story-tall manor. It was a fairly large building, but built on a much smaller plot of land than Leon was used to seeing among the elites of the Empire. They were also much farther south than even his estate was from Occulara, so the density of farms had lessened quite a bit, giving the dark, somber manor a sense of privacy that not even Leon’s estate possessed. It was surrounded by thick bands of trees rarely seen farther north, with a long unpaved road cutting through this remnant of Ilian wilderness right to the manor’s front gate.

There wasn’t much of a courtyard, but the front of the manor was decorated with a simple fountain featuring a large stone bowl, blackened by what Leon sensed was fire. The road wound around this fountain, giving any visitors more than enough room to turn around to turn into the relatively small nearby stable upon arrival. The manor itself and the stable were the only buildings on the property, which was surrounded by a powerfully-enchanted stone wall, while the gate was composed of wrought iron bars topped with anti-climbing spikes. That, combined with the wall’s enchantments, meant that for most people, ingress wasn’t possible.

But Leon’s skill in enchanting was far greater than the enchanters who’d worked up that warding scheme, and not long after their arrival, he’d gotten himself and his handful of retainers past the wall and into the manor within less than half an hour.

Their discomfort with the place didn’t lessen once they’d gotten inside, though. The place was richly furnished, but the walls were bare stone, the floor on the ground level was likewise stone, while the floor on all other floors was rough wood. The ceiling had exposed rafters, and were much higher up than standard buildings in the Ilian Empire.

The manor’s roof was steep and sharp, while the manor had an actual nine-story tower in one corner. With Gaius’ comment about the gardens, Leon turned his attention out of the nearest window—a tall and narrow opening set in the thick stone walls—and observed the gardens. There wasn’t much room between the manor and the outer wall, but what was there was sinister: colorful flowers, but all featured sharp thorns. Vines curled around the inside of the wall that Leon had thought he’d seen move when they’d entered. In the corners of the garden were dark trees with black bark and not even half a leaf between them, despite the trees outside of the manor being healthy and full of greenery.

Compounding all of this was the complete lack of magical lighting within the manor—it was entirely light with candles. Combined with everything else, the place didn't look that comfortable to Leon, and even seemed quite dark and unwelcoming. For a vampire, though, he supposed it was about on-brand.

Upon gaining access to the manor, Leon quickly realized just how big of a job this was going to be. Within the place were several dozen rooms and a haphazard layout that seemed designed to confuse anyone who didn't already know their way around. The place could hide any number of secrets within its thick walls, and just scouring what was out in the open as an exercise that might take hours.

"You know..." Gaius said, pulling Leon out of his musings, "it seems strange to me that this place isn't under more active observation. I get that Narses was ordered to use discretion for this investigation, but I still would've had a couple of people staking this place out just to ensure that no one took any potential evidence..."

"This place *was* under surveillance," Leon said. "The problem is that Narses' investigation was small and he decided to pull those men back to focus more on Valentina's lab. Though, that hasn't worked out, so here we are..."

Before anyone could response, Marcus suddenly said, "Someone's coming!"

Leon followed his retainer's gaze out of a nearby window and saw some faint lights between the trees coming up the road. Indeed, it seemed that they were about to have some company.

With a frown, he made a snap decision and sent his wind magic careening through the manor, extinguishing all of the candles that they'd lit to provide more light. Given the connections between Rufus, who'd been keeping Narses from entering this manor, and the Director, and between the Director and the vampires, Leon couldn't count too much on his status as a Hand to keep violence from breaking out. More than that, Narses had indicated that he didn't want Leon to do anything illegal, but Leon could read between the lines and knew that all that meant was that if Leon got caught, Narses would disavow having anything to do with this.

[Get down and go invisible!] Leon mentally shouted to all of them. They all complied, donning their armor and activating their darkness enchantments. No one thought that those coming toward Valentina's manor in the middle of the night were any friends of theirs, so it was best to be safe. But at the very least, it seemed a good opportunity to get some information...

Chapter 766: Completely Legal Search

Leon's group, now invisible with their darkness shrouds covering them, watched from the windows as a dozen men came walking up to the front gate of Valentina's manor. To Leon's eyes, not one of them had reached the sixth-tier, meaning that his people were more than a match for them if it came down to straight fighting. However, as the group unlocked the front gate and walked in with the familiarity and complacency of having done so many times before, he put away thoughts of violence.

[Let them come through,] Leon ordered his people. [They've clearly been here before, and they may know where any secrets can be found. So let's see what they do...]

He heard a few breathed acknowledgments from his retainers, and they went back to watching the dozen go about their business.

First thing they did was close the gate behind them, locking it to ensure that the wards surrounding Valentina's manor didn't have a massive hole punched through them—not that that had stopped Leon's group, of course. All of the men were dressed in dark clothing covering their faces, so when three of them peeled off into the shadows between the manor and the stable, they almost vanished into the dark. However, Leon could still see them quite clearly, and could tell that they were assuming positions to watch over both the gate and the front door.

The remaining nine men walked inside. None spoke, and though they seemed to be paying some attention to the need for stealth, none were particularly quiet as they trooped inside. However, their coordinated movements were even more evidence in Leon's eyes that they'd all been here before.

Leon and his people were on the manor's third floor, having been searching one of Valentina's small libraries, of which several were scattered about the manor. There hadn't been much more than recreational reading to be found within, though Leon was grateful that his people hadn't made too big a mess of this room or any others that they'd searched.

What little mess they had made didn't seem to be noticed as the nine below them began climbing the grand staircase in the central hall. Leon watched with his magic senses as the group ascended right past them to the seventh floor, and only then did he finally hear one of them speak.

"This one," the group's only fifth-tier mage said as a door above opened.

[Let's follow, but remain quiet,] Leon ordered his retinue. Slowly, his retainers crept out of the library they'd hunkered down in, their hands on each other's shoulders to keep from bumping into each other. They were all in full armor, but they moved like ghosts—the results of not only their own skill but the incredible work that Sid had done in forging their armor.

Slowly, they made their way up the stairs as the group above them all shuffled into a room above and began whispering amongst themselves as they moved things about.

When Leon's group reached the top floor, they found that a fourth-tier mage had been stationed at the top of the stairs in a surprising display of caution and professionalism given their otherwise lackadaisical attitude.

With a smile, Leon realized that the door the rest of the group had taken was almost closed and no one else was keeping an eye on the stairs. For the moment, at least, it seemed they didn't need invisibility...

Leon crept up close to the fourth-tier sentry and dropped his invisibility. At the same time, lightning flooded through his body. The sentry barely had the time to widen his eyes in shock before Leon struck him in the chest and shocked him with enough lightning to cause his body to seize up. In a flash, Leon's hand went over the man's mouth, keeping from making any noise, and with his other hand, Leon kept him from falling to the ground.

Another weak bolt of lightning knocked the man unconscious.

[Al,] Leon whispered to his retainers, [take him.]

Alcander dropped his invisibility and prowled over, took the sentry from Leon, and gingerly let him down on a thick carpet just down the hall.

With that handled, Leon inched over to the mostly-closed door, calling upon his old hunting skills to stay quiet and out of sight. With his magic senses, he could see that the room the remaining eight men were in was a rather large office with a large and imposing desk on the opposite side from the door. The room had several large bookshelves, an expensive-looking clock, three sets of file drawers behind the desk, and a small sitting area.

The men were in the process of rearranging the room, with four third-tier mages slowly moving the huge desk a little closer to the center of the office, while the remaining third-tier, two fourth-tier, and final fifth-tier mage all took care of moving around the file drawers.

Leon was a little surprised that they weren't going through the drawers, but the answer to his silent question was answered when, after the drawers had been moved out of the way, the fifth-tier mage began pulling at the candle sconces on the wall above the drawers like they were levers instead.

The sconces didn't immediately move, and one of the third-tier mages let his discipline slip when he asked, "That fucker lied to us!"

"Shut the fuck up," one of the fourth-tier mages chided as he struck the third-tier mage in the belly.

As the hapless third-tier mage collapsed, gasping for breath, the fifth-tier mage tried pulling the sconces again, and this time, Leon sensed the activation of a subtle enchantment. The sconces moved like levers, and a section of the wall behind the drawers slid open, revealing a tight passage through which Leon's magic senses penetrate.

Leon grinned in spite of himself. His first attempt at creating a soul realm had been a mountain palace replete with hidden passages; he was of the opinion that everyone, with only a few solitary exceptions, could be excited at the prospect of finding a secret passage.

His grin quickly turned to a frown as he thought, *'This is the home of a vampire, though, so that passage probably doesn't lead to hidden magic secrets of secured treasure...'*

Without a word, the fifth-tier mage stuck his head into the passage for a moment, looked both ways, and then slid in, his shoulders almost scraping both sides the passage was so narrow. He quickly disappeared into the passage, along with both fourth-tier mages, though not before one paused at the entrance of the passage—the one that had struck the third-tier mage—and growled, you all had better wait here. *Quietly.*

Then into the passage he vanished.

Leon filled in his retainers on what he was seeing and waited several long minutes for the sounds of shifting and scraping coming from the passage faded. He was right about to burst into the office and start taking prisoners when one of the third-tier mages revealed that Leon hadn't been the only one waiting for the others to vanish.

"Those fucking assholes," the mage grumbled.

"Be quiet!" another begged, though without much conviction.

“How about *you* shut your fuck hole?” the first venomously responded. “This whole thing is fucking bullshit! We’re fucking out here risking our jobs for shit that hasn’t been fucking explained, for people too fucking rich to actually care about us! This whole shitting thing fucking stinks!”

“It’s our fucking *job*!” a third mage shot back. “If you don’t like it, then quit! Then we could all live better without having to listen to your idiotic comments!”

“Don’t fucking act like you’re fine with us getting fucked in the ass over here!” the first mage replied. “This is some *really* shady shit they’re covering us in! You may like the stench, but I prefer being fucking clean!”

Leon smiled as he recognized this foul-mouthed wordsmith as a potential turncoat. Unfortunately, none of the third-tier mages became so undisciplined as to actually reveal any of the secrets they may have been told about this place—assuming they’d actually been told any secrets of worth—so Leon swiftly opened the door and entered the room, closely followed by his retainers. The five third-tier mages barely had time to register his presence before his aura and killing intent had them all rubbing their noses on the floor.

Leon let his magic power settle around them, and he used his power to not just exert pressure upon them, but to hold them still and keep their mouths closed.

It wasn’t a silent entrance, but it was quiet enough. Still, Leon kept an eye on the passage opening, but he could neither see nor hear any sign of the three other mages returning to investigate.

“Secure them,” Leon ordered, and in a matter of seconds, his retainers had all of the third-tier mages bound, gagged, and their masks removed. Alcander then ducked out of the room and returned a moment later, the unconscious fourth-tier mage slung over his shoulder.

Leon glanced at those he’d captured and noted that they all seemed terrified, though the one who’d been complaining the most was, oddly enough the calmest. He looked almost resigned to his fate, though he was rather pointedly staring at the floor rather than at Leon or any of his companions.

“Stay here, watch them,” Leon ordered Gaius, who nodded and closed the door, holding it shut by leaning against it.

Without a word, Leon led Marcus and Alcander through the passage. He wanted to question everyone, but without a clear idea of what the remaining three were doing, he wanted to treat this like he was on a time limit rather than risking them escaping by wasting time with those left behind.

Once on the other side of the passage opening, Leon’s magic senses weren’t blocked anymore, and he noted that the tight passage led to a small room to the left, and to a *very* tight spiral staircase to the right, descending quite deeply past the other floors and into the ground. He couldn’t see any of the other three mages who’d gone in, but he knew which they’d gone. He immediately made for the stairs.

Once he, Marcus, and Alcander were at the bottom, the passage widened up, though it was even less inviting the rest of the manor had been. The entire passage was made of roughly-hewn stone and completely unlit, though that hardly stopped Leon’s group. They sped down the passage as quickly as stealth would allow, and at the end, they found a huge door partially open.

On the other side, Leon could see what looked almost like a small theater, with a series of descending stone steps in a half-circle around a stage down at the bottom on the far side. In the center of this stage was a huge stone bowl large enough, he realized, to hold all the blood in several people's bodies—and judging from the stains around it, *had* held quite a bit of blood in its time.

The bowl was inscribed with several long lines of runic script he didn't immediately recognize, though Leon noted that it was only the runes carved along the rim that were actual enchantments. The stand that the bowl stood upon, though, heavily carved and stylized in geometric fashion, *was* heavily enchanted, and he could sense light, lightning, and darkness magic within it—all the magical components for spatial magic.

Behind the bowl and its stand, Leon could see 'backstage', a large chamber within which were several more file drawers. It was there that Leon could see the three mages. One fourth-tier was going through the drawers and piling documents in front of the fifth-tier mage, who was quickly going through them. After skimming, the fifth-tier mage sorted the documents into two piles, one of which the other fourth-tier mage was pulling papers from and quickly burning.

"Take them now," Leon ordered as soon as he realized they were probably burning evidence that he was here for.

He lunged forward, lightning blazing through his body and propelling him beyond a mortal man's ability to track. In a flash of lightning and with the boom of thunder echoing behind him, Leon appeared in front of the fifth-tier mage and slammed his fist into the side of the man's head. With a metered dose of lightning, the man was hurled across the room, hit the wall hard enough to crack the stone, and collapsed, unconscious, but still alive. A moment later, while the fourth-tier mages were still reacting, Marcus and Alcander slammed into them both, tackling them and bringing them to the ground.

The fourth-tier mages resisted for a moment, but as they realized the situation they were in, both fell still.

Leon glanced around at the documents and the file drawers, and with little more than a wave of his hand, brought all of them into his soul realm. Then, he walked over to the fifth-tier mage and slung him over his shoulder like a bag of potatoes.

"Let's head back up," Leon said, and Marcus and Alcander hauled the fourth-tier mages up. Together, they made their way back through the passage to where Gaius was waiting.

—

Leon stared at all twelve mages who'd come to the manor, now bound and completely restrained before him in the manor's dining room. After securing all of the mages who'd come into the manor, he'd sent Marcus and Alcander outside to take the remaining three prisoner while he and Gaius moved the rest downstairs.

Now that they were all secure, Leon paced in front of them and glowered menacingly, some of the papers taken from the dungeon-theater in his hand. He didn't let his aura radiate from him without any restraint, but he did let it settle around their shoulders, pressing them down into the floor and ensuring that every single one of them knew that his power was so far beyond theirs that escape was impossible.

"All right," Leon growled as he pulled the papers back into his soul realm. "Let's talk about what was going on here. You lot were sent to destroy any evidence of Valentina's crimes and those who she might've collaborated with. I'm just going to leave the floor open for anyone who wants to pipe up now before we start taking this more seriously."

Leon glared at each of the men in turn, not thinking any of them were actually going to speak up here, and not really wanting them to, either. He wasn't surprised when he was answered with nothing but silence, but a couple of the men looked at him with pleading eyes, all of them third-tier. The mouthy one from earlier was among them, he noted.

"So be it," he said. He then ordered his retainers, "Separate them into different rooms. We'll discuss things one-on-one from here on out..."

Gaius, Marcus, and Alcander did as ordered, swiftly herding each of the mages into various rooms within the manor, and even though the mages numbered a dozen, the manor was large enough that they were still rather spoiled for choice. When they were finished, Alcander remained with the fifth-tier mage to keep an eye on him while Gaius patrolled around near the fourth-tier mages.

Marcus, however, returned to him for further orders.

"Send for Naiad," Leon ordered him. Marcus, as a light mage, was the fastest one of those with him right now, and at the fifth-tier, he could get word to Occulara and return in only a couple of hours. The night was still young, though, and Leon had more for him to do. "Also, inform Narses the White that there's been a break-in at Valentina's manor. We just happened to be passing through, and we managed to stop the intruders. If possible, sending some people here to lock the place down and take our prisoners into custody would be for the best."

Marcus grinned in understanding. "Will do, boss."

With that, he left, and Leon made his way upstairs to start making the rounds with his prisoners.

The first several third-tier mages had little to say to him, though all were utterly terrified. He didn't spend much time with them, but given the fear they were all obviously feeling, he decided to leave them to the professionals. He thought that Narses would probably get them to talk fairly easily.

However, when he got to the mouthy third-tier mage, he found more success.

When Leon walked into the room, the man was sweating so much that it was starting to pool on the hard wood floor where he was kneeling.

"So," Leon said as he closed the door behind him, "care to tell me your name?"

The men had prepared quite well, none of them having any identification on them. Leon had opened with this question for the other mages he'd interrogated so far, but only two had actually given him names, though he acknowledged that they could be false.

"Runil," the man blurted out as if he'd been dying to identify himself. "I'm sorry, My Lord, I never—I mean, this wasn't—" As he sputtered and tried to speak, he eventually started speaking a language that Leon didn't understand, though from the way he spat his words, Leon guessed he was swearing in frustration.

“Slow down,” Leon commanded with a soothing tone, recognizing that the man *wanted* to talk, but he was just too damned scared to get the words out. “I have no problems with you taking your time...”

Runil took a few deep breaths, then said entirely without prompting, “I can give you everything I know. I don’t know much, but whatever I can give you, I will! I hold no love for those pig-fuckers that sent me here! I knew it was illegal and that it would get us into trouble! I *knew* it!”

“I’m glad you’re going to be cooperative,” Leon said. “Let’s start, then, with who you work for?”

“Heaven’s Eye,” Runil immediately replied. When Leon’s eyes widened in only mild shock, Runil clarified, “I mean, we’re paid by Heaven’s Eye, but we work for a private security company in Occulara.”

“So you’re just a contractor?”

“Yes!”

Leon frowned, wondering just what Heaven’s Eye would need security contractors for when they had a full division of the guild devoted to security—though, a moment later, he supposed this was less a practical decision and probably more to use security that weren’t answerable to Narses.

“Who hired you?”

“Some pasty fuck, I don’t know his name.”

“Tall? Gaunt? Terribly pale?”

Runil nodded.

“And this guy sent you here, did he?”

“Not him, specifically, that’s just who hired us,” Runil explained. “I’m not really one of my company’s managers, so I can only tell you what I heard, but rumor has it that we were actually hired by someone *very* high up in Heaven’s Eye...”

Leon nodded. “Were you hired for this job, or did you have other duties?”

“We had other duties that we were pulled off to take care of this.”

“What duties were those?”

“We were supposed to be helping to monitor a research lab north of the Scamander. Fairly small and nondescript place, I don’t think anyone around it even knows what it is...”

“I’ll want to know where that place is,” Leon growled.

“Anything! Anything!” Runil cried out, and he hurriedly gave Leon the address. Leon’s knowledge of Occulara’s less-than-well-traveled streets wasn’t the greatest, but if he wasn’t wrong, the place Runil gave him was in a fairly sleepy suburb about an hour’s north of the Hexagon mostly inhabited by farmers and those who catered their services to farmers.

“Now, tell me what you came here to do,” Leon demanded.

“Just to get in and move a few things out,” Runil responded. “We weren’t told what, only our leaders were. I’m just here as muscle, if it was needed...”

“Mm,” Leon hummed as he leaned against the wall.

It sounded like these men were hired by a vampire, but if they were guarding a secret—or at least, unadvertised—Heaven’s Eye research facility, then he thought it likely that Rufus was somehow involved. The man was apparently running interference for Valentina, and possibly for the Director.

With a sigh, he turned his attention back to Runil. It sounded like this was going to be a long night, but he figured he was at least lucky that he didn’t have to scour this manor for what he was looking for.

Chapter 767: Valentina’s Interrogation I

“You did well out there,” Narses commented as he thumbed through a few of the papers that Leon had just given him, his expression growing more and more foul the more he saw.

Leon could understand the man’s anger—those papers were the documents that he’d retrieved from Valentina’s manor, and just from his own cursory skimming, he already knew that they implicated quite a few people in Occulara as collaborating with vampires, whether knowingly or otherwise. They didn’t just give a list of potential vampires, but also those who provided Valentina’s people with supplies and shelter, and those who Valentina was personally keeping an eye on. Leon himself had come up plenty of times in the latter category, and he’d given those particular sections a little more than a cursory glance, but there hadn’t been much within them that indicated anything more than a bit of passive observation. Not even a note about trying to potentially gain access to his villa.

“Thanks,” Leon replied as he leaned back in his chair. He and Narses were meeting in a security station not too far from the Hexagon. It was one of the places where Heaven’s Eye kept their prisoners who presented the greatest and clearest danger to peace in Occulara. As a result, it was an enormous building, and one of the most heavily enchanted in the entire city.

Despite the size of the place, however, Leon was a little gratified to have found out that there were only thirty cells within, and even those were rarely filled. In general, over the past decade, he’d learned that it was a rarity for more than five cells to be filled at any one time, and even then, there were usually less.

Naturally, this was the place where Valentina was being held. As an eighth-tier vampire—and a mage who’d been quite highly-ranked within Heaven’s Eye and thought to only be seventh-tier up until her failed attack on Narses—her capabilities weren’t entirely known. She might have more knowledge than she should about Heaven’s Eye’s security measures, or she might have deep wells of power she could call upon that they couldn’t account for. Regardless, she was imprisoned here, where Heaven’s Eye was most able to imprison one of her power.

Following Leon’s raid on Valentina’s manor, Narses had practically jumped at the chance Leon presented to enter Valentina’s manor without Rufus’ interference. All twelve contractors that Leon had captured were turned over to Narses, and Narses’ people were even now going through Valentina’s manor with a fine-tooth comb looking for anything out of the ordinary. Leon, however, hadn’t stayed long. He hadn’t gotten much more information out of those contractors, but he at least was certain that, given their

original jobs of protecting a Heaven's Eye research facility, they were hired by Rufus, either directly or indirectly.

Unfortunately, they didn't have enough proof of Rufus' direct involvement for Narses to openly act against him—at least, no proof that they knew of, Leon had taken a *lot* of papers from Valentina and they'd need quite a bit of time to go through.

Narses appeared to realize this as, with a deep sigh, he set aside the stack of papers that he'd been leafing through.

"Leon," he said, "I'm going to head down and speak with Valentina now. Would you like to accompany me?"

Leon, grinning, replied, "You ask that as if that as an offer I was going to turn down."

"Good. Then follow me."

"Is there anything you need me to do?"

"You can observe, but leave the talking to me."

"Easily done."

—

Valentina was kept in the lowest cell in the prison: a deep, dark pit guarded by dozens of powerful mages and reinforced with an ocean of magic. The pit itself had a long staircase running along its outer edge, and as he and Narses descended past the gates interspersed along its length, he could feel them passing by the powerful wards that would serve to keep Valentina down below.

As they walked, Narses informed Leon that this particular prison wasn't normally staffed, but with Valentina here, they'd had to call in the guards. However, the wards and other facilities were always kept in strict condition, ensuring that there were no weaknesses that Valentina could exploit.

From what he could sense of their warding scheme, Leon had to admit that it was powerful enough that he would've been surprised if anyone weaker than a tenth-tier mage could break out, and even a tenth-tier mage would likely have a *lot* of trouble should they find themselves unlucky enough to be thrown down there.

He silently resolved to carry with him a bigger supply of 'open' runes, which he'd been slowly stockpiling since the expedition to his Clan's research facility.

Once they reached the bottom, Leon estimated they were at least half a mile below the earth. He was a little surprised that they were so deep, and he couldn't help but wonder if this pit had been around since his Clan ruled the plane.

His wonder was almost immediately confirmed when Nestor whispered from his soul realm, [Idiots. This was an industrial waste pit. Foolish to build something down here...]

[Should I be worried heading down there?] Leon asked as he slightly slowed his pace.

After a long moment's pause, during which Narses spoke with the guards on duty at the bottom of the stairs, Nestor finally said, [I suppose not. Everything dumped down here probably decayed within ten or twenty thousand years of our fall. Still idiotic to be here.]

[I'll be sure to make a note of that. Xaphan, you there?]

[Huh? What do you want, human?]

[I'm going to sit in on an interrogation involving a vampire who's probably contracted with Amon. Figured that would be something you'd be interested in listening in on, too.]

Xaphan chuckled, filling Leon's ears with the sound of rapidly crackling flame. [That *would* interest me...]

[Good.]

As he had that quick exchange, Narses waved Leon over, and they walked through the door at the bottom of the stairs.

In contrast to the otherwise open pit above them, capped by the main prison and filled with nothing but magic power channeled by enchantments, the bottom of the pit was a dense building, with narrow corridors only allowing two people to pass by each other if one of them hugged the wall. Like the pit above, it was dark, and Leon could sense certain enchantments in the walls that were familiar to him. They almost felt like his antimagic gems, but more focused. It was hard to read the flow of magic, but if he had to guess, they were all trained on the cell at the center of the building.

It took a surprisingly long time to reach the heart of the building, as there were no straight unimpeded hallways that ran for longer than fifty feet. There were additional gates, guards, and enchantments frequently, and if anyone managed to break out of the cell, they'd have to wind their way through a maze, break through a dozen interminably slowly-opening reinforced doors, and fight off several dozen powerful mages, all without the use of their magic power thanks to what felt like wards similar to Leon's antimagic gemstones. If Leon were to design a prison, he realized as he and Narses slowly made their way through the building that he would struggle to come up with something more secure without using some of his Clan's more questionable practices.

At the heart of the building, surrounded by reinforced steel walls many feet thick, Leon and Narses stepped out into a small room, though relatively large given the tight tunnels they'd just had to walk through. On the opposite side of the room was a wall of enchanted glass, and to the right was a door. To the left was nothing more than a simple wooden table and three chairs. Two guards stood on either side of the door, but Leon hardly took note of them even as they saluted, for on the other side of the glass, he could see Valentina herself, sitting alone in a bare cell with only a single dim magic lantern to light the place.

Her cell was steel and concrete, and for furniture, she had no more than a table and two chairs. A toilet and sink were in the corner, but they looked quite strange to Leon, and when he asked Narses, it was explained that all of their facilities had to be specially designed to ensure that the prisoner they were to house would have no magical materials at all to work with, compounding the overlapping fields of antimagic Leon could feel concentrated on the cell.

Valentina herself looked about as Leon expected any powerful vampire to look: inhumanly gaunt, with skin so pale it was almost transparent. She had sharp features that were excessively emphasized by her vampirism, and a pair of cold black eyes currently narrowed in boredom. She wasn't particularly tall, but she was so thin that she appeared taller than she was.

"Did people really not see her for what she was?" Leon asked in wonder, not really expecting much of an answer. To his eyes, Valentina was about as obviously vampiric as any he'd ever seen.

"She had disguised herself with a permanent light enchantment," Narses explained. "She also wore enchanted jewelry that hid her aura, making her look a tier weaker than she was. It's understandable that she fooled so many in Heaven's Eye."

Leon just smiled and shrugged. "Good thing she tripped up this time."

"Indeed," Narses commented. "Let's get this started."

Without another word, Narses opened the door to the right of the enchanted glass, Leon following closely behind. Those Heaven's Eye personnel who'd followed them stopped in the observation room.

Valentina looked up as they entered, but the bored expression on her face didn't even flicker until Leon stepped in right behind Narses. However, all he got for his presence was a brief widening of her eyes, he didn't even get a gasp of surprise.

"Valentina," Narses stated as he took the seat opposite her. Leon closed the door behind them and leaned against it. When Valentina failed to respond, Narses, unperturbed, continued, "I hear that you haven't been cooperating with your interrogators. You must know that you're not going to leave this place alive if you don't give us *something*. We have you dead to rights, there's no getting around that."

Valentina averted her gaze and didn't respond. Instead, she began to quietly tap on the table in a regular rhythm in what Leon interpreted as a way to keep her focus on something other than Narses.

Regardless, Narses pushed on. "Who are your accomplices? You have to have had a few here in Occulara, and many others outside of the city, to maintain your cover. Surely there are a few that don't matter? Just one that you could give us? Anything to forestall your inevitable execution?"

Valentina remained quiet, and Leon couldn't help but frown as Narses continued.

"Look, you're a smart woman, you wouldn't have gotten as far as you did if you weren't. You're also ambitious. There isn't an eighth-tier mage in the world who isn't. You don't want to die, but that will be the inevitable conclusion to this story if you don't provide us with *something*. Even just a little morsel. How about the reason why you attacked me? You can't have expected that assault to work, so why even try it in the first place? Why me of all people? Isn't Leon Raime your target?"

Valentina's eyes momentarily flickered toward Leon, but again, she didn't respond.

Narses continued trying to cajole her into speaking, but Leon's frown only grew wider the more he continued. Narses emphasized again and again that Valentina wasn't going to make it out of the prison alive, and Leon couldn't help but think that a foolish move. He was by no means an expert interrogator, but he wondered why Narses kept emphasizing the fact that he didn't intend to let her go. Leon had to admit that if he were in Valentina's position, he wouldn't give up anything without a *lot* of persuasion or

torture. There wouldn't be much point in it, he saw, if he was only going to be killed after being pumped for information.

Judging by Valentina's appearance, he didn't think they were starving her, even though she consumed blood to live. He didn't see any signs on her body that she'd been mistreated, either. If anything, her lack of concern over their presence and obvious boredom she displayed prior to their arrival spoke of just how well Heaven's Eye was treating her, relatively speaking.

'If Narses isn't going to offer her anything, then the longer she stays quiet, the longer she lives,' Leon thought. 'Narses is claiming it's the other way around, that she'll live longer if she gives up information, but... is that even true? She doesn't even look like she's been tortured. Why would she conclude that giving up information in this case was the best bet? Are they just hoping she gets bored enough to tell them everything they want to know?'

For a quarter of an hour, these thoughts weighed on Leon's mind as Narses continued to get absolutely nowhere with Valentina. He did finally get around to offering a few more amenities, but Leon noted that they were little more than creature comforts. He never once promised Valentina her life, nor her liberty.

Leon's desire to speak up began to grow, but he reigned himself in and checked in on his demonic partner.

[Xaphan, is there any way at all to undo vampirism?]

[What a question that is, boy,] Xaphan replied. [No matter what, there are always ways to turn something back. She made herself a vampire, and becoming human again is possible, yes. But it's hardly a thing easily done.]

[Do you know how?]

[I do, but the method is effectively impossible.]

[What do you mean?]

[The demon she's contracted with has to release her from her contract. Or at least, the contract between them has to somehow break. This could be as easily done as a simple declaration of intent on Valentina's part, but most demonic contracts have long clauses dedicated to preventing such violations. I know Amon, and I can sense him on her, and I can tell you right now that if she tried to undo his contract, then she'd be toasty ash on the ground in about two seconds flat. Amon doesn't fuck around when it comes to his contracts.]

[So there's no way for Valentina, specifically, to renounce her contract? To get Amon's power out of her body?]

[I wouldn't say *no* way, but there's certainly no *practical* way.]

[And without that, there's no way for her to get rid of her vampirism?]

[No.]

[But, hypothetically speaking, if she *were* to lose her contract with Amon, what would need to be done?]

[A human imbibes blood—or, more specifically, *mana*—to transfer its power to their demonic Lord. After a long while, their bodies will adapt to require such imbibement to live, and that's where a human becomes a vampire. Throughout this process, demonic magic inundates the mage's body, and likewise, the mage becomes addicted to it. Mana is consumed, most of its power flowing to the demon. Demonic power returns through their connection, nourishing the mage in question in place of food or drink.

[In order to undo this, a mage would, ideally, require demonic power without consuming mana. That way, they would continue to be nourished despite no longer consuming mana. Once that's done, the mage would need to be slowly healed as they're weaned off demonic magic and readapt to human food.]

[But in Valentina's case, would that be needed?] Leon asked as he furrowed his brow in thought. [She's a powerful mage, surely she wouldn't need much, if any, food to live, right? Would it be that hard for her to readapt?]

[Without Amon's power, Valentina will likely drop in magical tier. Even then, her body is adapted to mana and demonic magic-based nourishment, and if she wanted to be healthy again, then readapting to human food would be the ideal. She can't just go 'I don't need to eat' and stop, her frail human body would likely fail.]

[So, she needs to be weaned off of demonic power. Why then did you recommend that her contract be broken first?]

[She needs to get rid of all the demonic power in her body. The healthiest thing to do is to do so gradually, but demons that make contracts with humans don't allow that to happen. There is no chance even in your hells that Amon would ever allow her to wean herself off of him. So, the only way to rid herself of demonic magic is to break her contract.]

[Xaphan...] Leon said as a devious spark flickered in his eyes, [would *you* be willing to forge a contract between yourself and Valentina?]

[Fuck *no*,] Xaphan immediately and emphatically responded. [Not a fucking chance.]

[You sure? I couldn't bribe her for all the information she knows by offering her another demon to sign on with as she weaned herself off of demonic power?]

[I'm still healing, boy! She can fuck right off if she thinks she's getting any of *my* power!]

[But what you're saying is that it's not impossible? You just don't want to.]

Xaphan went quiet for a long moment. Before he had a chance to say anything, Leon continued to press, sensing an advantage.

[Xaphan, wouldn't your healing go faster if you had more people under contract with you? Wouldn't this benefit you greatly?]

[I will *not* take Amon's scraps!] Xaphan roared. [This is a vampire, Leon. This woman whored herself out for power! Accepting her is below my dignity! I am a Lord of Flame, and my standards will not be lowered!]

[Does the contract have to be onerous, then? Couldn't you spare what she might need to live?]

[Even if I could, how are you going to get around Amon killing her immediately if her contract were to break? Or how to even break her contract?]

[I was hoping you could have some tips for me there, but otherwise I was going to consult with any of Heaven's Eye's demonologists. I just figured that since you were an exalted Lord of Flame, then you might be willing to impart a little wisdom on this mere mortal man.]

[Don't patronize me, boy.]

[Don't let your pride get in our way, demon.]

As they descended into stony silence, Leon started to tune back into Narses' attempts to get Valentina to talk, but as he did, he realized that her eyes kept glancing in his direction. She didn't seem nervous, but she was clearly keeping an eye on him.

Finally, he could stand it no longer and decided to make the decision he had to. Valentina was the best lead he had on the vampires in a long time, and he wasn't going to let her go the way of Kassia. He needed her cooperation, and he was going to get it.

So, with more confidence than he was actually feeling, Leon pushed himself off the door and sauntered over to the table, taking Narses by surprise.

"Leon..." the Chief of Security said in warning, but Leon paid him no more than a reassuring smirk.

"Narses," Leon said in an even tone, "let's talk outside..."

Chapter 768: Valentina's Interrogation II

"All right, what is it?" Narses asked in annoyance as he and Leon re-entered the observation room.

Leon, before answering, glanced out through the enchanted glass and noted that Valentina at least didn't look particularly bored anymore, but neither did she look anything other than relaxed. They'd only been questioning her for about twenty minutes, but she looked utterly unfazed by anything Narses had said.

"I have an idea for how this interrogation can play out," Leon explained as he turned his attention back to Narses. "I was hoping you'd let me take point from here on out."

"You want to take the lead?" Narses asked skeptically. "That might not be the best thing to do given your current relationship with the Director..."

"Given that Valentina attacked *you*, I don't think you heading in there is all that advised, either. Conflicts of interest and all that..."

"True," Narses conceded. "I *did* have to pull some strings to get in there with her. But what is this idea that you have? Explain it to me, and if I like it, I'll send you in there..."

—

Valentina's eyes turned to Leon as he walked back into the cell, her demeanor having slipped back into one of obvious boredom as he'd explained his idea to Narses.

Leon met her gaze without hesitation, but instead of sitting down at the table and immediately launching into his pitch, he instead began to pace around the room, examining it thoroughly. For the most part, he focused on the enchantments he could sense flowing through the walls, but he also paid some attention to the sheer starkness of the cell in contrast to her rather rustic, but still rather luxurious in its own way manor.

He was right about to address her when Xaphan finally spoke up about what he was about to do.

[Leon, you'd better not make any promises on my behalf...] Xaphan warned him.

[I'll make whatever promises I need to in order to defeat Amon,] Leon responded. [Just roll with me for a while on this one, we'll get through it together.]

[With your record? That's about as reassuring as a tidaryk declaring that they can handle a carenilorian.]

[I have no idea what any of that means.]

[Unfortunately, we're reliant on your ignorance, aren't we? We're fucked.]

With that, Xaphan went silent, and Leon, after putting in the titanic effort required to resist rolling his eyes, finally managed to refocus on Valentina.

"It's quite the slide in quality, being in here," he observed. "I saw your manor. Not exactly to my tastes, but it was much more comfortable than this..."

Valentina didn't say a word, but he could see her subtly tracking him throughout the room, keeping an eye on him without moving her head too much using the mirrored side of the one-way glass. Still, he was able to see the slight tightening around her eyes and mouth, and he heard the momentary hitch in her breathing.

"Do you miss those creature comforts?" Leon asked. "Personally, I could live out in the forest in little more than a shack if I have to, but someone in your position might feel different."

He continued to pace, and she continued to track him and remain silent.

"Where are you from, Valentina? Your file said Beloran. I've never been there, myself. Is it beautiful? I've heard very little about the place. I assume that your manor was built in Beloran style? It has *some* appeal, I have to admit."

Leon rambled on, not so much expecting Valentina to respond as he was just poking at her defenses, getting her prepped for his main assault.

"I have to admire this cell, though. I understand that this might be a bit insensitive given your circumstances, but as an enchanter, I just can't help myself. I've never seen this kind of anti-magic used before. I mean, back where I come from, they use manacles and chains that can interfere with a mage's ability to use magic, but this kind of anti-magic field wasn't something I thought anyone in the Empires could set up. It's truly an astounding piece of magical engineering..."

"It is..." Valentina muttered in agreement.

Leon smiled in response, and when he made eye contact with her, he found her smiling at him with something resembling pride. Given her sharp and gaunt features, she looked downright predatory given how she angled her head and narrowed her eyes.

"Is it your work?" Leon asked, happy that she was finally speaking.

Valentina took a deep breath, then nodded in confirmation.

"It's wonderful to behold," Leon remarked as he fought to contain how amusing he found it to be that she was being restrained with her own enchantment work. "It's quite efficient, too. Spectacular, simply spectacular. I'll have to take some notes before we leave. How long ago did you work on this?"

Valentina stared at him for a long moment before answering, "About sixty years ago."

"Sixty years, huh? Not that long in the grand scheme of things. It's still more than long enough that I would've assumed this kind of enchantment would've permeated throughout the entire Ilian Empire, at least, but this is the first I've seen it."

"It's based on some pieces of Sky Devil magic that we reverse-engineered," Valentina explained. "We don't fully understand the principles behind it, but we could reproduce it on a relatively small scale. This place, for all your praise, is about all that Heaven's Eye is capable of. The Empires likely have similar facilities, but this 'anti-magic' is expensive and not as efficient as you seem to think. They're not cost-effective."

"That's surprising criticism," Leon noted. "Are you not happy with what you managed to accomplish? After all, even this much is still quite the accomplishment..."

Valentina went quiet again, and Leon was momentarily nervous that she was going to refuse to answer his question. However, after what seemed to be some intense thinking, she eventually said, "That was before. After I... forged my contract with my patron, I had to reprioritize my ambitions. I re-specialized from anti-magic enchantments to blood magic."

"Was there anything in particular that you were trying to accomplish?" Leon asked.

Valentina shrugged. Leon lightly frowned, having asked in earnest. Sixty years was before the Director had started working with the vampires, as far as he was aware, which meant that the vampires had been operating within Heaven's Eye for longer than he'd admitted to Leon. And whether or not the Director was aware of that, he found that concerning.

Leon contemplated that for a moment before launching into something a little more immediately relevant. "How did you get mixed up in all of this, if you don't mind me asking?"

Valentina sighed again, but this time, she actually answered him, to his delight. "I... sought out the vampires in a... a moment of weakness." She paused for a second and stared at her reflection in the one-way glass.

Leon nodded and stopped pacing, choosing instead to stand between her and the glass. Her eyes drifted upward to meet his, and he said, "I forged my contract seeking power. I was weak at the time, and homeless, and saw signing a demonic contract as an easy way to gain power. I won't lie, Xaphan's power has come in handy quite a few times, but it wasn't quite what I imagined."

"They never are, are they?" Valentina commiserated. "You were lucky, it seems. Xaphan seems to abhor human sacrifice."

"You know him that well, do you?"

"I was... told. By my patron."

"Amon?"

Valentina didn't answer, but this time, from the desperate way she looked at him, Leon figured that she simply *couldn't*, at least not without suffering severe consequences. But he already knew that Amon was behind this. That demon had its hooks too deeply into this plane and was too personally invested in Xaphan's death for it to be anyone else.

"I have a question that I hope you can answer, then," Leon said. "It's fine if you can't, but I'm hoping you can."

Valentina's expression quickly slid back into a stoic smile, which Leon took as her allowing him to continue.

"I've been dogged by Amon's vampires for a long time," Leon explained. "If you had gone north twelve or thirteen years ago, you could've ended me with a thought, or a casual wave of your hand. There were a few powerful vampires that Amon sent after me, of course, but given the force he seems to command on this plane, I would've thought he'd send more. If he wanted Xaphan dead so badly that he invested into a large vampiric network on this plane, then why have his minions come at me piecemeal?"

Valentina's smile turned to a light frown. "Demoniac contracts aren't all the same," she explained. "I can only speak to what my patron demanded of me, not what was demanded of others. But what I understand is that contracts are just that: contracts. They spell out specific terms and conditions in return for power. Just as your patron doesn't demand you make human sacrifices, others can have their own terms.

"When you look at it like this, it's easy to understand why a demon would find it easier to control weaker mages and force them to do the demon's bidding—these weaker mages will usually agree to contracts with harsher stipulations, oftentimes being little more than slaves to their patron."

"But that wasn't you?" Leon asked.

Valentina smiled again. "I was a little savvier in my negotiations. I am only required to 'support' other vampires my patron sends after an enemy. I'm not required to fight them for my patron, and my patron can't force me to do so."

"Can't your patron just break the contract? Wouldn't that kill you?"

"Possibly, sure," Valentina conceded. "However, consider how much time and effort and power a demon will invest into a person. Think of my power and position. It's rarely as simple as 'do what I want or die', and more trying to get your pieces to do what you want without being forced to destroy them. If my patron were to get rid of me, then he'd lose out on what I can offer and all of the power he'd invested into me. Go ask an arrogant investor how willing they are to give up on investment."

"Is that not a concern now? Isn't he going to lose you right here?"

“That depends,” Valentina said with a smirk. “Demons can be impatient, arrogant, and petulant, and some might’ve immediately killed me off for getting captured. My patron has a sword over my neck and I’m just waiting for it to fall. As for why it hasn’t yet, I can’t say.”

“Why wait so quietly, then?” Leon asked. “I can offer you a way out, potentially. Break your contract with Amon and sign on with Xaphan instead. Work *with* me instead of against, and you might just accomplish what you wanted when you signed on with Amon in the first place. What was your ambition, by the way?”

Valentina sighed, then with the resigned tone of one who’d already accepted that this was her end, explained, “I’m a researcher. An alchemist and an enchanter. A healer and an artisan—and much more besides. It’s rare that I’ve ever found a field of study that I didn’t want to at least learn the basics of, but there’s only so much time in the day, isn’t there?”

Leon smiled and nodded, finding some common ground in that particular gripe. It had taken him ten years of dedicated study to gain even some modest skill in blacksmithing, while he’d studied enchanting as much as he could nearly all his life. There was so much more that he wanted to learn that after reaching the eighth-tier, he’d barely ever slept. He wasn’t entirely sure why Valentina had launched into this non-sequitur, though. Hells, he was already disappointed that she’d barely reacted to his offer.

“But,” Valentina continued, “Apotheosis represented a way out of that dilemma for me. *Immortality*. Such a concept holds great appeal for one like me who constantly feels like she’s running out of time. I reached the fifth-tier myself. I needed some assistance from others in my social circle to reach the sixth. I knew in my heart that I would likely never reach the seventh. So I went looking for someone who might help—a process that wasn’t easy given how unwilling I was to stop my studies and projects.

“Eventually, though, that search bore some fruit. I failed many times, but those failures eventually led some vampires to contact me and make an offer. I initially refused, but after some years without success or progress, I contacted them again. And this time, I accepted their offer. I made a contract with my current patron and did things that I don’t look back on fondly. But I gained the power I sought, and bought myself a great deal of time.”

Leon nodded. He would want specifics later, but for now, this was a good start. “Is that all you wanted, then? To achieve Apotheosis so that you could further your studies without ever having to end?”

“I want to know everything, Leon Raime. I would move mountains if there was even a scrap of knowledge in it for me.”

“Really?” Leon said. He almost brought up the Thunderbird Clan and the knowledge he’d taken from the archives beneath Teira, but he remembered Narses was still in the observation room.

‘Better to use something else as a bribe,’ he thought.

“Xaphan can give you power and knowledge,” Leon said. “But more than that, he can give you freedom from certain death.”

“Do you have the power to guarantee that, Leon Raime?”

“I do. By word or by sword, I can guarantee it.”

“You’d fight for me? I’ve tried to have you killed before. I’ve kidnapped your people before...”

Leon’s smile thinned greatly. “Oh, we’re going to be revisiting *those* admissions later, but they don’t change my offer. Make no mistake, however, I’m not asking you to join my retinue. All I’m saying is that, in my experience, being affiliated with me leads to a longer life expectancy than being affiliated with my enemies. And if you’re with me, then we can both substantially profit.”

Valentina leaned back in her seat and sighed as she seriously regarded Leon.

Leon just sat there, drinking in her attention and projecting an air of confidence and power.

After several long seconds, Valentina said, “Let’s go over the precise details of what shifting my contract to Xaphan might require...”

—

Leon was madly grinning as he walked back into the observation room, but he paused a moment as he noticed Narses still staring at Valentina through the one-way glass and the two Heaven’s Eye guards walking out into the hallway and closing the door behind them.

Before he could say anything, Narses said, “Do you trust her?”

“Not in the slightest,” Leon replied, glad to see in his demeanor that Narses wasn’t angry.

Valentina hadn’t accepted his offer, but after liaising with Xaphan a bit and offering up a framework for the magical requirements to cut her contract with Amon and sign one with him, she’d at least not turned him down. Leon felt quite good that she’d eventually accept his offer—assuming Amon didn’t fry her to a crisp, first.

At the same time, she’d given him some good intel on a couple of nearby vampire cells—including one that coordinated with some werewolves out in the Ilumerian Wetlands.

He was grateful that Amon didn’t seem to be paying that much attention to her, and when he’d brought it up, she’d merely said that her patron had many vampires contracted to him throughout the universe, and that she was rarely actively monitored. Perhaps that was why she was a little more willing to speak, but Leon couldn’t say. It seemed to him, however, that if she had just a little more time to think, then she’d be on his side.

He wondered what having her with him might do for him. By all accounts, she was a highly capable enchanter, and one that, as of late, had specialized in fields that he’d never dabbled much—blood magic in particular. He would never have her in his retinue, of course, but as a researcher and enchanter in his faction was worth considering.

Bringing him back to the conversation at hand, Narses said to him, “I don’t trust her, either. But I didn’t get the impression that she was lying at all during your little chat. I’ll have my people run down the leads she’s given us.”

With a nod, Leon responded, “One stuck out for me...”

“Oh? Which one?”

"That one small vampire cell she mentioned operating within the Screeching Desert piqued my interest. It just so happens that that desert is right next to the Cortuban Alliance, and I ran into something rather interesting the last time I was in the Alliance..."

Leon quickly filled Narses in on the channeler he'd discovered beneath the main arena in the Cortuban Alliance's capital city.

"That's interesting," Narses whispered. "I'll give that one priority. Vampires seem to be operating everywhere these days..."

"I kind of figure that, while it seems that way, it's more just the fact that we're becoming aware of them. They were always here, we're only now seeing them."

Narses scowled. "True. I just don't like how much it's exposed about Heaven's Eye."

Leon nodded in understanding. "Find anything from that hand that the Lord Protector gave me?"

"It belonged to a vampire caught by the Ilrian Empire just a few months ago. Fairly weak and from a small cell. Otherwise useless for us."

"Damn," Leon muttered. Given the engine Anastasios had given him at the same time, it seemed clear to him now that the hand was meant only as a statement of intent rather than for any practical purpose. After a few moments of silence, Leon asked, "Will you be briefing the Director on all of this?"

"*Gods* no. Or, not yet, anyway. I need to verify a few things about that shit sack Rufus, first. If the Chief of Magical Research and Development is in bed with vampires—and it's looking more and more like he is—then we have to be prepared to deal with him. Given what's happened these past six months, I'm not sure the Director would allow Rufus to be touched, no matter what he claims he's doing."

"We'll deal with him, one way or another."

Narses smiled and nodded. "Of course we will, Leon Raime. And once all's said and done, we'll DRINK!" Narses threw his head back and laughed in a manner most maniacal, but Leon could tell it was mostly just a venting of emotion. He had to admit, though, that it was good to see Narses acting just a little more like he'd been back at his party before the expedition north.

Silence settled around them, and both stared through the window at Valentina, who'd mostly gone back to leaning back in her chair looking bored. However, Leon noted the way her eyes flitted around the room and could tell that she was thinking quite hard about something, and a curious thing suddenly occurred to him.

Breaking their brief silence, Leon observed, "You seem quite fine with me trying to reel Valentina in. Would you mind if I ask why? Didn't she attack you in your own home?"

Narses scowled again, then shrugged lightly and said, "She was with the party, but never actually attacked me. She actually surrendered once I killed the rest of the vampires she was with. From the way they acted, I think they expected her to take a more active role in the assault than she did, which I suspect is why they tried in the first place. She was the only one among them stronger than the seventh-tier, and if she weren't with them, I'm not sure they would've been so bold as to attack my home."

Leon frowned in thought and nodded. That tracked pretty well with his impression of Valentina so far. A fighter she didn't seem to be, and while she had power, that wouldn't help much against a peer. He wondered if the reason she didn't fight against Narses was because she knew she couldn't win, or if she simply didn't want to try. Having power was not the same as having the will to use it.

He supposed whether or not he recruited Valentina into his slowly-growing Kingdom would depend on the answer he eventually got to that question. She'd never be a part of his retinue, but it would be a waste to lose her skills when it wasn't necessary to do so.

After another moment of silence as Leon turned over that small observation in his head, he and Narses departed the prison, and the guards took to their posts again.

For now, Leon had to wait while Narses ran down those leads and as Valentina mulled over his offer. He also had to get Xaphan on board with the offer if she accepted, but he thought that he might just be able to do so. But at least for a little while, he thought that he might just have a few days to rest, relax, and prepare for the next moves he and his side would make. Rufus, he figured, had the makings of a powerful enemy, but he thought that if they moved quickly and boldly enough, then they might just be able to take him off the board entirely.

Chapter 769: Bribing a Lord of Flame

With his part in Valentina's interrogation over, Leon made his way back to his villa while Narses took over following up on the leads she'd given them.

Along the way, Xaphan did not remain quiet, and he and Leno argued incessantly all along the way. The argument wasn't over by the time Leon made it back home, so instead of seeing to some of his other duties, Leon decided to head to one of his meditation chambers and dive into his soul realm.

Upon opening his eyes on his granite throne, he was almost immediately confronted by a *very* angry fire demon.

"You have some nerve, boy," Xaphan crackled as he loomed over Leon's throne. "Offering me up like a cheap whore. What kind of bitch do you take me for? My ass is not for you to rent out!"

Leon smirked as he stood up, undaunted in the face of Xaphan's obvious attempt at physical intimidation. Though he was now only in his magic body—fragile at the best of times—he not only had greater power over fire, he still had his contract with Xaphan backing him up. Just as he'd thought it would, the fires that perpetually covered Xaphan's body retreated as Leon advanced, even as the demon stood firm.

"Aren't you one of the ones constantly telling me to impose my will upon others, or something to that effect?" Leon said, his smirk growing into a full, unabashed smile. "You can help me to end this vampire threat, which threatens not just me, but you as well. You can help me to give Amon quite the black eye here on Aeterna. And all it requires you to do is sign a contract with Valentina. It doesn't have to be permanent, you can end it for all I care as soon as she's no longer a vampire."

"Few vampires ever manage to return to humanity," Xaphan growled. "Her forging a contract with me would mean that I am risking taking Amon's sloppy seconds on for a *very* long time. And for what? I

would get no power from her, yet I would have to provide *her* with power?! You're trying to extinguish me, human!"

Xaphan raised his voice as he spat out his frustrations, but Leon kept walking forward, enjoying the sight of Xaphan's fire receding like water from a beach. Eventually, Xaphan's body was barely covered at all as his fires were blown backward as soon as they erupted from his obsidian skin. Leon could practically see Xaphan himself within the fire, rather than just a shadow of his form.

"I'm not trying to do anything detrimental to you," Leon said a little more reassuringly. "We still have our contract, don't we? To support each other as much as we're able?"

"You have a fine way of showing it," Xaphan sarcastically grumbled, though he took a step back.

"There's something I've been quietly wondering for a while, demon," Leon explained in a seemingly unrelated tangent. "You see, my Ancestor can exist in all of the soul realms of my Clan that bear her power—or so my understanding of her existence goes."

"You're not wrong!" Nestor called out. "She's not 'physically' present in all of our soul realms at the same time—she's basically limited to only appearing in one at a time—but she can fly between them all equally!"

"Exactly," Leon said. "Isn't that rather like what we're doing right now, demon? You're existing in my soul realm just as she is..."

"The pigeon is bodiless," Xaphan retorted, "I am not. I was able to come here when you were still third-tier thanks to our contract building a connection between us. Were I not bound by contract to not harm you, I could've drained you dry of all your magic and left you as little more than spent ashes, if I were to so choose. But I'm a benevolent Lord, one that plans long-term. And so I've not consumed your meager power."

"But couldn't you forge connections to other soul realms?" Leon asked. "Wouldn't that speed up your recovery if you could receive magic from multiple mages?"

"Our soul realms are linked!" Xaphan shouted. "I can trust you because of our history and our contract! But I never would've created that contract with you in the first place if you were not so weak and I not so desperate! If such a contract were to be made with someone stronger, who has a better understanding of what she's doing, then she could strike at me! Possibly even kill me! Certainly cripple me terribly!"

"Would this be any different from any other demonic contract? Couldn't you have a contract that prevents such a thing?"

"You make it sound so easy. Boy, demonic contracts have to be enforced by the demon, and so are almost never forged between beings of equivalent power. It gives us a certain amount of power over you humans, yes, but if Amon's fucktoy were able to kill me in one hit—as she very well might given our relative powers and the connection that would exist between our soul realms—then she *might* escape the resulting devastation. She might even be able to reforge her contract with Amon and gain even greater powers. It's a dangerous risk to me, and one that I can't take!"

Leon frowned in thought. He'd never probed the contract he had with Xaphan too much, reasoning that it was a kind of magic that he had no real hope of understanding, and not wanting to risk the connection he had with his demonic partner with clumsy prodding. However, if Valentina could strike at Xaphan through it, then the same should hold true for him.

'Something to ponder, even if I never actually use that option...'

Turning his thoughts away from his options and toward potential solutions for this problem, Leon asked, "Then how about we set about making you stronger? That enchantment array that you've been using to absorb the Mists of Chaos... how's it been working for you so far?"

Xaphan glared at him for a long moment before answering in a low, frustrated growl, "Not as well as the last one."

"Well, that last one was so overloaded with power that you shattered the gems I used for it. This one is much more durable, but I thought that would've made it *more* powerful—the enchantments could be better anchored into it."

"Don't forget that everything here is still *made* of the Mists of Chaos, even the land beneath your feet. Though it feels solid to the touch, try to keep in your tiny human brain that your tiny human body *isn't here*. You're here in your *magic* body."

"Why should that make much of a difference? There're many things that I'm storing here that are physical, yet they interact with everything here just fine..."

"You can interact with things just fine using magic, too. Like when you fly by carrying yourself with your magic. Look, boy, the point is that my array could be stronger. *Would've* been stronger had the pigeon not—"

Xaphan was cut off by a blast of thunder and a flash of lightning. His massive frame was suddenly bent over at the waist like a gigantic hand was pressing down on his shoulders.

"Had I not... *what?*" the Thunderbird asked as she landed upon her perch in avian form.

"Had you not threatened me!" Xaphan shouted. "I could've been so much stronger by now, but *you* were the one to be all 'don't play with the mists!' and 'be a fucking loser coward with me and don't build that fucking majestic demonic array!' I haven't healed a substantial amount of my power in a terribly long time, Leon! And that bitch-ass enchantment array is the reason!"

"The Mists of Chaos are magic at its most primal," the Thunderbird intoned as her tremendous aura pushed Xaphan even further down. "It is dangerous in its raw form. It *can* be absorbed by a mage seeking quick strength, or a broken has-been demon trying to put himself back together again, but such raw power can easily fly out of control and destroy your soul realm, leading to great power loss at the least, and even death at the worst! I will not allow *you* to put my last descendant in such danger!"

"With all due respect, Ancestor," Leon said as he calmly walked between the Thunderbird and Xaphan, though given how short he was compared to Xaphan and the Thunderbird up on her perch, he didn't cut as imposing a figure as he would've liked, "I believe that's my decision to make. My risk to take."

“There are four lives riding on your continued well-being, Leon,” the Thunderbird replied, her tone softening. “Or, I suppose *three* lives. Or two, depending on how you count.”

“What about the golems?” Leon asked half-sarcastically as he stuck his thumb at the massive domed archive he’d built for the library golems he’d taken from beneath Teira.

“Hardly,” the Thunderbird said as she turned her gaze momentarily to regard the domed structure.

“And if I count only two, then what?” Leon asked. “What risk is there then if both of those people, the *only* people I’m counting, want to build a bigger and better enchantment array for absorbing the Mists of Chaos? What would then be the problem?”

The Thunderbird glared at him for a moment before sighing. “The impetuosity of youth,” she murmured aloud, more than loud enough for Leon to hear. “Leon, you should listen to your elders. We know better and hold your interests closer to heart than *some*.” She sent a withering glare at the still-bent-over Xaphan.

“That may be so, and I would never argue against such a thing being true,” Leon conceded. “However, I need Xaphan’s power, too. And under our contract, Xaphan’s power is mine, too. Increasing his power is increasing my power. And if allowing him to absorb the Mists faster results in the both of us getting stronger, then it’s a win. And if allowing him greater power can also grant us power over Valentina, then even better.”

“And if it results in your soul realm imploding?”

“I will do everything I possibly can to ensure that doesn’t happen. What do you say, Xaphan? Shall we refine that array of yours to gain you more power, faster? Would that be an adequate enough bribe to ensure that you help out with this Valentina situation?”

Xaphan was quiet for a long time, but after almost enough time passed for Leon to repeat his question with much more vitriol, he said, “That would be... sufficient. Give me the power to defend myself against her absolutely, and I will lend as much power, experience, and knowledge as I have to curing her vampirism...”

“Wonderful,” Leon said with a gleeful look at the Thunderbird. “If you don’t mind, could you let him up? We have some work to do...”

The Thunderbird for just a moment looked like she was going to refuse, but after slightly tilting her head in thought, her power faded, and Xaphan straightened himself out.

Then, all three of them stood there in deeply awkward silence for almost ten painfully long seconds before Nestor sarcastically shouted, “You lot are killing me with all of this shouting; please, someone, take a breath and let the others speak for a change!”

Leon chuckled despite himself, and he said to all of them, “Then let’s get started. I don’t know when, or *if*, Valentina agrees to my proposition, but I’d like to be ready whenever her decision is made...”

—

Leon practically skipped out of his meditation chamber, the additional magical secrets that Xaphan and the Thunderbird had shared with him rocking around in his head.

The Thunderbird wasn't happy about the situation, but after Leon and Xaphan, with a little help from Nestor, decided to leap directly into drawing up plans for the new enchantment array that would help Xaphan to heal, she decided to jump in, too. 'Better to ensure something's done right, anyway,' she'd said as she'd joined them in her human form.

Regardless, with her, Xaphan, and Nestor all working on the same thing, Leon had learned quite a bit about handling the Mists of Chaos. He imagined this would also greatly enhance his own power as he learned how to more properly harness 'magic at its most primal', as the Thunderbird had described it.

But that wasn't all that he'd learned: Xaphan had also started working on his demonic contract for Valentina—assuming it was something she might even want. Leon noted that the thing, once completed and rolled into a single fiber of light before disappearing into Xaphan, was much thicker and longer than his. He wasn't out to compare sizes or anything, but he couldn't help but think that Valentina was going to get the VIP treatment while he was left out in the metaphorical cold.

Thankfully, Xaphan had explained that her contract was to be much larger than his because she was such a greater threat. Xaphan needed greater protection and had worked in many more clauses designed to prevent either him from harming Valentina, or the reverse.

Curing the woman of her vampirism would be another herculean task on its own, though, but Leon was at least comforted with the knowledge that Xaphan was tentatively on board with that plan.

So, with that taken care of, he decided to focus on other business, and for that, he needed to see some of his retainers. He made his way down to Helen's workshop where, given it as about midday, he knew that she would at least be. He wasn't surprised to find both Tikos and Elise there, too, and Helen's assistants hanging out in the less-secured atrium told Leon exactly what they were doing.

When he walked in, he found Helen, Elise, and Tikos quietly discussing something as they huddled around a table in the center of the room. The air, normally smelling of rich herbs and tinged with smoke, now had the distinctive smell of lightning, and sure enough, when Leon drew closer, he found that they were pouring over the piece of thunder wood.

The three were locked in what looked like pretty deep conversation, so Leon hung back a bit, unnoticed as they spoke amongst themselves, and listened in.

"... but how would it just get 'stuck' in there?" Elise wondered aloud. "It's not like lightning is capable of freezing in place!"

"I would bet my life that it has to do with some way that the ambient magic was flowing through the tree," Helen replied. "Maybe, when the tree was petrified by the bolt, the magic already within the tree was locked in place, or something. And that locked the lightning in place."

Tikos' leaf-hair fluttered, though Leon was unable to smell anything given the sheer number of other scents in the room. However, it quickly said, "Trees within our forest not have unusual magics."

"They have a higher-than-usual quantity of tree sprites," Helen countered. "What about the trees that you make when you get set up somewhere? Or when your people set up shop inside of an existing tree? What kind of changes happen then?"

Tikos began to explain exactly how tree sprites merged with trees, but it was so immersed in advanced principles of light, earth, and water magic that Leon was barely able to follow along. Regardless, about when Tikos finished its explanation, Elise finally realized that Leon was there.

“Husband”! she exclaimed. “How long have you been there?!”

“Long enough to listen in a little,” he replied with an amused smile. “Not much progress has been made, then?”

Helen answered, “It’s only been a few days since we’ve gotten back to a proper environment for testing, so, no, not a lot of progress.”

“But ‘not a lot’ is not ‘none,’” Elise pointed out.

Leon’s eyes widened and his eyebrows shot upward. He looked at his wife with expectation glittering in his eyes.

Elise, eager to show off, gestured at the thunder wood and explained, “This is incredibly old. And I don’t just mean that it was being studied by your Clan way back in the day; I mean that the tree that as struck by lightning was *old*. Probably a thousand years old or more.”

“That’s... worrying,” Leon replied. Achieving Apotheosis would effectively give him unlimited time to work with, but if he had to wait a thousand years just for another batch of thunder wood, then that wasn’t as practical as he would’ve liked. It would require a *serious* investment of resources and long-term planning to harvest any usable thunder wood, and while he couldn’t yet say how quickly those who’d achieved Apotheosis tended to move, he wanted something a little more practical.

“Kind of,” Helen agreed. “I don’t *think* we’d need that long if we were to try and replicate the process. Tikos can manipulate trees, after all—stimulate their growth and all that. And that’s not even taking into consideration if there’s a ‘most beneficial’ time for a tree to be converted into thunder wood. Or if a tree can *survive* conversion, allowing us to grow thunder wood straight-up! All we can say right now is that lightning struck a *very* old tree, and that it was trapped within. Somehow, after many thousands of years, that lightning hasn’t gone anywhere. If anything, given what I’ve been able to test so far, the thunder wood seems to be almost *generating* lightning!”

Leon’s closed his eyes and tried to blank his mind completely, momentarily afraid that his eyes were going to turn green with greed, and almost felt the need to hold his jaw shut to keep from salivating all over the floor.

And then Helen added, “And we’re pretty sure it can be replicated. Tikos can more thoroughly test the internal structure of the thunder wood than anything I could possibly do, and once we get through with those tests, we’ll have a much more in-depth idea of just how this thing was made.”

“How long?” Leon croaked.

Tikos held up both of its hand, seven fingers outstretched. “Days,” it said.

Leon reeled backward, smiling with glee and barely able to keep himself from cackling.

But then he froze, turned to look at Elise, his narrowed with desire.

Elise, sensing the change in his demeanor, pushed her chest out and smiling back with equal heat.

Not even five minutes later, Leon was carrying Elise back to their bedroom, Elise quietly whispering the more detailed results of their tests so far in his ear, which, for Leon in that state of mind, was more arousing than any dirty talk she could've otherwise come up with.

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“Oooh,” Elise moaned as Leon finally disentangled himself from her.

He paused, took one last loving look at his wife, still in bed, her eyes heavily lidded with fatigue and satisfaction, little more than a thin bed sheet struggling to cover her body after their exertions.

It took a monumental effort on his part to rip himself away from that sight instead of diving in for yet another round, but a firm, but respectful knock at their door forced him away—though not before giving her one last kiss.

When he reached the door, he was fully dressed, though not entirely put-together, and he drew a curtain just inside the door that would ensure his wife could still have some privacy even as he opened the door.

Talal was revealed as the door opened, standing just to the side, looking like the very image of a stoic professional.

“Leon,” he said as he held out a sheet of paper. Without even the slightest waver in his tone, he launched right into his business, “This is a report from Utavi, the largest of the Pegasi States. The local Heaven’s Eye Tower Lord has sent an urgent request for help here. Apparently, a red seventh-tier wyvern showed up on their doorstep demanding she be brought to Occulara. And she bore your letter of introduction...”

Chapter 770: Raikos

It was a beautiful day in Raikos. The sun was shining, the birds were chirping, and the breeze was cool and pleasant. Raikos itself was the very picture of the idyllic village, with a number of small timber houses spread out in orderly, though not particular straight rows, punctuated by quaint brick roads and fields of some of the greenest grass on the plane. The horizon was dominated by gently rolling hills to the north, and the great southern mountains to the south that formed the southern coast of Kataigida.

But as small and beautiful as the village was, it was one of the most important settlements in all of Kataigida, the island that the Imperials knew as the ‘Sky Devil’s Hell’. It was here in Raikos that the Clans of the Jaguar Tribe met, up in the fortified gathering hall on the largest hill in the village.

It was also in this vicinity that the tribal elders lived, though further south, deeper into the mountains. Every Clan in every Tribe had an elder, and these elders formed tribal councils. Each Tribe’s council then sent a representative to Stormhollow, where they formed the governing body of all of Kataigida.

The Jaguar of the West was born here. As he strolled down the brick roads, taking in the scenery, listening to the children playing and the people quietly going about their day, he couldn’t help but be lost in memory. The village was quiet and sleepy, despite its importance. However, when the tribal council gathered, the village would swell by thousands. To accommodate these people, many estates

had been built nearby, and were always almost entirely empty, inhabited only by a family or two to keep up with maintenance.

If he were honest with himself, the Jaguar, for all his fame and accomplishments, greatly preferred the quieter moments in Raikos. He hated the way the city would completely change when his Tribe's council gathered. He hated that it was just about time for them to gather again, to finally sanction one of the greatest undertakings in the history of the Ten Tribes.

As much as he wanted to continue enjoying the village's atmosphere, though, he was here for a reason.

He soon found himself at the foot of the Tribe's gathering hill. The central hall was at the top, but down here was a massive square where the Tribe's greatest warriors would marshal themselves before heading out for war.

The Jaguar paused a moment in the center of the square, where a massive totem pole had existed for as long as his Tribe had. Such totems weren't rare sights in Kataigida, but this one was monstrously large, being more than a hundred feet in circumference at the base, and nearly three hundred feet tall. Twenty figures had been carved into the pole, commemorating for all time the founders of the Jaguar Tribe.

At the bottom—the figure that bore the weight of all those above, and so was considered the place of greatest prominence—was a heavily stylized carving of a jaguar. Fitting, in the Jaguar's mind, for it was under his bloodline that his Tribe had united.

Eighteen Clans had come together back then to form his Tribe. Things were rough in the beginning, but in the millennia since, even as the number of Clans in their Tribe grew more than ten-fold, their marriage ties had grown so intertwined that all in his Tribe were descendants of his great Ancestor, whose power he'd inherited.

All were made equal under the Old Jaguar when they formed their Tribe.

The following eighteen figures on the totem pole were representations of the eighteen founding Clans. None of them were carved to look like any specific person—not that the heavy stylization lent itself to such recognition—but each one had been lavishly painted to reflect the chosen colors of each Tribe.

The final figure on the totem pole was the one figure that was on every totem pole in Kataigida. The top wasn't the most respected place on the pole, but it was still an undeniable place of reverence, for the top was the closest to the sky, to the place where they'd all come from. And it spoke to each and every inhabitant of the island of just how far they'd come, and how much they'd lost.

The ancient Lord, the only one that they could all follow, the only one revered by all on the island: the Thunderbird.

The Jaguar of the West had eyes only for his Ancestor, though, and he laid his hand against the dark red enchanted wood of the pole, resting it against the carved jaguar's cheek.

"Grant me strength in the war to come, Honored Ancestor," he whispered in prayer. "Lend me your hide, that I may ride into battle without fear of injury. Lend me your fangs, that our enemies may bleed. Lend me your roar, that our enemies may tremble at my coming. May death come to all who threaten our Tribe."

His prayer finished, he glanced up at the gathering hall, and then walked right around it. His destination was not within, but several miles behind it. The elder of his Clan and chief elder of his Tribe was waiting for him at the Rock of Blood.

Despite the name, the Rock of Blood was but a small mountain close to the village. However, the one chosen to lead the Tribe's warriors—known in the dark days following the Thunderbird's fall as the chief warrior, though the title had fallen out of fashion in the past few millennia—always met with the chief elder there, for one last private consultation. It was there that their Tribe confirmed their intent to march to war, to rend their enemies and bloody their claws.

It was a short journey for the ninth-tier Jaguar. The woods were thick to the south, and the magic even thicker, warding off all who dared approach uninvited. The Jaguar, however, had been invited, and marched down the path unfettered.

A stone staircase had been carved into the side of the mountain, winding around it until it reached a simple platform upon the wide summit. There, something akin to an altar had been carved. Wrapping around the edge of the platform an enormous statue of the Old Jaguar, his eyes set with dozens of glittering rubies, and his claws made of sharp obsidian that seemed constantly damp with crimson liquid—blood, the Jaguar believed, though he'd never worked up the nerve to confirm for himself. Stone clouds had been carved above the jaguar, and if the Jaguar of the West listened closely, he could hear the sounds of faint thunder.

Though the jaguar statue had the air of an altar, it was but a place of reverence, not a place for worship, sacrifice, or any other ceremony.

Sitting cross-legged on the bare stone in front of the jaguar statue was an old man, gray of hair and heavily wrinkled, but still with a robust ninth-tier aura. He was at least a thousand years old, but even though he showed many of those years, he was still strong and sharp. He tilted his head slightly as the Jaguar of the West finally reached the platform, his pale golden skin gleaming in the sun.

"You're finally here," he observed.

"Yes, Elder," the Jaguar replied, showing nothing but the utmost respect. They were of the same tier, but the elder was centuries his senior, and had trained the Jaguar to boot. The old elder had instilled in the Jaguar fierce pride, but even fiercer discipline, and those old habits die hard.

"You're early. That eager are you to kill the usurpers?"

The Jaguar frowned and didn't immediately respond. Instead, he stayed near the stairs, respectfully standing even as the elder refrained from commanding him to sit.

"What is on your mind, child?" the elder asked after several moments of silence, his tone softening by a tiny fraction.

"The campaign," the Jaguar admitted. "The Tribe is ready. The fleets are assembled. We are ready to launch the raid just as soon as the Thunderer orders it..."

"... But?"

The Jaguar sighed. “*But* I still don’t like it. I don’t approve of this attack at all, and even if I did, I’d rather be a part of the assault on the Sword, not attacking Argos.”

“And why’s that?”

The Jaguar paused a moment, searching for the right words. He didn’t think his old master, his elder, the man he most respected in the world, would think him a coward, but the pride the old man had given him still demanded he word himself correctly.

“It’s... too political,” he neutrally stated.

“The movements of armies are always political,” the elder replied, still not changing his didactic tone.

The Jaguar wasn’t perturbed; this was always how the elder acted. The elder likely already knew what was on his mind and had likely contemplated the same things the Jaguar had, but he was still prompting the Jaguar to speak his mind.

“This one is designed to harm us,” the Jaguar continued. “The Thunderer wants the glory of trampling the Sword. He doesn’t want to share that with anyone. He also wants Argos destroyed, and if that can’t be done, then he at least wants our Tribe smashed upon its sea walls and impaled upon its Lances. Either way, so long as this raid is launched, the Thunderer wins.”

“Who is our greater enemy?” the elder asked. “The usurpers? Or the Thunderer?”

“The usurpers,” the Jaguar replied. “Those savages bring their children up to hate us. If we were all to die tonight, the Empires would celebrate tomorrow.”

“But the mist has always held them back.”

“Not always. They’ve launched attacks on our island before.”

“And been repelled.”

“All the same, they are our greatest enemies.”

“Then why are you so concerned about attacking Argos?”

“Because I hesitate to deliver a win into the Thunderer’s hands. Though the usurpers are our greater enemy, the Thunderer is still an enemy. He intends to destroy our Tribal bonds and reduce us to servitude under him. He wishes to destroy Kataigida’s oldest traditions and declare himself King.”

“Why would that be a bad thing?”

“The Thunderer would see us all dead in service of his vanity. We would be slaves, little more than fodder for him to hurl at the savages across the sea. He wants power at the expense of all. I question his morals, I question his ability to lead, I question his intentions.”

“The Elder Council declared him Thunderer. Do you object to their decision?”

“The Elder Council is wiser than I could ever hope to be. But I can’t help but be suspicious of all those who wish to make themselves King over the Ten Tribes.”

“You still hold to the old prophecies, then?”

“I’d rather you not refer to them as ‘prophecies’, elder...”

The elder finally turned to look the Jaguar in the eye, a smile playing at his aged lips. “Why not? Do your beliefs embarrass you still?”

“My beliefs? No. But when someone calls them ‘prophecies’, I believe it detracts from any fact buried within them.”

“And what facts are those?”

The Jaguar briefly bit his tongue. Despite what he’d just said, it was still a childish belief that the elder wanted him to give voice to, a thing not spoken of in dignified circles. It was a children’s bedtime story to get them to sleep at night, to think that the Thunderbird was still out there, watching over them.

The Thunderbird survived its death and the fall of its Clan and to this day, still watched over its people. It watched over Kataigida, its will smashing the usurpers’ ships upon the rocks and breaking them in the shallows hidden by the mists surrounding the island.

The Jaguar was too old and learned to believe in that story, but he knew enough to recognize the kernel of truth within. When Jason Keraunos challenged the Grave Warden, he did so with most of his children—but not all of them. Two were recorded as being absent from the battle. If they lived past the civil war that followed Keraunos’ death, then there could still be those who bore the Thunderbird’s power out there. Those two missing sons could even still be alive.

Instead of directly answering the elder, the Jaguar evenly stated, “The Tribal Council decides matters for the Ten Tribes. The only King that we have is the Storm King. No others may rule over us.”

The elder sighed, finally turned to face the Jaguar head-on, and gestured to the ground before him.

“You still hold to old fantasy. What would those in Stormhollow think if they could hear the venerable Jaguar of the West speak of children’s fantasies?”

“What they think would have no bearing on how I lead my people. They could say whatever they wish, and I still guard the western shores, as is my duty.”

“A man who knows his duty is wise. A man who *does* his duty is virtuous. What is your duty now, my son?”

The Jaguar sat in front of the elder, his posture rigid and formal. However, after a moment, he began to slouch.

“I don’t know, elder. I cannot in good conscience serve the Thunderer. He seeks power that is not his, and throws our tribesmen to their deaths at the hardest target in the whole world. But that target is a worthy one, and the prospect of sacking it wets the tongue. No matter what happens, an enemy of ours gains from this battle. What is my duty? I cannot say.”

“The usurpers have been building up their arms, have they not?”

The Jaguar thought of the new flight gear that the savages had been using of late, and of the many recon ships they’d sent through the mists. His people had done the math: the rate of encounters with the Imperials had increased three hundred percent in the past decade. He couldn’t believe they hadn’t

noticed the Ten Tribes' own build-up of arms, but at this point, there wasn't either of them could do to back down.

There was going to be another war in the near future, there were too many weapons in the seas for there not to be.

"They will attack us," the Jaguar stated. "Tomorrow. Next year. Next century. They will not rest until we are destroyed. But the Thunderer..."

"The Thunderer commands by assent of the Tribal Council. His authority is legitimate. Have your suspicions, act as a check against his power, but see to the greater foe first. We are united for the first time in centuries. We have the capability to strike against the usurpers for the first time in eight hundred years. So strike against them. Deal with the Thunderer later."

"Yes, elder..."

"You don't sound enthusiastic."

"To strike at Argos... we will be weakened by this. Our Tribe will not survive whatever the Thunderer is planning if we..." He trailed off, not wanting to even speak aloud his greatest fear.

The elder, clearly sensing his distress, said, "Then you only have one option, don't you?"

The Jaguar looked to his old master, his teacher, the man he most respected in the world.

The elder smiled and said, "Win. The fate of our Tribe is in your hands, my son. It's a heavy responsibility, but I can think of none more suited to bear it. Now, go to Argos. Break their Lances, smash their walls, and burn their city. And take as few losses as you can. Then return home with all of the tribesmen that follow you."

The Jaguar sighed, then took a long, deep breath. The elder was the only man he would ever show this lack of resolve to, and if they were to win, then he must show his people what he'd always shown them: inspiring confidence.

It didn't take him long to find his resolve. It rarely did.

"With bloody fangs, our enemies will tremble," the Jaguar stated, the most often repeated line of his Tribe's sacred words.

"And borne aloft by feathered wings, we will return home, victorious," the elder finished, speaking the part that few remembered anymore.

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The Jaguar stared at the receding coastline of Kataigida, thunderous resolve in his heart. Though he still had his misgivings, when surrounded by the kind of force that he was, it was hard to remain without confidence.

Hundreds of warships, armed to the teeth with the most advanced weapons they had. Dozens of war arks, similarly armed. Hundreds of troop transports, bearing tens of thousands of soldiers and marines, ready to have their vengeance of thousands of years of suffering and war at the hands of the savages

across the sea. On the other side of the island, a smaller, though still quite significant force was sailing east, intent on obliterating the Imperial bases along the coast of the Shield Mountains, and possibly even seize control of a few of the Titanstone mines therein.

Such a massive force wouldn't long stay united. The Sword was a long island to their west, with many bases from which the savage's fleets plied the seas. Many detachments would separate on the way there to deal with those bases in due time, but it was the Jaguar's own fleet that would split away first.

Almost as soon as the massive fleet entered the strip of mist that completely surrounded Kataigida, confusing the senses of all those not aboard the ships of the Ten Tribes, he gave the order to turn north while the rest of the force kept going west.

They would move with haste, but it would still take at least a month to reach Argos. But when they did, the Jaguar was fully intent on razing the city to the ground. He would destroy that city, so long used to strangle the Ten Tribes and separate them from the mainland, and return home. When he did, he would then see to the island's would-be King, the Thunderer.