

Storm King 771

Chapter 771: Confronting Rufus

Leon tapped his foot impatiently on the bricks of the road, waiting for Narses' people to show up.

Over the past few days, the Chief of Security had been running down Valentina's leads and achieving some measure of progress. There weren't many vampires that were caught, but many people were arrested and brought in for questioning. Most of these were unknowing collaborators, ignorant of whom they were collaborating with as they rendered the vampires various clandestine services, but some were criminals or demon-worshippers themselves.

Still, the number of vampires caught so far wasn't promising. Leon was a little frustrated, especially with everything else he had going on, but he hoped today would prove to be different.

Narses had specifically requested his help with this upcoming raid. He'd tracked down a den of small-time vampires supposedly operating a blood farm out of a villa southwest of Occulara, and Leon had grabbed a few of his retainers and made for the staging point. It seemed he was a little too eager as Narses had yet to arrive.

With some time to think, Leon couldn't help but ponder everything else happening right now. It had barely been half a year since Red had told him that she needed a year to give her young the bare amount of care that wyverns provided their young, and yet she was already on her way to him. She'd tried to get Heaven's Eye in the Pegasi States to help her reach him, but apparently his letter of introduction only went so far in securing their cooperation. Fortunately, after receiving the message that she was in Utavi, Leon was able to send word back that she was, in fact, one of his people. For now, since the rulers of Utavi didn't want a seventh-tier wyvern flying around unescorted, she was being hosted by the Tower Lord in Utavi's capital, and Leon would have to make his way south to go and pick her up at some point in the near future.

He also had the thunder wood to look forward to. Four days had passed since Tikos had indicated his research team would only need a week to get a more concrete idea of what the material was and how it was made, and Leon could barely contain his excitement.

But, as a troop of Heaven's Eye guards appeared in the distance, Leon put those thoughts out of mind, for now.

The staging point was about five miles away from the suspected blood farm, along a seldom-used back road cutting through some of the older farms in the area. Fruit orchards dominated the agricultural sector in this region, giving them plenty of space to conceal themselves from any potential lookouts at the blood farm—even those with magic senses.

"Leon!" Narses called out, the platinum-blond man riding with three others in a less-conspicuous hovering chariot than the one he'd rode to Leon's party. Trailing behind him were thirty powerful Heaven's Eye security mages. Leon, meanwhile, had grabbed Valeria, Anzu, Alcander, Marcus, Gaius, and Alix.

"Narses!" Leon responded.

The chariot came to an abrupt halt and Narses jumped out. "Thank you for meeting me on such short notice," he said as he conjured a table and map from his soul realm. "Can you see the villa?"

"I can."

It was a fairly standard villa for the area. An outer wall with a reasonably large two-story building in the middle of the grounds. Outside of the outer wall were several acres of fallow fields and grazing lands. *Very* flat and relatively clear land, ensuring that there wasn't much cover from the edge of the estate to the outer wall.

The map that Narses had brought turned out to be a floorplan of the building. They couldn't count on it too much, but together, the two of them used their magic senses to examine both the floorplan and the exterior of the villa—the interior being hidden by standard privacy wards—and took a few minutes to plan out their raid.

Once that was done, everyone got moving.

It was fairly late in the day, so Leon's retinue took off into the sky and shadowed Narses' advance. They moved quickly, not wanting to give those in the villa any more time than they already had.

From the air, Leon didn't think such speed was particularly necessary, but he appreciated it anyway. There didn't seem to be much of anything going on within the villa. It looked like the front gate had a couple of guards, two men were quietly chatting out in the small garden, and there were a few lights on, but otherwise, Leon couldn't see anything of note. The villa wasn't even large enough to have a stable for horses or carriages.

Five miles was covered in a matter of a few minutes at the level of their raiding party, and once they reached the field, Narses and Leon wasted no time.

Narses' people spilled out into the field and immediately spread out. They weren't coming from the main road, so those within the villa didn't even realize what was going on until the security mages got close.

"Hey!" one of the guards at the gate called out as Narses' chariot sped around the corner of the outer wall. "Identify yourself!"

Narses shouted a response, but Leon and his retinue were already plummeting down behind the villa's outer wall.

Marcus and Alcander hit the ground right next to the two men in the garden, their weapons drawn and magic brandished. Those two nearly jumped out of their skin in shock, but surrendered immediately. The guards outside did likewise as Narses forced them their knees with nothing more than his aura, but by then, Leon and the remainder of his people were already stacking up outside of the villa's main door.

Not bothering to knock, Leon, with more lightning flowing through his body than blood, kicked the door. He broke it right down, but he was still a little surprised—the door was more heavily reinforced than he'd expected.

But it was still broken down, and he surged in, his body sparkling with arcs of lightning.

Just inside the villa was a small atrium with doors to the right, left, and opposite the entrance.

“Alix, Gaius, left,” Leon ordered. “Val, Anzu, right.”

His retinue moved to those doors as he went to the one in the back. Once again, he kicked the door down, noting that at the same time, Narses was getting the gate open as several other security mages were leaping over the walls to secure the grounds.

The inner atrium door was reinforced just like the main door had been, but it couldn’t stand against Leon. It broke down with a single kick, revealing an open floor plan on the other side.

A hallway of columns and extended from the door to the back of the villa roughly bisecting the huge room beyond, while to the right and left were the kitchen and main living space, respectively. In the kitchen were two more people, while five were in the living room, all possessing weapons, but none being strong enough to possess elemental magic.

Leon didn’t even give them a chance to ask what was going on and let loose with a relatively weak blast of lightning. Lightning scored the white walls, ceiling, and columns black, while blasting everyone Leon could see and rocking the villa with thunder.

All seven went down, though Leon couldn’t help but feel a tinge of pride in seeing that none were dead, or even seriously injured.

Behind him came the rest of his retinue.

“It was just a coat room,” Valeria explained.

“Shoes for us,” Alix said.

“Follow me,” Leon ordered. “Leave these for the others.”

These people were disabled and he didn’t want to waste the time it would take to have them bound. With Narses’ people moving toward the broken-down front door, however, he could leave that part of this raid to them.

Leon and his retinue surged forward, deeper into the villa, taking room after room, and subduing another half dozen people. The villa only had about six bedrooms, so this was already quite a few people relative to the villa’s size. What made the place seem even shadier was the fact that it had almost no decorative furnishings, and the entire place was rather dirty, as if no one had bothered to clean in a while. There was even quite a bit of trash on the floors that no one had deigned to clean up.

As Leon’s retinue finished up with the second floor, they had yet to find anything resembling a ‘blood farm’, but they still had the cellar to go. Once they trooped down there—the other security personnel taking care of dealing with their seized prisoners as they did—they found something far more promising.

The cellar had clearly been designed to mostly just be a place for the residents to store wine, and indeed, there were a few big barrels of wine down there. However, through a combination of Leon’s thunder having shaken the villa and thrown things around down there, and some audible, though muffled shouting from behind a certain wall, they found that one of the largest wine barrels had been converted into a hidden door.

With a smile of glee at finding something hidden, Leon burst through the hidden door. It was a little more heavily reinforced than the doors above, but it still stood no chance of holding him back.

Two men had been holding the door shut, though, and when Leon kicked it down, they went flying. They were only second-tier, so as Leon appeared in the room with a flash of lightning, he knocked the two out with quick jolts and surveyed where he now found himself.

Unlike the villa above, which, while dirty and in dire need of maintenance, was still quite nice, this tunnel carved into the foundation was much rougher, little more than bare stone and dirt, with a few magic lanterns to light the way. The room itself was small, with little more than a table and two chairs for the guards, and the top of a staircase leading further down into the earth.

“Shit, underground shit,” Marcus cursed.

“We’re dealing with it,” Leon declared, despite his own dislike of the underground. Even Anzu, despite a few anxious chirps, folded his wings and narrowed his eyes in determination.

Sparing only the time to give his griffin a quick head pat, Leon launched himself down the stairs.

It wasn’t long before he reached the bottom. The stairs only went down about twenty feet, and opened into a long, relatively narrow chamber of rough stone, bisected by a single row of roughly-hewn stone columns.

All along the right wall were cheap chairs and tables. Sitting in the chairs were thin, pale people, none of whom looked happy, or strong in any sense of the word. Their arms were tied to the tables, upon which had been inscribed enchantments that drew blood out of their bodies and into nearby bowls. It was little more than a trickle for each person, but a rough count put Leon at no less than sixty people having their blood drawn.

A few people looked up in hope or fear as Leon’s people came barreling down the stairs, though none seemed like they had the energy to even sputter out a greeting—all probably suffering from having their blood constantly harvested for who knew how long. Only one close to the entrance was even able to look Leon in the eye and point to the left side of the long hall.

Seven more doors lined the left wall.

“Get clearing,” Leon ordered his people, and he ran for the nearest one. The people having their blood drawn didn’t seem like threats, so for the moment, he ignored them. What was more concerning was the fact that no one seemed to be monitoring them—though given how Leon had broken into the villa, he couldn’t blame them for having cut and run.

He burst into the first room while his retinue began breaking into others. Unfortunately, all that greeted him on the other side of the door was a small storage room with dozens of glass jars filled with blood—and very little of what he could see was mana. He guessed that this was probably the equivalent of low-grade food supplies for vampires given just how little magic power was contained in this stored blood.

Still, there was a lot of it, and he had to take a second to stare, estimating that there was enough here to represent thirty or forty full-grown men completely drained—enough to make a meal for hundreds of vampires.

Some shouting from outside pulled him back into the moment, and he ran outside to continue securing the rest of the hall. As he ran out, he was confronted by the sight of Alix and Gaius hauling three people

out of the next room—more workers similar to the men above, if their lack of ostentatious dress and apparent youth were anything to go by.

These three were thrown down in front of Anzu, who froze them in fear with a single glare.

A moment later, they were joined by a fourth man, older and more well-dressed, dragged out of the third room by Valeria.

“Please!” the man shouted. “Please, I didn’t do anything wrong! Don’t hurt me!”

“Quiet,” Leon growled as Marcus and Alcander hauled two more men out of the fourth room. Both of them were relatively powerful, though not so well-dressed, so Leon assumed they were guards.

The last few rooms seemed to be offices, and when they were cleared, no more people were found. No exits were found either, or signs of recent use of earth magic. It seemed that they’d secured the villa.

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“Sixty-four people were being held hostage down there,” Narses summarized as he, Leon, Valeria, and a small handful of Narses’ subcommanders met in the villa’s kitchen. “Twenty-one others were found on the premises. Three low-level enchanter to monitor the constant blood-draw from the hostages, eighteen guards, and one manager.”

“How much can we expect to squeeze out of them?” Leon asked as he glanced out of the nearest window into the front yard. There, all of those taken in the raid were being lined up and prepared for transport. The hostages, meanwhile, were being seen to by Marcus and Narses’ healers while they waited for more trained professionals to arrive.

“Enough,” Narses said with a predatory smile. “Men like these rarely know much outside of their own dealings, but they can often provide threads that, if pulled, will lead us to bigger targets. In this case, we found a damned gold mine down in those offices. Seems like they were poor criminals and kept a lot of their records and correspondence. Did you look at any of it?”

“Not yet.”

“Then it might come as a surprise that Rufus comes up quite a few times in them. It seems he visited this place rather frequently.”

“Really?” Leon asked in surprise. “Someone of his level coming here personally? And frequently enough to be noted with a cursory look through their records?”

“I know,” Narses said. “I can’t say why they kept these records, but they did. With this, we ought to have enough leverage to go after Rufus.”

Before anyone could celebrate, Valeria asked, “What are the chances that these records are fake? Just some kind of insurance policy to implicate higher-ups in Heaven’s Eye if something went wrong, or a false trail to throw us off the track of the real person operating this place?”

“A possibility,” Narses conceded, “and one that I’m not going to dismiss. My vampire hunt has only just begun, I assure you of that. However, what we know of Rufus is that he’s doing all he can to get in my way, and this evidence, fake or not, is enough for me to act against him.”

“For *us* to act against him,” Leon reminded Narses. “I’m not going to sit that one out.”

Narses smiled. “Good.”

“What about the Director? With this evidence, should we assume that he’s going to try and protect Rufus?”

“Anything’s possible,” Narses said. “I don’t know. We’ll have to remain alert; if the Director gets involved, then we’ll have a whole different situation on our hands.”

Leon nodded. “Is there a better time than the present to deal with this?”

Narses’ smile widened. “Give me a few hours. Then let’s go deal with this.”

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Leon, flanked by Maia and the rest of his retinue, marched into the tower next to the Hexagon that housed Rufus’ office, the headquarters of Magical Research and Development. With him and his people were Narses and several hundred of Narses’ best security mages. The plan was simple: they were going to invade the tower and take Rufus into custody, and only then were they going to speak with the Director.

What they were doing could be considered rebellion. It certainly represented a tarnishing of the authority of the Director given they were acting entirely on their own, and they had no idea how he might react.

Given that the Director apparently needed his blood, though, Leon wasn’t overly concerned for himself. So, it was with a bold heart that he walked right through the atrium, past all of the tower’s guards, who seemed confused, but didn’t stand in his way. With Narses with him, he didn’t think they’d be interrupted at all on their way to Rufus’ office.

He wasn’t entirely correct in that assessment, as Rufus himself came out to meet them. Leon, Narses, and their closest comrades stepped off the magic lifts at the same time on the top floor of Rufus’ tower. The lifts went back down to pick up another load of security officers, being only large enough to take their entire force in several trips, leaving Leon and Narses accompanied only by a couple dozen mages as they stepped into the large top-floor atrium.

Rufus, on the other hand, had packed the palatial top floor with at least three or four times that number down in the top floor’s atrium behind the various secretaries’ desks, and lining the railing at the edge of the second-story mezzanine.

“It almost looks like you’re declaring war!” shouted the man leading them: Rufus himself, standing at the top of the stairs leading up to the mezzanine, decked out in glittering silver armor.

He was an older man, with gray hair and a receding hairline. His face was rather pudgy and bloated, with loose skin and many wrinkles. A looker he was not, but his body at least seemed fairly fit. Leon noted that he radiated the aura of an eighth-tier mage, and he couldn’t detect even a hint of demonic influence within it.

It seemed that for all that he was, Rufus was *not* a vampire himself.

“Rufus!” Narses shouted. “I’m placing you under arrest! Are you going to come quietly?”

Rufus smiled back and gave his response. “Fuck off!”

Chapter 772: Promotion

“Rufus!” Narses shouted. “I’m placing you under arrest! Are you going to come quietly?”

Rufus smiled back and gave his response. “Fuck off!”

‘All right,’ Leon thought to himself as he took a few menacing steps forward, *‘I guess he’s choosing the better way to handle this. Good thing, I could use a little exercise...’* As he strode toward the foot of the stairs, he stepped essentially right into the kill box that Rufus had set up beforehand, being surrounded by several dozen relatively high-power security personnel on the bottom floor, and a few dozen more up on the mezzanine. Since the mezzanine encircled the entire room, that meant that Leon was now surrounded on all sides.

However, he didn’t for one moment feel like he was outmatched. There were a couple of seventh-tier mages in the crowd, but of his opponents, it was only Rufus who was eighth-tier. He had Maia and Narses behind him, both eighth-tier. Even though most of Narses’ people were still on the bottom floor waiting for the lift to return and ferry them up to the top floor, Leon was supremely confident that his side held the advantage—and that wasn’t even bringing Xaphan into the picture.

He conjured his blade into his ride hand, dramatically extending it outward and letting his aura spill forth. The mages closest to him—a handful of fifth and sixth-tier mages, all pale from obvious anxiety—began to shudder in fear as his aura settled around them, and he encouraged that reaction by letting his power spill into his sword, causing silver-blue lightning to dance across its blade.

“If you’re not going to come quietly,” Narses shouted back to Rufus as he quickly made to follow Leon, “then we’re just going to come and get you!” Rufus almost responded, but Narses cut him off by immediately addressing the security forces in the room. “You all know who I am! All of you fall under *my* command, not Rufus’! He is a base liar and a traitor! More than that, he is a collaborator, throwing his lot in with vampires who have caused Heaven’s Eye to silently rot from within! I am cleansing this rot with my comrade, Leon Raime, a Hand of the Director!”

Narses paused a moment, and Leon almost burst out laughing when almost a full third of the mages set aside their drawn weapons and backed off, and even more began to look at Rufus, a range of emotions from worry to suspicion crossing their faces.

Leon decided to nudge them a little further without forcing them to defend themselves. “All those who aid Rufus will be assumed to be collaborators, too! But those who stand down right now will not be punished! You are all members of Heaven’s Eye in good standing; don’t throw all of that away for this man!”

Rufus scowled quite nastily as several more of his security guards stepped aside, thinning the line of those separating him and Leon.

“A million silvers to everyone who doesn’t lose their nerve!” Rufus half-shouted, half-growled. A few of the guards clearly steeled themselves, but most of them seemed to ignore him, and three more guards even stepped aside.

Leon couldn't help but smile, and when he heard the lift arrive back at their floor, his mad grin widened.

When the lift doors opened, for just a moment, he drank in the sight of abject terror that graced the faces of those guards still between him and Rufus. However, just as he was about to turn his head to watch Narses' forces bolstered, he saw a look of joy cross Rufus' face, and then felt a ninth-tier aura flood the room, completely outshining his own.

"Now, what do we have here?" the Director asked as he stepped out into the room, followed closely not only by Penelope and Damien Makedon, but three more eighth-tier mages that Leon recognized as three more of his Hands. "All of you look like you're about to explode; I'm glad we made it in time..."

Leon stared in disbelief at seeing the Director here, having become so used to him staying in the Hexagon that he never seriously thought the man ever left. Yet, here he was, in the flesh, parting Narses' guards with ease as he calmly approached Leon.

"Leon," he warmly said, "you've done well, but I decided that this is something that I should handle myself."

He didn't speak with a commanding tone, and even implied that Leon had been acting with his assent, but Leon still lightly frowned as he wondered just what the Director was doing.

'If he actually does something now, then that would be for the best,' Leon thought. He didn't want to *kill* anyone today, though he was always willing to do what needed to be done. He just wanted the vampire menace dealt with, and given the support Rufus had been giving them, that meant that he had to deal with Rufus, too.

"Director!" Rufus cried out as he pushed his way past his own people to hurry down the stairs and meet with the Director in the center of the room. "I'm so glad you're here! These lawless boors burst in here accusing me of all kinds of crimes! Such vile lies they spread about me! I beg of you to deal with these slanderers!"

Rufus spoke with a rather high-pitched voice that grated on Leon's ears almost as much as the words he used. He rolled his eyes, then watched with great intent at what the Director was going to do.

When he saw the Director's aura flare up, the corners of his lips began to rise. The Director moved with prodigious speed: raising a hand, conjuring a short two-foot-long blade of translucent razor wind, and then slashing it across Rufus' throat. The Chief of Magical Research and Development didn't even realize what happened as his head was separated from his neck, not a speck of his eighth-tier strength able to save him. Leon guessed that in his certainty that the Director would side with him, he didn't even raise his defenses.

Rufus' head hit the ground just as Leon's lips finished forming his smile. But that smile froze as the Director, his full ninth-tier aura now raging, turned around toward him, Narses, and the rest of his group. Lightning still raged through him and he prepared to defend himself, and he could sense Maia doing the same, but the Director raised his hand and someone loudly shouted in surprise.

Narses came hurtling past Leon, borne aloft by a dense cushion of air created by the Director, and stopped before the man himself.

The Director raised his hand again and slammed it into Narses' chest, driving all the air from his lungs and causing the entire room to cringe from the sickening crunch of shattering bones.

The air cushion restraining Narses then dissipated and the Chief of Security fell to the ground. He was gravely injured, but yet lived.

"There," the Director said as his eyes met Leon's. "I think that should put a stop to all of this." More obviously to the entire room, he loudly stated, "Rufus worked with vampires to undermine my authority and the good name of Heaven's Eye! For his crimes, he has been punished!" His gaze then drifted down to Narses lying at his feet. "Narses took it upon himself to try and arrest a man equal to him in station! For this overreach in power, he has been punished! I will handle the rest myself! Everyone, return to your stations!"

The security guards didn't move immediately, but after a few moments, during which Narses struggled to his feet as he quaffed a potent healing potion, all of the assembled guards began to slowly spread out and return to their posts.

"Leon," the Director said, "would you care to join me in the Hexagon? I'd like to go over what just happened."

Leon frowned, feeling quite unsatisfied with how things turned out. He glanced at Rufus' headless corpse, then back to the Director. "Sure," he replied. "I have some things I'd like to ask you, too."

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"What in the fuck was all that?" Leon demanded as the Director's office door closed, giving him, the Director, and Penelope all the privacy they could possibly ask for.

He didn't feel the need to elaborate, and his feeling was vindicated when the Director, as he leaned back against his desk instead of sitting behind it, answered, "I was wondering what was going to happen. I wanted to see how committed you were to this partnership. How committed you were to Heaven's Eye. How committed you were to seeing this threat dealt with."

"Really?" Leon asked, skepticism dripping from his tone. "Did you not have evidence enough of all that? You needed more? You *needed* to sit on the sidelines and watch as a civil war damn near erupted in the guild?"

"Dear me, Leon, is that concern for Heaven's Eye I hear in your voice?" the Director asked with a teasing tone that Leon found quite aggravating given what had just happened.

"Cut the horse shit. What *was* that?"

The Director's easy-going smile faltered for a moment, and then he said, "I've been following this investigation much more closely than you give me credit for. I've done my part to root out vampires from my guild, but others needed to do theirs, too. If they didn't, how could you possibly believe me if I were to claim that I'd gotten rid of them all?"

"You did all this for *my* sake?"

"What even *is* 'all this', Leon? From where I'm sitting, I don't think I've done that much."

"I suppose not, but that's a problem unto itself."

"As a leader, Leon, you must understand that the greatest skill I can possibly possess is the ability to delegate important tasks to competent and trusted people. I gave Narses the authority he needed to pursue the vampires—"

"Hardly," Leon interjected. "You allowed Rufus to stall him with bureaucracy for weeks before I returned."

"Yes, I did do that. With Valentina in custody, the situation was in well in-hand, there wasn't much need to go further."

"Then why did you say that you gave him the authority he needed when it was clearly insufficient?"

The Director stared at Leon for a long moment, not answering. He seemed to be almost hesitant to answer Leon seriously, but it was Penelope who applied the pressure needed to get him to continue.

"Dad," she whispered, "if you work with Leon, he's not going to come for your position."

Penelope punctuated her statement with a quick confirming look sent Leon's way.

"Right," Leon replied. "I'm not much of an administrator. If you work *with* me, then there's no reason for me to try and usurp your position. I'd rather not even try—my talents and interests lie in fighting and enchanting. You said yourself that you were choosing my side over the vampires. So level with me: what's going on?"

The Director sighed. "Fine," he said with some resignation. "Fine. No use in pretending anymore, I suppose. With Valentina in custody, there wasn't much need to try and contain the vampires. She was, as far as I was aware, the most powerful vampire within the guild. There might be one or two more eighth-tier vampires out there, but she was the greatest threat they posed to the guild. So, with her in prison after that failed attack on Narses' villa, I calculated that I could take a few risks.

"You see, Rufus has been one of my oldest and most loyal supporters."

"That seems to have paid off quite well for him," Leon sarcastically muttered.

"Indeed. He was too loyal by half, I think. He took too zealously to the extreme measures that I've had to embrace. Diving in where I would only slowly lower myself, holding my breath. When it came to the vampires, he didn't believe me when I told him that I was turning my back on them—I didn't tell him anything important about you, I swear it. He believed that what I was doing wasn't in my best interest, that I was having to cut loose a powerful asset for the sake of appeasing you and Narses.

"That belief of his led him to block Narses from proceeding with the investigation as much as he could. Since he was involved with the vampires with me, he had almost as much information on the vampiric presence within the guild as I did, and he protected them as best as he could."

"Why didn't you act against him, then? Order him in no uncertain terms to stop what he was doing and get rid of the vampires in his care?"

"I considered doing so. But the thing I was most concerned about in making my decision to support you, Leon, was that I needed to win your trust. If you returned from the north, and I were to simply tell you that I'd already eradicated all of the vampires within Heaven's Eye, would you have believed me?"

Leon didn't verbally respond, but he sneered at the idea.

"Exactly," the Director with a knowing nod. "Letting all of this play out as it did was risky, and I kept myself as informed as I could. But what I wanted most of all was for you to see for yourself rather than taking my word for it that the vampire threat was being dealt with. Narses will be more vigilant from now on, and Rufus is dead. I hope that the execution of my oldest supporter will go some way to convincing you that I'm not on the vampire's side anymore, but yours."

"The loss of Rufus can't be overstated," Penelope added as the Director finished. "He was the most fanatically loyal supporter my father had, and he was in charge of one of the six main branches of Heaven's Eye. With him gone, it leaves quite the hole in Heaven's Eye that now has to be filled with someone whose loyalties we might not be able to entirely trust."

"My heart bleeds for you," Leon quipped before turning back to the Director. "Why wait as long as you did?"

"Stepping in would've brought an immediate end to things," the Director stated. "I was ready to move whenever things started getting out of hand—as I did just now. The thing I had to decide on was when I should make my move. Moving too quickly would've prevented you from conducting your own side of the investigation. Moving too late would leave Heaven's Eye more damaged than I would've liked. I think, all things considered, this wasn't the worst outcome ever."

"I can think of better outcomes," Leon stated. "Ones where you never involved vampires in your affairs in the first place, ones where you gave me all the authority needed to bring the vampires down in the first place, ones where you showed me those damn arks you apparently have!"

"All in due time," the Director said with a dismissive wave of his hand. "For now, we're left with a choice, you and I: who to choose as the next Chief of Magical Research and Development."

Leon's eyebrows rose in interest. "You're letting me in on this decision?"

"If we are to be partners who trust each other, then we have to make certain decisions together, don't you think?"

"We already have a candidate in mind," Penelope said with a meaningful look.

Leon's eyes narrowed while his smile grew as he read into Penelope's pointed gaze. "You can stop looking; I want that job."

"You're the only one we want," Penelope said.

"You need a better position than one of my Hands," the Director stated. "One with more authority. I'm glad that it's a position you want."

"And I'm glad we don't need to debate it. But, on a more concerning note, the vampire threat hasn't been dealt with, yet," Leon pointed out, though the smile on his face hadn't gone anywhere. "There are

undoubtedly members of their foul cult that escaped you, or were never a part of Heaven's Eye to begin with..."

"Then hunt them down," the Director replied. "Work with Narses and the Empires to bring these creatures down. I have no more use for them, so slaughter them at your leisure."

"How magnanimous of you. Should I expect such treatment if you ever find a more a convenient ally?"

"Do you plan to sacrifice humans to demons, implicitly threaten me, and put all of Heaven's Eye at risk of Imperial sanctions?"

"Definitely not on the first count; the second... I'll do my best; and the third, well, you know who I am. I might not be able to control Imperial sanctions."

"That's the best we can hope for, isn't? Well, I think we'll get along quite well as we prove ourselves trustworthy," the Director said. "Besides with your new position, you'll be able to hunt down vampires as you please. You won't have to answer to me as much as you would as one of my Hands, so do as you feel you must."

"That doesn't make much sense. How can a Chief of one of the six main branches of Heaven's Eye have that much free time?"

"As I said just a few minutes ago: the key to a good leader is mastering the art of delegation. Delegate your duties to those you trust and those who prove competent. You need only resolve conflicts between your various departments and provide your department heads with needed direction."

Leon smiled as he thought the matter over. He did say in the heat of the moment that he wanted the job, but he didn't want to lose all of his time to administrative busy work. Still, it presented such a fantastic opportunity that he didn't for a moment seriously think of going back on his declaration.

"All right," Leon said. "I'll begin today."

Chapter 773: Chief of Magical Research and Development

As he left the Hexagon, Leon was practically buzzing with excitement. He couldn't help it; he still didn't trust the Director—the thought that the man might still be in bed with vampires that wanted Leon and Xaphan dead still flitting through his mind—but being placed in charge of Magical Research and Development was a position of such power and influence that Leon was excited in spite of his misgivings.

All of Heaven's Eye's researchers would be at his beck and call. Effectively endless resources awaited him, and he could utilize those resources as he saw fit. There were better ways this could've been resolves, he was sure, but it was hard to imagine them in light of his new position.

For now, though, he was torn on what to do next. Being placed in charge of an entire branch of Heaven's Eye was a monumental thing, and he had no idea how to handle it. In short, he needed help, and he wasn't quite sure where he should look first to find that help.

The first person he thought of was Emilie. His mother-in-law had spent more than a decade now as Chief of Acquisitions, and he was certain she could help him out with getting on his feet with his new duties.

The second person he thought of was Elise. She was quite skilled in administration, and with some of his other retainers, he thought that he might be able to take care of a few things more easily...

The third person was Narses, but after thinking on it, he decided to simply return home as quickly as he could. Most of the rest of his retinue was already waiting for him right here, having not left after the unexpected end to Narses' attempt to arrest Rufus, so after linking up with them and having them head toward the tower that was now his, Leon took off into the air. He was breaking the law by flying, but right now, all he cared about was getting home as quickly as he could.

—

"This is incredible," Elise said, and not for the first time as she looked around the office.

Rufus' office, now hosting Leon, his family, and his retinue, was an opulent place. Marble and gold was the name of the game, and rich red carpets and furniture made of exotic materials like Heartwood, turtle shell, and ivory.

It wasn't exactly to Leon's taste, but fixing that wasn't even close to first on his to-do list.

He, Elise, and most of the rest of his retinue were going through Rufus' personal documents with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Elise and Talal were the two most taken with the task, and Elise in particular was reading through papers with a look of unabashed glee on her face.

"Find something interesting?" Valeria asked, clearly taking the opportunity to look up from her own stack of paper.

"Rufus had quite a few personal accounts," Elise explained with a look of magic glee in her eyes. "They're not exactly 'legal' accounts, and it wouldn't be too much trouble to take them over for ourselves..."

"How much?" Leon asked, his own patience strained from reading through Rufus' personal correspondence. Most of it was Rufus telling his department heads to get along, or to deal with the funding they'd been given, unfortunately. He'd been hoping for progress reports and the like.

"Billions," Elise replied, and Leon froze, then slowly turned his head toward his wife. Elise nodded furiously. "*Many* billions. And they're ours now."

Leon, his eyes wide, slowly looked away from Elise and let his gaze drift over the rest of his shocked retinue. He could barely even comprehend that much wealth, let alone that it was now his. At the very least, as he took in the mildly envious looks of his people, he knew what he could do with some of it.

"We'll have some accountants go over it," he said, "and once it's been cleared, I think a bonus of all of you will be in order. Maybe ten years' salary, at least?"

Rufus' former office practically shook as Leon's retainers cheered. However, that good cheer quickly cooled as someone knocked on the door and rather arrogantly forced their way in without waiting for an answer.

"What is the *meaning* of this?!" shouted the man. He appeared rather long-in-the-tooth, with short white hair, a few prominent wrinkles, and a face that reminded Leon of a weasel.

"Who are you and why are you bursting into my office?" Leon growled as he let his eighth-tier aura spill forth, his killing intent slamming into the man who'd so rudely barged in. The seventh-tier weasel froze in place, his eyes going wide.

"Y-Your office?" he gasped under the weight of Leon's aura.

"Yes. Answer my questions now."

"I am... I am Ephialtes!" the man gasped. "The... Vice-Chief!"

"Oh," Leon whispered as he narrowed his eyes. "Appointed by Rufus, were you?"

Ephialtes frowned and shuddered as Leon refused to let his aura abate. But after several long seconds of defiant scowling, he eventually nodded.

"All right," Leon said. "Talal, are you looking for a promotion?"

The Samarid barely reacted for a couple seconds, Leon's words clearly needing time to process. However, as he slowly turned his head toward Leon, his eyes widening, his aura roiling as exactly what Leon was offering him became clear.

"Leon...?" he murmured in confusion. "Are you...?"

"Offering you the job of Vice-Chief? Yes, yes I am." Leon smiled as Talal did his best impression of an air-drowning fish for a moment. "Look, Talal, I need people I can trust. Someone without any respect for proper decorum, like this guy whose name I've already forgotten, isn't that. Someone appointed by Rufus, like this guy whose name I've already forgotten, isn't that. Guy whose name I've already forgotten, you're fired. Leave."

Leon restrained his killing intent just enough for Ephialtes to suck in a breath of air and straighten himself out.

"This... you can't do this!" the weaselly man shouted.

"Well, that's awkward because I've already done it," Leon replied. "Talal will have you escorted as you grab your personal affects and then depart the building. I'll give you twenty minutes."

Talal, still clearly reeling from what Leon had just done, could only nod and dumbly stumble out of the office, Ephialtes furiously following him. Leon dimly heard Talal organizing some of the guards outside to follow through on what he'd just ordered, and the guards doing so. Fortunately, even though the Director had yet to make an official announcement, he'd given Leon all the required paperwork he needed to ensure that the security and other essential staff of the building knew who was now in charge.

Ephialtes simply hadn't yet gotten the memo, having been absent from the tower until seemingly just now.

"That was nice of you, Leon," Elise whispered. "Talal's done good work for us, it's good to see him rewarded, despite the circumstances of our meeting."

“Nice, and practical to boot!” Gaius agreed. “Talal’s proven himself a good man. Maybe a little arrogant in those early days, but good nonetheless.”

“Exactly,” Leon said. “He’s managed our affairs magnificently. I think for dealing with my horse shit, that he deserves a little compensation. So long as he doesn’t revert to how he was back in Akhmim, I think having him as a trustworthy Vice-Chief will only be to our benefit.”

“You’re only trying to foist off your responsibilities onto him, aren’t you?” Alix observed with a wry smile.

“I’m *delegating*,” Leon corrected with a sagely look. “I’m terrible at administration, let’s not beat around the bush about that. Talal is great at it. So, I just have to let him do what he does best, while I provide ‘direction’ and ‘solve disputes’, as the Director put it. And use Heaven’s Eye for my own personal ends, but that’s just a perk, isn’t it?”

“Practically what Rufus was doing, anyway,” Elise added. “Though, I think there’ll be less outright corruption with us in charge, right?”

“Just new management with new priorities,” Leon replied. “Not getting rich, but advancing our power and understanding of the universe. Now, where were we?”

As he turned his attention back to the correspondence, he could practically feel the disappointment and dejection in his retinue as they had to do likewise. There were a *lot* of papers here, and it would take quite a while to sort through.

—

Leon’s decision to appoint Talal to the position of Vice-Chief immediately began paying dividends. Since it was just Rufus and Ephialtes who were now being replaced, there wasn’t much paperwork that needed to be done quite yet. That would soon change, of course, but in less than a day, the Director made the public announcement that Leon was taking over for Rufus, and Talal had ensured that the announcement was heard throughout the tower and that the various labs and other holdings that answered to Leon’s position checked in.

By the next day, Tlaal had already gotten a summarized report of all of what all of the various departments in the Magical Research and Development branch were doing, and who was appointed by whom, and the various resources at Leon’s disposal.

The first thing that had to be done was a check-in with the department heads. Leon himself had to take charge during that meeting, but fortunately, it was a quiet and bureaucratic affair, though no less exciting for those reasons. The department heads had to come in and essentially present themselves before him. However, given that nearly all of them had been appointed by Rufus, Leon didn’t bother to remember most of their names, knowing that Talal, even without his explicit instructions, would fire most of them. Even with Rufus dead, Leon wasn’t going to continue to staff the most important positions within his branch with those who owed the dead Rufus any favors, connected as they might to vampires.

There were quite a few projects that Heaven’s Eye was involved in, and Leon was *very* disappointed that he simply didn’t have the time to immediately dive into the details of any of them. He still had Red down

in the Pegasi States to go and pick up, and he needed to check in with Tikos and Helen on the status of the thunder wood.

He trusted Talal to see to those aims, and to overhaul the branch's bureaucracy as needed, or whatever else a Chief of Vice-Chief of a branch of Heaven's Eye was supposed to do. For now, he just had to focus on his own projects.

On that note, he made the introductory meeting short, and left Talal in the tower to begin consolidating power while he returned home.

—

"So, how're things going?" Leon asked as he entered Helen's workshop. As was usual for the past few weeks, she, Elise, and Tikos were busy pouring over the thunder wood with many stacks of papers nearby filled with notes regarding its technical properties. Leon was actually rather surprised with just how many notes had been taken, and a quick glance at those closest had his eyes crossing. They were dense and so far beyond the base fundamentals of nature magic that he could barely make heads or tails of it.

"They're well going," Tikos responded, filling the air the scent of sweetness.

"Yeah!" Helen enthusiastically replied. "With Tikos here, we've been able to conduct tests on this thing far better than anything I could've done on my own! Honestly, even in just these few weeks spent studying it, we've done the work of years without our new friend!"

"Kind, you are very kind," Tikos responded.

"Leon," Elise breathed as she slid closer to Leon and gave him a quick hug. "Did things go well at Heaven's Eye?"

"Things are going at Heaven's Eye," Leon vaguely stated. "Too early to say."

"Understandable," she replied as she directed him towards several enchantment arrays inscribed upon large sheets of spell paper covering two nearby worktables. The arrays were dense and detailed, but he could see multiple gaps where the arrays were incomplete. "I need your help," Elise continued. "With Tikos' help, we've been formulating a few hypotheses about how this wood managed to trap lightning within it and how its properties changed as a result, but figuring it out completely isn't that easy given all of our relative lack of knowledge regarding lightning magic."

"And that's where I come in," Leon said with a smile. He wouldn't say that he was the most knowledgeable about lightning magic on the plane, but in his more arrogant moments, he figured that he had to be pretty close to the top at this point.

"Yes," Elise replied. "Let's go over this in as much detail as we can. If we're lucky, we might be able to send you south with a few enchantments to test."

"That would be... delightful," Leon exclaimed as calmly as he could, though his heart thrummed with excitement at the prospect of figuring this riddle out so quickly.

He spent the entire rest of the day locked in Helen's workshop going over the enchantments with Elise.

—

“Anything interesting in there?” Nestor asked as Leon stared at the reports in his hand, as he’d been doing for several hours.

Talal had been hard at work in the tower over the past day, and had already gotten rid of two of Rufus’ lackeys. It was hardly the purge that Leon had been expecting, but it had only been a day.

Still, a day had been more than enough time for Talal to have comprehensive reports on the big projects that Rufus had been sponsoring drafted and sent Leon’s way. For now, Talal would continue to see to the bureaucratic affairs of Leon’s new position, but Leon was far more interested in these reports, and had dove into his soul realm to look them over with Nestor upon receiving them.

Unfortunately, Leon hadn’t been too willing to read them aloud, and without his hands, Nestor couldn’t exactly read them himself, so Leon had quickly altered his plans and simply read them himself, only asking Nestor a few pointed questions as he made his way through the stacks of documents.

“A few things,” Leon replied. “There were a dozen ‘big’ projects that Rufus had initiated, but only three that really pique my interest. The rest are just the usual fare that large organizations like these generate. Important, to be sure, but not what I’m looking for.”

“Give me an example.”

Leon indicated the report he was reading at the moment and explained, “This is research into Hesperidic Apples and seeing if their effects of aiding mages in ascending through the tiers no matter what tier they’re currently at can be replicated artificially. The research was relatively promising for the lower tiers—up to the fourth-tier—but since it has no relevance for me, it’s less interesting than some of the other reports.”

“Helping a mage to reach the fourth-tier artificially is hardly anything to turn your nose at,” Nestor observed.

“True, but given that up to the fifth-tier, ascending through the tiers involves absorbing magic power and adapting your power to its use, there already exists many alchemical solutions to that problem.”

“Those come with sideeffects, like creating flaws in your body’s adaptations that make a mage weaker than they should be. What about the results of this research?”

“Inconclusive so far. Not enough time for thorough testing. But I’m not saying that this research is pointless, all I’m saying is that there are other things I want to prioritize. And so far, I’ve found three ‘big’ projects that Rufus was working on that align with my interests.”

“Only three?”

Leon nodded in confirmation. “This one,” he said as he picked up a particularly thick report, “is one that attempts to create some kind of armored vehicle in the style of the horseless carriages that can act as a platform for large Lance-like weapons. As far as I can tell, they managed to get a prototype of such an armed vehicle running, but its power requirements are so great that it’s not yet been made practical.”

“Interesting,” Nestor said with some appreciation. “Such vehicles aren’t unheard of in the Nexus—our Clan even had quite a few, though they weren’t particularly suited for the job of taking over this plane, so they were left behind.”

“Really?” Leon asked in mild disbelief. “An armored vehicle bearing a Lance, and you left it behind?”

“They’re powerful and heavily armored, but slow and, as you’ve just indicated, require vast amounts of power. We didn’t anticipate running into any challenges that they’d be more suited to handle as opposed to a powerful mage, and we were correct.”

Leon sighed, but didn’t press the issue. He’d get a better understanding of just what Heaven’s Eye had managed to create when he returned from the Pegasi States. For now, he simply moved on to the second report, this one much thinner than the last one.

“This one has to do with golems, as far as I can tell. To my understanding, a golem frame is created with complex enchantments, but it’s powered, animated, and given its driving will with a wisp, a semi-intelligent sentient creature made of magic that a post-Apotheosis mage can create.”

“Correct in essence...”

“Well, Heaven’s Eye was attempting to create something like a golem using only enchantments. Again, it ran into power problems and the fact that the enchantments had to be impossibly complex.”

“Of course,” Nestor said with a derisive snort. “Wisps are by far the better option—for a golem to be even remotely animated by just a simple power source and enchantments, the enchantments have to be so incredibly small, fine, and detailed as to be essentially impossible. Not *entirely* impossible, of course, but it would require an enchanter of staggering skill and post-Apotheosis strength, at which point, using a wisp is simply the better option.”

“These were the problems this research team was trying to solve,” Leon said. “Miniaturization of enchantments and how to power the damn thing.”

“Mhmm.”

“Do you notice the theme so far, Nestor?”

“That it’s weapons or automatons that can be slaved to you that have interested you so far?”

“I mean, sure, if you want to put it that way—I wouldn’t, but that’s beside the point—the problems faced so far have been twofold: intricacy of enchantments, and power requirements. I believe that if the miniaturization of enchantments problem can be solved, then the enchanters we already have are skilled enough to put something together that’ll work. More concerning are the power requirements: they’re staggering for their purposes.”

“As would be expected. Lances and golems eat power like you wouldn’t believe, and in the case of the former, are typically only installed on large weapons platforms like arks or sea ships where they can easily be fed massive amounts of power from what those large vessels already have.”

“But we already have a solution for that, don’t we?”

“Do we? Funny, I don’t seem to recall you studying how to forge power crystals or refine Titanstone...”

“No, dead man, I’m talking about thunder wood!”

Nestor went quiet for a long moment, then whispered, “You know, that might actually work. Using thunder wood in place of power crystals *could* be feasible. We’d need better data on how much power thunder wood is capable of generating, though.”

“Which means we need more thunder wood, which, thanks to Tikos, I’m on track to getting fairly soon.”

Leon let that statement hang in the air for a long moment before he gloatingly said, “Does it sting that in a matter of weeks, I’ll have the answer that your subordinates failed to acquire in the years they had that piece of thunder wood?”

“I know what you’re getting at, Leon, and I’d prefer if you just moved on,” Nestor said, his voice emanating from his ruby like it was coming through clenched teeth.

Leon smirked, but again, didn’t press the issue. Instead, he grabbed the last project that had piqued his interest. It was a larger report than that of the golems, but not quite as extensive as that of the armored vehicle.

“Blood magic,” he said with some dis

Chapter 774: Picking Up a Wyvern

As Leon stared down at the work he’d just finished, he was greatly impressed—and not with his small part in the enchantment. He’d needed to lend his expertise with lightning magic for his thunder wood research team’s work, and while he was proud of what he’d done, it was paltry compared to what his people had accomplished before him. With Helen and Elise’s nature magic skill and Tikos’ natural affinity, they’d finished in just a matter of weeks a prototype enchantment that might, *might* just be able to recreate some thunder wood.

And they hadn’t even needed to sacrifice any slaves to do it. Despite this monumental achievement, though, Leon resisted the urge to rub it in Nestor’s face. He wasn’t necessarily above the gloating, but he wanted to see if the enchantment actually worked before indulging in anything so unproductive.

“Remind me what I’ll be looking for,” Leon growled in excited impatience. He was to leave for the Pegasi States in a matter of hours, and he wanted to be damned sure that he was ready when he finally departed.

“Look for *very* old trees,” Helen replied, showing all the patience that Leon found himself lacking. “Oak would be ideal, but it’s not required.”

Leon lightly frowned, then sarcastically stated, “Of course, I’m an expert on trees. Know all about trees, I do. But just in case someone in this room doesn’t know how to tell an oak tree from a hole in the wall...?”

“Oaks have acorns,” Helen explained with bright smile, absent judgment.

“Just ask around, husband,” Elise lightly chided, an easygoing smile of her own playing at her lips. “I’m sure the various Tower Lords on your way will jump at the chance to help you look for ancient trees.”

"I'll just have to do that, then." Leon was a little embarrassed, but he'd never studied trees. He knew about as much as he needed to about forest ranging, but there hadn't been any oak trees in the Forest of Black and White, and that's where all of his expertise came from.

Putting that embarrassment aside, Leon sighed with suppressed excitement. If he wanted to find a tree, then the best place to go was undoubtedly the southeast, but the great forests that blanketed that corner of the continent were under the purview of the Forest Watchers, and to Leon's understanding, outsiders were rarely granted entrance into their lands. The Pegasi States, meanwhile, were relatively lightly forested. He would be flying over much of the Ilian and Sunlit Empires, though, and he was sure there might be a few nice and old oak trees on the way that might be sufficient for testing purposes.

As he contemplated the hunt ahead of him, his eyes turned toward Tikos. The enchantment devised by his people which he'd just placed the finishing touches on was powerful and exceedingly complex, but even it wasn't sufficient on its own to create thunder wood. Tikos would have to work its own magic on any tree that Leon found to prepare it for conversion.

However, with the Hesperidic grove still being set up, Leon didn't want to drag Tikos away just yet. And yet, he didn't just want to collect information on possible trees; he wanted to test their work out at the same time.

"Tikos," he said, "will you be coming with me?"

Instead of immediately responding, Tikos started to channel its power and slowly walked toward Leon.

"Here, for Leon," the tree sprite said as a gorgeous flower bloomed on its arm. It resembled a lotus, but its petals glowed with ghostly white-blue light similar to the ethereal leaves of the trees of Tikos' older and more powerful fellows. It was large enough to fit quite well in his hand, but Leon remembered Tikos showing off flowers on its arms like this when discussing whether it was male or female.

"What... is this...?" Leon tentatively asked, feeling too awkward to just take the offered flower, wondering if that could be considered pulling off the tree sprite's reproductive organs.

"A bud," Tikos explained. "Bears power of mine. It will channel power of mine. I can speak through this flower and use my power through this flower. If you find an old growth, then you can place this flower on it and I will use my power in readiness."

"I see," Leon said as he carefully plucked the beautifully glowing lotus from Tikos' arm. "How many of these can you make?"

"Many," Tikos responded, its alien tone rather ambivalent.

Leon nodded, interest and greed blooming in his heart faster than the flower had bloomed on Tikos' arm. "Well, we're just going to have to go over *that* when I get back..." He sent Elise a meaningful look, and given her eyes were practically shining as she stared at Tikos, he guessed that the possibilities of what this flower could mean for them had occurred to her, too.

With all of that done, he gathered up the created enchantment, the thing being so large that it stretched over several dozen square feet of spell paper despite the constituent runes being tiny, and pulled it into his soul realm. He then hesitated for a moment before doing the same thing with Tikos' flower. If it

could channel Tikos' power, then placing it in his soul realm was a calculated risk, but he trusted in Tikos' pacifism if in nothing else.

And with that, it was time for him to make his final preparations to head south and pick up Red.

—

"You don't have to go alone, you know," Gaius said as Leon made his last preparations for his journey in his villa's inner courtyard.

"You offering to come with me?" Leon asked with a sarcastic smile.

"I won't lie, I'd prefer to stay here," Gaius admitted. "However, it doesn't sit well with me that you're heading off alone."

"I move faster on my own, and I won't be alone for long," Leon replied. "Not like anyone's going to be foolish enough to attack me on the way, I don't think."

"All right," Gaius said with some resignation, but he wasn't the only one with that thought in their mind.

Leon's entire retinue, save for Talal and Anshu, had gathered to see him off, and he could feel Valeria and Maia's eyes burning holes in his back. They'd shared their vigorous goodbyes the night before, but Leon was already well aware that Maia didn't like being away from him for too long, and Valeria hated being left behind.

But his mind was made up. He wanted to get Red and get home as soon as he possibly could, and that meant he had to travel as fast as he possibly could. That necessitated leaving the others behind.

So, as he finished his preparations, Leon turned to the friendliest, relatively speaking, pair of eyes in the courtyard: the blood-red eyes of his griffin.

"You'll take care of everyone here, won't you?" he asked Anzu.

Anzu chirped, but it was low and a far cry from the happy, joyous vocalizations he usually made. Leon cheered him up a little bit with a minute of head rubs, but the griffin was still reluctant to part.

Finally turning to address his family and retinue as a whole, he declared, "I should be back within a week. Be careful and watch out for vampires."

When he finished that statement, he watched Marcus, Alcander, Helen, and Anna all react quite negatively to the prospect of facing vampires without him. Alcander shivered, Marcus frowned and averted his gaze, Helen shrank back in apparent unconscious fear, and Anna scowled and flexed her sword arm. All four had suffered at the hands of vampires, and he had to admit to some regret at having not adequately addressed that, yet.

'When I get home...' he swore to himself. Hopefully, by then Valentina might've sent word back on her decision to accept Xaphan's contract or not. He was eager to learn whatever she could teach on the subject of enchantments.

But now, it was time to set out. He said one last goodbye to everyone, sharing a quick intimate moment with Elise, Valeria, and Maia, and then activated a newly-installed enchantment in the courtyard that

created a shroud of darkness around him. It didn't make him invisible, it merely obstructed his form from view. Once the shroud had been fully realized, Leon took one moment to examine it, and when he was satisfied that it was working properly, he pulled his clothes into his soul realm. With the shroud hiding his body from the others, he activated his transformation enchantment.

When the shroud was lifted less than a minute later, he stood in his courtyard in his avian form, towering above everyone else. With only one last look around, he took off, his powerful wings and magic taking him high into the sky with just a few mighty beats.

He reveled in his flight. He hadn't transformed much in the past eleven years, not wanting to make his strong association with the Thunderbird too obvious to those less accepting of his ties, but now was different. He was a Chief of one of Heaven's Eye's main branches, and he simply didn't care as much as he did even just a few months ago—less so for the Ilian Empire's restrictions on flight.

With this feeling in his heart, he ecstatically flew through the sky, his body mostly hidden thanks to it being a cloudy day.

—

It was a long journey south to Utavi, though one undergone relatively quickly. The state of Utavi itself was small in absolute terms, but relative to the other Pegasi States, it was quite large. It lay on the eastern coast of the region, with enviable access to the Veins of Vigilance thanks to many fantastic natural harbors.

Utavi itself was quite beautiful, in a stark way. Its hinterland was fairly hilly and bereft of much vegetation. It was dry and hot, but those few trees that did grow in the area were the extremely tall variety that were also scattered all over the Scorched Fields just a stone's throw west.

However, compared to the sights he'd seen flying down, Utavi wasn't much of a spectacle. It seemed just an average state, if a little richer compared to the rest of the Pegasi States.

Over the past few days, Leon had flown for thousands of miles, rarely stopping to rest—only really doing so when he found fairly large forests that promised to hold potential ancient oak trees. However, so far, he'd come up empty on that front.

What he'd taken far more interest in was his first real look at the Sunlit Empire. Flying many miles above the plane, Leon could see a great distance before everything faded into gray haze, and what he'd seen of the Sunlit Empire had been almost spine-tinglingly surreal. Leon guessed that if his eighteen-year-old self could be teleported from the Bull Kingdom to the Sunlit Empire, he likely wouldn't have immediately noticed anything was wrong. The sheer size of many of the great public works and richer villas and the magical wealth on display would've inevitably given away that he wasn't in the Bull Kingdom anymore, but other than that, the architectural style and aesthetic sensibilities he saw were so like those of the Bull Kingdom that Leon couldn't help but be suspicious.

The Sunlit Empire was all white stone and red roof tiles, columns and marble statues lining every boulevard, men and women walking around in fashion that looked surprisingly close to what Leon would've seen in Ariminium on any given day.

Had he not been in a hurry, he would've stopped in the Sunlit Empire for a short while, if only to take in the ambience. The place also apparently had an abundance of lightning mages, so Leon was also rather curious as to what he might be able to learn within the Empire, but Red had to come first.

And so, when he finally arrived in Utavi, the small state's capital situated on the coast hardly seemed all that special.

On his final approach, Leon put some faith in the fact that he was so high above the ground that he doubted any mages he could sense down below had any idea he was there, and shifted back into his human form with all haste, then dressed himself. As he plummeted, he caught himself with his magic and controlled his descent while bathing the city below in his magic senses.

By his reckoning, the city was home to about half a million people, but the local Heaven's Eye enclave was still easy enough to spot. It wasn't any larger than it was in the Bull Kingdom's capital, comprised of just the Tower, a few large warehouses, and the Tower Lord's palace, but the Tower still towered over its surroundings, doing much to dominate the city's skyline.

Leon drew quite a bit of attention when he gracefully landed in the courtyard in front of the Tower, but he ignored all stares and immediately entered. The Tower here followed the standard Tower design to a t, with him emerging into a large lounge area filled with black-dressed attendants and rich-looking guests.

He'd barely been approached by an attendant before the lifts in the back opened and an older man came walking out as fast as dignity would allow, his seventh-tier aura flickering with anxiety.

The Tower Lord.

It turned out the Tower Lord knew Leon by sight, the Director having sent along Leon's likeness to all those of sufficient rank in Heaven's Eye across the plane, as was standard practice when a new Chief of a branch was selected. Leon, to his immense relief, barely even had to say a word before he was being escorted to a small guest palace nearby where Red was being boarded.

The palace was as heavily warded as could be expected, explaining why Leon wasn't able to sense Red until now. The wyvern was in human form when Leon was shown to her location. She'd been napping in the thickest part of the guest palace's gardens, behind a number of bushes and beneath some kind of willow tree, damn near invisible to the naked eye despite her eye-catching scarlet hair and striking dress made of what looked like red silk.

As Leon sauntered toward her, he rustled her hair and dress with a gentle gust of wind, and despite this light magical touch, as soon as her hair made the tiniest wave in his wind, her amber reptilian eyes flashed open, and she sprang to her feet. Her aura practically exploded out of her and a wave of killing intent swept over the garden, but after a moment, she restrained all of that, her eyes having landed upon Leon as he sauntered over, completely unperturbed by her turbulent aura.

Red stepped out of the bushes and stood before him, her arms crossed, her eyes narrow, the distinct red scales surrounding her eyes glittering in the sun like vivid red agates.

"Red," Leon said in greeting as those who'd escorted him to the palace made themselves scarce.

The wyvern-in-human-form frowned, opened her mouth several times, frowned even deeper, then spoke to him mentally.

[It's about damn time,] she said, not speaking in words, though her intent was carried through anyway. [I have been waiting for too long.]

"If you didn't want to wait, maybe you shouldn't have come so early?" Leon retorted. "I suppose that brings me to my first question, which we can get out of the way now: what's going on that you showed up half an Ancestor's damned year early?"

[Trying to raise my young bored me,] she admitted. [Constantly nipping and fighting amongst themselves. After one of my young ate another while I slept, I lost all patience and left.]

"You... abandoned your children?" Leon asked, his tone flash-freezing.

[They're old enough to hunt,] Red brushed off. [I had no need to stick around at that point.]

Leon felt his face harden into a scowl. "Then why ask for a year?"

[I might've wanted to rest,] Red replied. [Raising young is tiring.]

"It sounds like you didn't actually raise them."

[It sounds like you don't have any idea what you're talking about.]

Leon stared at Red, wondering just how big of a deal he wanted to make out of this. On one hand, he absolutely hated the idea of leaving children behind. It disturbed him fiercely, and if Red were actually human, he would've been tempted to make her shorter by a head, let alone accepting her into his retinue. But she wasn't human. He barely even considered himself able to comment on how humans raise their kids, let alone something like a seventh-tier wyvern with an utterly alien world view and value system.

"Is that... how you were raised?" he asked.

[Indeed,] Red replied.

Leon sighed. His scowl didn't go anywhere, but he dropped the topic, for the time being. He could only hope that having Red in his retinue would help her to a more human outlook. He wasn't that confident in any lessons sticking, though.

"Well, then... let's get moving."

[Already? You don't want to rest?]

"Absolutely fucking not. I have things to do, and they aren't going to wait around for me. So, it's back to Occulara as fast as our wings can carry us."

Red nodded, and her clothes vanished back into her soul realm revealing a sight that any lady lover would've killed to witness. However, it was barely visible for a second before Red's body was covered in gleaming red scales and began to grow.

“Not quite what I had in mind, but all right,” Leon muttered as he did likewise. His transformation went much quicker, and he was able to send a mental message to the local Tower Lord that he wasn’t going to stick around and not to wait up for him. He was sure he just raised quite a few questions with the man, but he hoped the Tower Lord was prepared to live with those questions unanswered.

Once they were both back in their animalistic forms, Leon and Red took off. Leon moved quicker, and Red followed as close behind as she could. Leon first flew straight up, not wanting to cause a scene with a giant eagle and even more massive wyvern swooping over Utavi’s capital. He didn’t level out until he was several miles in the air once again.

Once Red got up that high with him, he set off for the north. It had only been a few days, but he was already raring to get home and get back to work so he could exploi—*make efficient use* of his new position.

Chapter 775: Changing Course

Leon and Red made good time as they flew north. Leon was in no mood at all to stop for rest, he just wanted to get back to Occulara as soon as he could.

It seemed that Red agreed with him—or at least, felt no need to argue against Leon’s tacit goal. That was, at least, until about two days into their journey, when they were drawing to within a hundred miles of the border the Sunlit Empire shared with the Ilian Empire, when Leon suddenly started to dive.

[What’s going on?] she asked, breaking silence for the first time since they’d left Utavi.

[I saw something that I have to check out,] Leon replied.

What he saw, his avian eyes glittering with greed, was a large tree. Not incredibly large—Heartwood trees, the huge trees of the Scorched Fields, and the massive homes of the Protia Forest’s ruling tree sprites dwarfed what he’d just seen—but as far as more common trees went, this one was quite large.

It didn’t have a single central trunk, but instead had many relatively thin trunks emerging from the ground and stretching outwards and upwards. Other than its relative size, it would’ve otherwise been completely unremarkable, save for the fact that Leon had noticed the forest they were flying over was filled with oak trees, acorns hanging from their limbs.

‘This might just be what I’ve been looking for...’ Leon thought to himself.

When he landed, he immediately transformed back into his human form and dressed himself. Red came to a surprisingly graceful landing close by, considering her size, and followed suit.

[What is this, Leon?] she demanded.

“A project I’ve been working on. Don’t worry, Occulara isn’t going anywhere, we can afford to stop for a few minutes or a few hours.”

Red scowled, but didn’t respond, so Leon considered the matter settled, at least for now. So, he turned his attention back to the tree and conjured Tikos’ glowing lotus. He felt Red’s attention slide from him to the lotus, and her scowl lessened slightly at the peaceful magic it emanated.

“Uhh, Tikos?” he asked aloud, feeling just a little unsure if the flower worked as Tikos had advertised.

He waited a moment, just long enough for his doubt to flex, when Tikos responded, [Leon. Greetings.] The lotus shuddered in Leon's hand as Tikos' magic pulsed through it, and Leon broke out into a wide smile.

This thing was... in a word, *incredible*, but he saved his further thoughts for when he could get back to Occulara and pick Tikos' brain—or whatever its equivalent was—about just what limits this flower had in terms of communication and power transference.

"Right," Leon said, forcing himself to again focus on the task at hand. "I found a large oak tree. I have no idea how old it might be, would you be able to check?"

[Place lotus mine against tree,] Tikos instructed, and Leon complied. He approached the tree and carefully set the lotus down atop one of the large branches that stretched out more horizontally than vertically so that the lotus could rest atop it rather than having to be pressed against the tree.

He didn't have to do anything more, for he'd only taken a single step backward when the lotus pulsed again with Tikos' power, but this time much more powerfully. Roots as thin as spider silk sprang from the stem of the lotus and wrapped themselves around the trunk of the tree. For several seconds, it was like a flood, feet and feet and feet of roots erupting from the lotus and winding around the tree, until they stopped without any warning at all.

[What creature is this...?] Red wondered aloud. [A strange being you carried with you, Leon.]

"In a way, I guess," Leon replied. "Just something from a tree sprite friend of mind."

Red recoiled and her scowl returned. [Tree sprites are worthless beings.]

"How so?" Leon asked, genuinely curious if she had any kind of reason for her outburst.

[No meat,] she simply said. [Not good to eat.]

"Living beings are more than their nutritional value," Leon said.

Red's scowl deepened and she glared at the lotus. [This power threatens.]

"You're dangerous, too. But in the case of Exotikos, they're not at all violent. In fact, their people seem to abhor violence. You needn't worry about them."

Red bared her teeth and huffed, something that would've been much more intimidating had she been in her wyvern form, but seemed almost comical as she was now. Regardless, before she could say anything more, Tikos spoke up.

[This tree is fairly old,] it said. [However, it's not quite ideal old enough. Possible to try, learn something might we with experiment?]

"I'd be down to try," Leon said as he conjured the massive, terribly intricate enchantment he and his research team had devised. "Might want to stand back there, Red, if you don't want to get zapped."

Red, still frowning quite deeply, took a few steps back, but not as many as Leon had hoped. Regardless, he just shrugged and continued his preparations. Red was strong, and she'd been warned. Given the

power he and Tikos were going to use for this experiment, he doubted she'd be injured for anything more than a couple of days even if she were to stand atop the tree when the enchantment activated.

So, Leon just set about attaching the enchantment to one of the exposed roots at the base of the tree as he reached into the sky with his power. As his power inundated the heavens, storm clouds rapidly gathered, ruining the otherwise perfectly bright and sunny afternoon. The forest seemed to realize what was about to happen as Leon could hear the forest's background noise increase as the native fauna scrambled for cover.

Once enough storm clouds had gathered, Leon took a deep breath, and pressed his hand against the spell paper, letting his power flow into the enchantment and be directed according to the inscribed glyphs. At the same time, he summoned lightning from the clouds above, targeting the oak.

As his power flowed through the enchantment, it rushed throughout the oak and began twisting and turning in ways that he was too inexperienced with nature magic to understand. It felt like his power had turned into roots that were forcing their way through the bark and into the heart of the tree. As his summoned lightning, gold in color, began striking the tree, lightning surged through the tree and through these roots of power.

Leon had seen many trees struck by lightning before, and oftentimes, the bolts would carve deep trenches in the bark, burning everything they touched and leaving the trees scarred and blackened by heat. However, Leon's lightning barely even singed the upper branches before being absorbed into the tree.

The tree began to vibrate and roar with contained thunder, while its many thick branches shuddered and cracked under the strain of storing so much violent power. One branch practically exploded as lightning erupted from its surface. Another branch cracked so deeply that it snapped clean off, letting another torrent of lightning pour out and scorch the surroundings.

After several long seconds, Leon let go of his power, and the last bolt fell upon the tree. The tree continued to vibrate for several more seconds, but with two of its largest branches gone, the power Leon had filled it with leaking out, it was unable to retain his lightning. It shook again with the sound of thunder, several arcs of purple-ish lightning danced about in its upper branches, and then fell still.

This attempt to create more thunder wood had failed, but having watched the whole thing, Leon still couldn't help but smile. It was an enlightening experience, and one that told him they were on the right track.

Agreeing with his instincts, Tikos, through its lotus that was still wrapped around an intact branch, said, "Promising start, many further to go."

"Indeed," Leon whispered as he took the lotus back, his golden eyes staring at the tree's upper branches. He'd never seen that particular shade of lightning before, and he wondered just what that meant...

Once he'd separated Tikos' lotus from the tree, the roots that had sprouted from it shriveled up and disintegrated.

"Bring some this wood," Tikos requested. "Much testing needs done."

“Can do,” Leon replied as he swept his hand out in front of him, pulling as much of the tree into his soul realm as he could. It didn’t go easily, however, being wider than most of his modular villa’s compartments. Still, he squeezed and stretched, and managed to pull the tree in, leaving only a few pieces of debris and a couple errant roots behind.

Once he finished, Red finally walked over, her amber eyes narrow and her mouth turned downward in a concerned frown.

[What was this?] she asked.

“An attempt to create a kind of super material,” Leon explained. “We can talk about it on the way back, so why don’t we get back into the air?”

Red hesitantly nodded, and soon enough they were both back in their respective beast forms and flying quite quickly northward. However, as they got started, Leon noticed an object flying toward them at high speed: an ark. It was small, so much so that he couldn’t imagine it had a crew of more than half a dozen. However, it was moving *fast*, and moving straight towards them.

[Move!] Leon shouted as he flapped his wings and called upon his wind magic to speed him up even more. Red did similar with her power, allowing her to just barely keep up with him.

The ark behind then turned slightly in their direction, but rather than following them, it instead slowed down over where the tree had just been.

‘Did we draw attention with that display?’ Leon wondered, notionally frowning. *‘We’re out in the middle of nowhere, how did they notice this? It wasn’t that powerful...’*

After flying in several slow, wide circles, the ark turned back toward them and began following, but at a respectable distance. They were still in the Sunlit Empire, and not wanting to cause any complicated incidents, Leon just kept flying, not attacking the ark, but not losing sight of it, either. It only waved off once Leon and Red reached the border with the Ilian Empire less than an hour later.

[Why let those humans go?] Red asked, having remained otherwise silent once they’d taken back to the air, simply following Leon’s lead.

[How have they harmed us?] Leon asked in response. [I’ll admit feeling curious as to why they came this way at all, but can we really fault them for that?] At this point, while he was still speaking with Red, he recognized that he was speaking more to himself than to her. [They didn’t attack us, so why not let them go?]

[They’ll remember this,] Red rebutted. [Safer for us to silence them forever.]

[Again, though, why? Have we done something shameful? Have we showed weakness?]

[We ran from them. That is weakness. They advanced, and we retreated.]

[We weren’t fighting, so why look at it that way?]

[All life is a battle. We all fight for our own resources. If we’re strong, we subjugate those around us and take their resources. If we’re weak, the strong will take ours.]

[Like that black wyvern did for you?]

[Yes,] Red responded without even the tiniest hint of changing her way of thinking, though there were a few traces of anger in her mental tone. [I was too weak to deal with my mate, and had to pay the price. I believe you humans have a similar concept: taxes.]

[Taxes are a little different. They're meant to fund government institutions which are then supposed to provide for common security and prosperity. Taxes are thus for the benefit of all, and when they're used for the benefit of only the already-powerful, it's generally seen as shameful and corrupt. Not that that stops some people...]

Red growled aloud and seemed to spit derisively into his mind, [Humans.] She said no more on the topic, so instead, Leon began telling her in greater detail of just what he'd been trying to do with the tree, and what he and his people had been doing for the past half year.

Once he'd finished, they'd started flying over more urban regions. So far, they'd flown mostly over the more sparsely-inhabited western region of the Sunlit Empire, with its cities mostly located further east. However, the Ilian Empire was vast and heavily urbanized, even more than two days' flight south from its heartland.

[So,] Leon asked once he'd finished his story, [Any questions on all of that?]

Red remained quiet.

[Any observations so far? We're flying over human lands, now, have any impressions?]

Red snapped, though it came off as more thoughtful than anything else.

[Good land, ruined,] she growled. [Land for prey to run and grow is best, this... *farmland* is a blight.]

[It's ruined much of the wild, that's for sure,] Leon commiserated. [However, it's ensured a great abundance of food for the Ilian Empire, and with that abundance of food came a great population.]

[Great numbers for wyverns is a thing to dread,] Red replied.

[Wyverns are solitary creatures, aren't they? You don't form family bonds, or any other such bonds, do you?]

Red clicked her teeth in what Leon assumed was agreement.

[Humans are more communal. We're not as naturally strong as wyverns, but our ability to organize and work together has made us the masters of the known world.]

[And what of the unknown world?]

[I can't say, I don't know it. But I think that given enough time, we'll become masters of that world, too. We just need some time.]

[The blight of humanity, growing incessantly,] Red grumbled.

[Hardly, growth is at least as common as stagnation and contraction... which I guess flies in the face of what I just said, doesn't it? We're definitely going to need to get you acquainted with some better philosophers than me once we get back to Occulara.]

Silence descended upon them again, and after a while feeling exceptionally awkward, Leon asked her, [Is there anything at all you want to see or do first? You decided to come with me to see and experience new things, isn't that right? To see what pleasures and delights that human civilization can bring?]

[I... would eat,] Red said, her tone changing to something much more curious than spiteful for the first time in their conversation. [Many things I have witnessed humans eat, but until that night I spent in your camp, I had never tasted human food. I wish to know what it is.]

[That can easily be arranged. The chefs that work in my estate are some of the best in the human world, and there are so many restaurants in Occulara that if they can't make something to your tastes, then another will surely rise to the challenge. Food's easy, thanks to all this *farmland*.]

As they flew, Leon let his eyes drift downward, taking in the sights. They were flying relatively close to an Ilian city of medium size, and even from many miles outside of the city, with his power and avian eyes, Leon could see any public thing in the city that he wanted to with perfect clarity.

However, as his gaze drifted over the local Heaven's Eye branch, he immediately grew concerned as he saw people running around between the local enclave's few buildings with much greater panic than he'd ever seen before. When he glanced toward what he took to be the local government buildings, he saw a similar scene. However, most of the people in the city continued going about their daily lives seemingly without any particular care, the rush that everyone in Heaven's Eye and the local government not permeating throughout the city.

'What's going on?' Leon wondered.

He continued flying, reasoning that if whatever was going on didn't have the people in a frenzy, then it probably wasn't *that* important, and he could just check in on it when he got back to Occulara. It was probably just some local concern, he was sure.

Or at least, he was sure until he and Red drew close enough to Occulara for Maia's magic to reach them—a distance of some eight hundred-ish miles.

[Leon!] Maia urgently said into his mind, her voice sounding rather shaky and distant even with their connection thanks to the sheer distance between them.

[What's going on?] Leon asked as he cast his gaze back at the city he and Red had so recently passed and its panicking upper-class.

[We've been trying to reach out to you, but Tikos can't speak to you with the lotus in your soul realm!] Maia explained. [There's something *really* big happening, and Elise asked me to reach out as soon as I could.]

Leon slowed his flight and gave Red a brief explanation while Maia went to find Elise to relay the message. As he waited, Leon flew in lazy circles over some Ilian farmland so high above the ground that he and Red were practically invisible in the sky.

After waiting for several minutes, Maia spoke again, having found Elise.

[Relaying,] the river nymph said, [Argos has come under attack and before we lost contact with them, the Imperial fleets further south reported contact with Sky Devils. Leon, it looks like the Sky Devils are trying to launch an invasion. The Imperial fleets were caught unprepared and Argos is under siege.]

Leon's eyes widened in shock, and he turned to face the southeast. Argos was another three days or so in that direction at his usual pace, but he felt like he could shave a day off if he had to.

'The remnants of my Clan's vassals...' he thought to himself. He'd always wanted to get into some kind of contact with them, and here they were attacking Argos. Still, he couldn't help but feel a deep sense of conflict as he wondered what he should do. *'Defend Argos? Is that the right move? Try and covertly meet with the Sky Devils? Do nothing at all and continue home?'*

As if she could sense his inner conflict—and given their connection, she probably *could* even over this vast distance—Maia went quiet for a moment, then said, [Elise says that we should help defend Argos. Heaven's Eye has many interests there, and Penelope has already been deployed to defend those interests.]

If Leon could've scowled then, he would've. Instead, with his heart still conflicted, he beat his wings and began flying southeast, a curious Red just behind him. At the very least, he couldn't exactly return home after that message.

So, just before he left Maia's range again, he told her—and the rest of his family and retinue by extension—that he was on his way to Argos. He didn't say what he was going to do once he got there.

Chapter 776: Argos I

Argos was an old city. Not quite as ancient as some of the most venerable cities on the plane, like Occulara or Ilion, but it had a long history. The site the city had been built on had a fantastic natural port, opening right out on the Argonaut Sea while having a series of hilly islands further out protecting it from the worst weather that the sea could throw at it, each one fortified with a tower and handful of Imperial Lances.

The original city had been little more than a fortress with a town to see to its logistics. The fortress had been erected to protect against retaliation from the fleeing Sky Devils when the nascent Empires realized that they couldn't pursue their quarry across the sea. Over time, that fortress grew, with a massive wall and series of towers protecting the town, while a secondary wall was magically built of stone out at sea. The sea wall was supplemented by additional massive towers, each capped with Imperial Lances, while the town around the fortress grew even more as the city's port increased in size and importance. The Imperial administration even went so far as to construct a secondary port further inland, connected to the sea by a wide and heavily fortified canal, where only Imperial ships could dock. Even Heaven's Eye had to use the primary harbor.

All in all, Argos was heavily defended, with a garrison of more than fifty thousand Imperial soldiers, mostly drawn from the Sunlit Empire, and with a powerful, if relatively small, fleet permanently stationed there to defend it. Combined with the Lances atop both of the city's walls and the island towers, the city was commonly thought to be invincible.

As Leon and Red finally drew close enough to lay eyes on the city for themselves around midnight two days after receiving Maia's relayed message, they found that it was anything but invincible. The Imperial fleet burned just outside the sea wall, half of the sea wall's towers had been destroyed, along with their Lances, all of the towers on the islands had been leveled, and it was clear that the Sky Devils hadn't paid anywhere near enough for those losses to be considered acceptable to any competent commander.

The Sky Devils were present in great numbers. Hundreds of ships of varying size, with more than fifty immense ships that carried powerful Lances of their own that ceaselessly hammered the sea wall, determined to either break through the wall's sealed sea gates, or break through the wall itself. Above the wall, Leon could see something far more terrifying, however: arks, three of them, and each one with four Lances of their own. These Lances, unlike the Imperial Lances and those on the Sky Devils' sea fleet, didn't spit balls of molten stone or metal, but bolts of dark red lightning that had his hair standing on end as they rained down upon the wall. In addition, swarming over the city were riders on flying beasts, mostly pegasi, while a comparatively small number of Imperial forces attempted to fend them off.

Fortunately for the Argonauts, the Sky Devils, while having done considerably damage to the sea wall and having flown over it with their aerial forces, had yet to crack the inner wall, where Leon could see many Imperial soldiers mustering in preparation for their stand against their besiegers. The city's civilian population was in the process of either fleeing or taking shelter.

But Leon, for the moment, had eyes only for the local Heaven's Eye enclave—a sizable district just inside the inner wall. The district was fairly well fortified itself, with a wall surrounding the district—though not even slightly comparable to the inner wall in size, thickness, or armament. The huge square in front of the local Tower was more promising for the enclave's defense, with seven or eight hundred Heaven's Eye security forces assembled. Standing at their head barking orders were several mages, all eighth-tier.

The first was easily recognizable: Penelope, clearly in command. The second was also directing many security forces, so Leon assumed him to be the local Tower Lord. The third and fourth were people he vaguely recognized as being two of the Director's Hands, though he'd never had much cause to interact with them more than the occasional polite greeting. He couldn't even put names to their faces.

As he and Red flew toward Argos, they were spotted, though that was hardly surprising. They'd been spotted and followed several times on their flight as they made their way over ever-more populated regions of the Sunlit Empire, but their pace of movement and clear lack of hostility had, so far, prevented the Sunlit forces from trying to stop them—they were merely observed as they flew.

A reasonable precaution, in Leon's opinion.

The Imperial forces at Argos didn't seem to be in such a mood, however, as Leon saw several Lances on the land-facing side of Argos' inner wall turn in his and Red's direction.

Another reasonable precaution, as Leon could see many powerful beasts in the air fighting alongside the Sky Devils. Now that he was closer and had been able to watch the battle outside the sea walls for a longer period, he could even see a number of sea monsters either fighting alongside the Sky Devils or taking advantage of the carnage as Imperial sailors and marines were dragged below the sea's surface by tentacles and large, terrifying fish that made sharks look toothless and docile.

Leon had been rather more conflicted over the past couple of days, but this sight was something else. The Sky Devils had come in force, and they were massacring the Imperial garrison. It was hard for Leon to watch the many beasts in the Sky Devil's invasion force tearing human beings to pieces and remain in a 'wait-and-see' mindset.

At the very least, he was going to defend the Heaven's Eye enclave, even if the Sky Devils *were* the descendants of his Clan's vassals, left behind by those who'd fled in the wake of his Clan's fall. Besides, it wasn't reasonable at all to assume that the Sky Devils even knew who he was, let alone that they might be in any way loyal to him.

As he flew closer to the inner wall, he contemplated reaching out with his darkness magic, hoping that he might be able to speak to the local Imperial garrison mentally to tell them that he and Red were friendlies, but he quickly realized that enchantments protecting the soldiers from darkness magic seemed to be standard on their armor. The wards weren't that strong and he thought that if he had to, he could break through them, but he knew how he'd react if unknown powerful beasts flying towards him while a city he was supposed to defend was under attack suddenly started screwing with the enchantments designed to protect his mind: he'd open up with whatever weapons he had and ask questions later.

So, he figured that since the sea wall wasn't falling yet, it was better to present a less concerning image to the soldiers on the wall, even if it slowed him and Red down a bit.

[Slow down a little,] Leon ordered Red as they drew to within a hundred miles of the city's inner wall. [Don't want to spook those on the Lances on top of the wall.]

[Why? They're weak,] Red responded.

Indeed, Leon could see that nearly all of the Lances were manned by teams of half a dozen, with a sixth-tier mage in charge of each weapon. From what he could tell, these teams were then overseen by a handful of seventh-tier mages stationed at the largest towers and gatehouses. Given the strength of wyverns compared to their human magical equivalents, he could understand why Red might be overconfident, but he wasn't. Even just from watching the Imperial Lances firing on the sea wall he could see that they completely outclassed the Bull Kingdom's Flame Lances in power.

[We wouldn't win that fight, and that fight isn't even necessary,] Leon replied. [Follow my lead and we won't run into any trouble. Got it?]

Red made several deep chuffing sounds, but a moment later replied, [Understood.]

Together, they slowed down as they drew closer to the inner wall, but the Lance crews continued to track them. Fortunately, while Leon assumed the weapons' ranges to be much greater than Bull Kingdom Lances, they weren't fired upon even as they drew to within twenty miles.

Still, the Lance crews were clearly growing more and more nervous as they tracked their approach, so Leon ordered, [Down to the ground, let's make the rest of the way on foot in human form.]

Again, Red chuffed in displeasure, but complied.

They quickly descended to the ground to the streets of the city's suburbs, then transformed back into human form and started running to the nearest gate about twenty miles away. Soon enough, they'd

entered the part of the city proper that had spilled out past the walls, and Leon considered the fact that they weren't being shot at by Imperial Lances to be a good sign that he was right to get out of the sky. Then again, they were also pushing past hordes of fleeing civilians, so he supposed them not being shot at could be down to the soldiers not wanting to blast their own people into oblivion.

Sure enough, when they reached the city's massive northwestern gate, he found that the soldiers stationed there had been greatly reinforced, and many powerful mages were waiting for him and Red.

It took some convincing, but with his Heaven's Eye ID, Leon was able to get them to step aside and allow him and Red inside the city, though not without escort—four seventh-tier and a dozen sixth-tier mages peeled off the gate to bring them straight to the Heaven's Eye enclave.

Leon was quietly impressed, considering it a powerful sign of the strength of Argos that even this great concentration of power—he remembered the war he fought in with the Talfar Kingdom, where the fact that Talfar had a single seventh-tier mage was one of the most concerning things in the war—didn't overly diminish the rest of the soldiers at the gate aiding in the evacuation.

Neither Leon nor Red spoke much until they reached the Heaven's Eye enclave. Leon had been trying to get in touch with Penelope—or anyone else in the enclave, for that matter—but the enclave's wards were powerful, and his darkness magic couldn't get through.

He was almost happy that he hadn't been able to get in touch with Penelope, if only so he could savor the look of abject shock on her face when they came running down the road and entered the front courtyard.

"Leon?!" she shouted in shock. "Is that you?"

"Would anyone else go around with a mug this ugly?" Leon shouted back as he gestured at his own face.

Seeing their IDs essentially confirmed, the leader of Leon and Red's escort wasted not a second in ordering his soldiers to turn around and get back to their duties as Leon and Red finally entered the enclave.

"What are you doing here?!" Penelope shouted as she ran forward to meet them.

"I was in the neighborhood," Leon explained as he gestured toward Red. "Had to pick a friend up from Utavi in the Pegasi States. Heard something exciting was going on over here on the way back and made a detour."

As if she were only now seeing Red, Penelope reeled back a bit.

"Red..." she said apprehensively. "Been a while."

A quiet, dismissive glare was the only response she received.

Apparently setting Red's presence aside for the moment, Penelope said, "You're stepping on a lot of toes just being here, but at this point, I don't care that much. We need all the help we can get to ensure the safety of this city."

"We're not going to be heading out and fighting in the streets, are we?" Leon asked.

Penelope looked like she was about to answer, but then thought better of it. “What do you think we should do?”

Leon smiled thinly and said, “We should remain in the enclave and defend it. Let the Imperials deal with the Sky Devils. If we can provide any shelter to civilians, then we should do so, but our first priority is to see to this enclave.”

“You don’t want us out and defending the port?”

Leon frowned as he glanced back out to sea and once more took in the sight of that slaughter, of the Imperial soldiers screaming as they were dragged beneath the waves by monsters, as they were burned by Devil Lances, and as they fell from the sea wall. Maybe he had the power to stop this, but that was a risk he wasn’t yet willing to take. “That’s... not our job, is it?”

Penelope gave him a skeptical look and shook her head. “I figured we’d be getting pressed into the army for this battle, but since you’re here, your authority can keep us out of it.”

“Is the authority of a Hand of the Director not enough?”

“A Hand doesn’t have the same powers of negotiation as a branch Chief does. Neither does a Tower Lord.”

“Interesting. What about the issue of Heaven’s Eye’s political neutrality?”

“There’s only one *very* important exception to that rule: when the mainland is being threatened by Sky Devils.”

Leon nodded, understanding what she was saying. “Quite the exception,” he muttered. “What forces do we have at our disposal? What are our defenses looking like?”

Without further ado, Penelope quickly briefed Leon on what they had. In Heaven’s Eye, they had four eighth-tier mages not including him, about two dozen seventh-tier mages not including Red, and about two thousand sixth-tier mages and below. A significant force, and more than enough to defend the enclave if they had to—but Leon could see that if they had to, then they’d be in a terrible position. If the Sky Devils made it so far into the city as to threaten the enclave, then there would be little chance that Heaven’s Eye could stop them on their own if they put the enclave to siege—especially with those Devil arks.

Now that he was seeing exactly what kind of forces he had to work with, he almost changed his mind and sent most of what he now had at his disposal to defend the inner wall. However, he still regarded that as the duty of the local soldiery. The situation wasn’t quite desperate enough for something like that. He’d only allow the Heaven’s Eye security forces to fight if the inner walls were breached.

As Penelope was giving him a breakdown on the kinds of wards that the enclave had defending it from the ramparts of the short wall, Leon saw a fairly substantial group of mages wearing Sunlit uniforms making straight for them. They were led by an eighth-tier mage, and all were quite heavily armed and armored.

“That’s Commander Arctis,” Penelope explained. “He’s the second-in-command of the local garrison. I’ve only been here for barely more than a day and he’s already come around four times demanding,

pleading, and otherwise trying to get us to take a more active role in the defense of the city. He was as far from polite as he could be the first time he came, but his attitude has lightened up since then.”

“Understandable,” Leon whispered as another tower on the sea wall went up in bright yellow flames under the combined firepower of the Sky Devil’s arks. “Hard to hold onto pride and prejudices when you’re staring death in the face.”

“Lady Penelope!” Arctis shouted as he ran into the courtyard. “We need to speak!”

“Speak with him!” Penelope shouted back, getting his attention as she gestured at Leon. “He’s in charge here, now!”

Leon gave her a look of amused disbelief.

“What?” she asked. “Did you think you were just going to let *me* handle all this diplomatic negotiation? That’s on *your* shoulders now, oh great and powerful Chief of Magical Research and Development.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Leon said in resignation as he jumped down from the wall and landed in the courtyard.

He quickly approached Arctis, who stared him down for a long moment, his expression carefully schooled, before he asked, “Might we be introduced?”

“I’m Leon, Chief of Magical Research and Development in Heaven’s Eye.”

“Pleased to make your acquaintance,” Arctis responded. “Dealing with women is always an exercise in frustration, and I hope that you’ll be more amenable to us. We require the aid of Heaven’s Eye if this city is to hold out. So far, we’ve been able to hold the sea gates, but I fear that they’ll fall in the next few hours. If those Devils get into the harbor, then we’re going to have a much harder time keeping them from hitting the rest of the city. We *have* to hold the harbor!”

“What kind of aid do you need?” Leon asked.

“Fighting men would be best,” Arctis frankly replied. “Any other assistance would be appreciated.”

“I need all of our fighting men and women here,” Leon replied. As Arctis’ face fell, Leon quickly added, “If we haven’t yet—forgive me, I’m still getting briefed on the situation—then I’ll open our stocks of spells and other material to your forces. We can also use this district as a safe haven for any civilians who are still trying to evacuate.”

Arctis breathed what appeared to be a sigh of relief, and he quickly said, “Thank you, Leon. It’s not all we hoped for, but more than we feared. I’ll have some groups of women and children redirected this way. Please defend them as your own kin.”

“Of course,” Leon responded, finding it mildly amusing that he was now to defend the natives of this plane from some of the remnants of his Clan.

As Arctis turned back to his people and Leon nodded to Penelope to follow through on his offer, a deafening blast was heard from the sea. Leon glanced in that direction and watched as one of the largest ships in the Sky Devil fleet cruised forward, firing off several Lances at the sea gate. As it drew closer, it didn’t slow down, and Leon almost thought its helmsman crazy until he realized that the bow

of the ship had two familiar-looking weapons: flame-spewing Lances of the sort that Jormun had mounted on his ship. These Lances, however, began spitting blue fire, with fire so intense that Leon couldn't help but stare in awe.

The ship continued onward, not stopping as the blue fire washed over the sea gate. Leon could feel the wards within the sea wall straining to hold back fire of that heat and power, and when the ship made contact with the gate, the massive steel and heavily-enchanted wood splintered and bent inward. The Sky Devil ship came to a halt, its magic engines continuing to push so hard the Leon could feel the magic runoff even in the enclave a few miles away.

The sea gate continued to strain and bend, pushing inward more and more, until finally, under pressure from the ship, and still being bathed in blue fire, they snapped. The Sky Devils had broken through. They were in the harbor.

Chapter 777: Argos II

The Jaguar breathed deeply as his ship emerged on the other side of the sea gate, the huge troop transports of his fleet following close behind. The ship's weapons were firing as fast as they could, providing withering cover for the transports. The Imperial Lances answered in kind, but their deadly fire was blocked by a large shield of light that sprang into existence around his ship. Even better, with the Lance shifting to his ship from the arks above, said arks were able to destroy another tower on the sea wall just a minute or so after the sea gate was breached.

He would remember this for the rest of his life, he could already tell. He wasn't eager to head off on this raid, but he had to admit, it was going off better than he could have ever hoped for. It seemed that more Imperial forces had been transferred to the straits between Kataigida and the mainland than had been reported, and the—admittedly still rather sizable—naval forces that had remained had been completely destroyed by his fleet. Now, the only Imperial forces stationed within Argos were the ground forces they could cobble together from within the city and its hinterland. Not a force to dismiss out of hand, but not quite the formidable host that the Jaguar had imagined guarding the gateway to the savage Empires.

The Jaguar had estimated that it would take reinforcements about four days to reach Argos following the appearance of his fleet. That had been three days and many assumptions ago. Now, he guessed that it would take the large Imperial relief army he could see mustering further inland at least two more days to reach Argos, and by then, with the sea gate destroyed, he would've already sacked it and made good his escape.

But he didn't allow himself to get complacent. As proud as he was of his Tribe for their work so far, the job wasn't yet done, and disaster could still strike their force. He had to remain on his game if he wanted as many of his tribesmen to return home as possible.

With the cover of his flagship, the transports drew close to the docks. However, their proximity brought them into range of closer-range weapons. Exploding projectiles and deadly magics met the transports, destroying two of them and spilling their human and war beast contents out into the waters of the harbor. At the same time, a number of water mages began infusing the water within the harbor with their power, and the sea in front of the dock began to rise, forming another wall for them to overcome.

'And overcome them we will...' the Jaguar thought with great relish. He sent a quick mental message to one of his most powerful beastmasters, and a dark shape sped into the harbor, passing below his ship. This shape was enormous, and if the Jaguar cared to analyze its aura, he would've sensed it to be at least of the eighth-tier by human standards.

The shape revealed itself to be a massive serpentine fish when it stuck its long, monstrous jaw out of the water wall, looking like some unholy combination of shark and eel, its body covered in dull black scales and its long, alien head covered in dozens of big, pupilless, pitch black eyes. It opened its mouth and a great torrent of water, far more than it could've possibly stored within its body, burst from within its maw like fire from a dragon. The massive cetan swept its water breath to and fro, covering the docks, killing many Imperial defenders, and disrupting nearly all of their defensive formations. The Imperial water mages defending the harbor were no exception, and the water wall came crashing down as they died or were forced back.

The Jaguar smiled as his transports then reached the docks and began disgorging their passengers out onto dry land. As the transports emptied themselves, the cetan stuck around for a few minutes, then returned to the open sea, where it continued to consume the Imperial sailors still trying to save themselves from wrecks of their destroyed vessels.

It didn't take long for the harbor to be secured. After their defenses had been breached, the Imperials made the pragmatic decision to retreat from the harbor to the relative safety of the inner wall, where their Lances could still provide decent cover. The Jaguar could see quite a few civilians in the city being left behind and desperately trying to flee, and his growing smile faltered a little when he noticed a few of the Inquisitors that he'd been forced to bring along hunting them down instead of proceeding with their objectives. Their pegasi made them the fastest troops that the Jaguar had access to, and to see them wasting their time on civilians like this...

"I'm heading to shore," he said to his ship's executive officer, and together with his personal guard, he took to the skies—himself flying under his own power, and his guard flying with his own team of pegasi. He was dimly aware that he was about to trespass on Elina's authority over her Inquisitors, but she was up in the sky commanding her own small force of pegasi, and if she wasn't going to take proper command of her people, then he was more than willing to do so.

It might've been a little hypocritical on his part, but he'd always intended to take command of the push into the city rather than remaining out on the sea, and had planned accordingly. His subordinates knew what they needed to do, and with the command structure he'd built, he was more than confident their objectives would be achieved even with him personally leading the push into the city.

When the Jaguar reached the shore, he didn't immediately make for the Inquisitors. Instead, he checked in with his subordinate leading the ground forces, the Chief of one of the smaller Clans in his Tribe. He was busy directing the invading tribesmen further into the city with as much organization as possible. Unlike the Inquisitors, they didn't want to get bogged down sacking the city only to be pushed back by a counterattack from the savages behind the inner wall.

"Karseh!" he shouted as he landed.

“Oh, dearest me, Lord Jaguar!” the ever-polite man replied as he spun in place to greet the Jaguar, the other seventh and eighth-tier warriors around Karseh rendering quick salutes in the manner of their Clans.

“The Inquisitors,” the Jaguar growled, “who let them off their leash?”

“Oh my,” Karseh whispered, his already rather pale skin draining of what little color it had, his head turning back to the city with a look of innocent shock, “they never checked in, My Lord. We just landed and into the city those little ones went!”

The Jaguar growled. “Break off a detachment to bring them back here.”

“At once! Shall I prepare them to be crucified? It doesn’t sit well with me, doing so in sight of the walls, and those I crucify tend to scream loudly enough to give me bad dreams...”

“I wouldn’t ask you to do so, old friend.”

“Oh, what a relief!” Karseh made a show of wiping non-existent sweat off his brow, but the Jaguar knew from experience that Karseh would have absolutely no qualms carrying out any order he gave, even if it were to plunge them into civil war upon their return to Kataigida—the Thunderer likely wouldn’t take stories of crucified Inquisitors well, after all.

The Jaguar waited a few moments for Karseh to follow through on hauling the Inquisitors back to the docks and to finish deploying their ground forces, then asked for a report.

“I was wondering, My Lord,” Karseh began, “have you been keeping an eye on potential reinforcements?”

“As much as I’ve been able to,” the Jaguar replied. The battle took most of his attention, and so he had others like Karseh keeping an eye on the outskirts of the city. Given the number of enchantments blocking magic senses in the region, though, this was easier said than done.

“Oh, that’s not good! Not good at all!” Karseh whispered. In response, the Jaguar, a look of concern breaking across his face, projected his magic senses as far as he was able.

“I can see the army mustering about two days out.”

“Those dastardly brutes have deployed other forces, My Lord!” Karseh said with dramatic trepidation. “Up there!” The brown-haired man pointed upward and roughly north, and after a moment, the Jaguar was able to spot no less than five large arks flying through clouds on their way to Argos, clearly attempting to maintain some element of stealth despite flying at great speed. They were large enough to transport perhaps a thousand individuals, but they’d arrive in a matter of hours, and the Jaguar had no doubt that their best and most powerful were in those arks.

“Looks like we’ll have to make this quick, then,” the Jaguar said with a deep frown, disappointment settling in his stomach like he’d swallowed ice. “Forget about sacking the inner city and focus on destroying the port. Fall back in four hours.”

“My Lord? Are we to leave these children unchastised?”

“No. I’ll see to the inner wall myself. Give them a good scare and kill who I can before pulling back.”

With that, the Jaguar took back to the skies, his personal guard following suit. With them, he had several hundred of his Tribe's best warriors at his back, and as a ninth-tier mage, he was confident that he had the strength to break through the inner city's defenses.

However, as he took flight, Karseh hurriedly shouted, "Dearest me, I almost forgot!" The Jaguar paused his takeoff and glanced back downward. "I spotted a couple of Ascended Beasts making their way inside the city only an hour or so ago! A wyvern and a rather lovely-looking bird! Seventh and eighth-tier!"

The Jaguar frowned, but it didn't stop him. He thanked Karseh for his diligence and continued onward, flying toward the nearest of the inner wall's gatehouses. A couple of Ascended Beasts wouldn't make too much difference to the city's fate as far as he was concerned.

He didn't have to go too far, the inner walls being less than a quarter of a mile inland from the harbor. However, he did have to keep an eye on the Imperial Lances atop that wall despite being confident that none of them would shoot. He was flying over their city, and he didn't think they'd risk a missed shot hitting any of their people still in the city, of whom there were still many—his forces were pulling from their homes those foolish enough to have stayed behind and either rounding them up, or, especially in the Inquisitor's case, slaughtering them indiscriminately. The thieving savages weren't so without honor that they wouldn't buy back their people if taken in a raid.

Soon enough, the Jaguar found himself in front of the southern gate of the inner wall. The battle so far had filled the air with titanic clouds of thick smoke, completely covering the sky. The Jaguar could feel the building of lightning magic within, and it wasn't that hard to not only take control of it, but to add his own.

By the time he'd taken ten steps toward the gate, the sky had filled with golden lightning bolts arcing between clouds of smoke, and the occasional blood red bolt that struck the ground around him. The street was torn asunder under such magical assault, and the thunder shook the buildings around him so hard that they began to collapse despite plentiful reinforcement enchantments.

With a flick of his wrist, the Jaguar called a dozen red bolts down upon the gate, each one striking with the full power of a ninth-tier mage. The flash cast everything in stark white for fractions of a second at a time, the thunder shattering glass throughout the city. The gate, however, remained intact, looking hardly worse for wear.

The Jaguar had to stifle some small amount of admiration; he hated the Imperial savages, but they weren't utterly incompetent when it came to building their fortifications.

So, he took a deep breath and drew from his soul realm a massive hammer, far too large and unwieldy for even a third-tier mage to lift, let alone wield. Yet the Jaguar held it just fine, raising it above his head and attracting all the lightning above.

Bolt after bolt fell upon him, being drawn into the hammer and stored. A dozen, then two dozen, then three, four, and five, and more bolts struck him in a matter of seconds. By the end of it, the hammer was aglow with the contained power of a hundred lightning bolts, and when the Jaguar swung it at the gate, all that terrible power was unleashed.

A single blast of lightning erupted from the hammer and slammed into the gate. Under such heat and power, the enchanted wood and steel shattered, burned, and melted, the concrete frame around it cracked in a thousand places, and the runes within the gate were torn asunder.

The gates didn't survive his second swing, blasting inward in millions of tiny pieces. A heartbeat later, the dust and gate fragments came blasting back outward towards the Jaguar's people on a massive cushion of wind.

The Jaguar smiled and flicked a finger, causing that cloud to fly up into the air, revealing the formation of powerful mages standing just inside the broken gate. The heavily-armored man in front radiated ninth-tier power, the same as the Jaguar.

'The military commander of Argos...' the Jaguar thought with relish.

He didn't speak a word, and neither did the commander. They just began calmly walking toward each other, the Jaguar slightly adjusting his grip on his hammer while the commander brandished a large halberd. Their followers advanced behind them. The commander's entourage was larger, but the hole in the gate negated that advantage, and the Jaguar had great confidence in the skill and experience of his personal guard, who'd been guarding the western shores of Kataigida with him for many years.

Magic began flying all around them as the mages started their fights, but the Jaguar had eyes only for the commander, who reciprocated.

They drew to within fifty feet, and the commander made the first move—he thrust forward with his halberd and sent a powerful wind spear five times the size of his weapon rocketing towards the Jaguar.

The Jaguar countered with an arc of red lightning, slicing the spear in half. He smiled behind his jaguar-shaped helmet as he saw his bolt also dissipate, all of its magic power gone from countering the wind spear.

'Just the fight I've been looking for...' the Jaguar thought as he wrapped himself in his magic power rose into the air. The commander followed, and a moment later, they were a hundred feet above the ground, staring each other down as their respective forces took to butchering each other with sharp blade and potent magic.

The commander soon vanished in a whirlwind of dust and debris, and the Jaguar called a storm of lightning down upon the twister. The lightning vanished into the twister just as the twister surged forward, tearing at the Jaguar's defenses.

The Jaguar wasn't deterred, though, and a torrent of blood red lightning erupted from his body. He stimulated his bloodline, calling upon his most primal power, and four bolts of controlled red lightning extended from his left hand like claws ten feet long. His hammer, meanwhile, began to charge with the lightning from his right hand.

He swung his hammer, sending a wave of lightning to meet the relatively slowly approaching twister, and the magic power of these two attacks detonated in an explosion that blinded the Jaguar's magic senses for a moment, filling the air above the battle with an opaque cloud of dust, the Jaguar's lightning claw barely visible to those below.

The Jaguar didn't even blink, and he quickly dodged with all the speed of a powerful lightning mage as a massive wind snake came snapping out of the cloud. He swiped upward with his lightning claw and the wind snake was sliced in half.

Half a dozen more wind snakes came rushing outward then, and all met the same fate as the Jaguar dodged in and out, rending them all to formless magic and air in barely more than a second.

The Jaguar grinned in delight, but he wasn't the sort to just take punishment. Like a proper jaguar, he projected his magic senses and found his prey, now flying above him, still hidden in the dust cloud, and charged. At the same time, he pulled his hammer back into his soul realm and conjured another set of lightning claws for his right hand.

Like an animal, he slashed and mauled and lashed out at the commander, now put on the back foot. The older commander barely had the space to launch a handful of wind spears at the Jaguar, let alone conjure another whirlwind or wind snake as the Jaguar kept on him, unrelenting in his attacks, savage and animalistic in his single-minded pursuit of his prey.

The old man was slower and perhaps just a little bit weaker; it was only a matter of time until he slipped up. The Jaguar got him first on his left arm as he raised it to defend himself against one of the Jaguar's swipes. The Jaguar's lightning claw was repelled at first by the commander's enchanted plate armor, but much force was still transferred, knocking the commander off-balance and leaving him open for another attack that raked across his chest, leaving dark lightning burns across the pristine plate.

The Jaguar surged forth, never letting up, and soon he'd broken through the commander's defenses, heating up his armor to the melting point where he wasn't outright ripping it off the man's body, along with copious amounts of lightning-scorched flesh.

Not even five minutes after they'd risen into the air, the commander came crashing back down to the ground as an unrecognizable corpse, rendered little more than a mass of burned flesh and pellets of rapidly-cooling red-hot metal.

The commander's troops lost heart, but the Jaguar, recognizing many of his own people lying dead or dying on the ground from the battle, descended in a rage, his lust for the hunt not yet sated. He took a few hits, but his armor served him exceptionally well, and he rent and slashed and blasted his way through the Imperial ranks, his personal guard rallying behind him and cementing his push while the Imperials fell before him like a rabbit before a jaguar.

Not even a quarter of an hour after the inner gate had been breached, the defenders had been shattered, rendered into hundreds of broken and bloody corpses strewn around the gate. The area around the gate had been devastated, most of the buildings reduced to little more than dust and splinters from the power of the mages in battle down there.

But the Jaguar barely even noted any of that. All he saw was that the gate had been breached, and his people now had access to the inner city. He was still conscious of the Imperial arks flying toward the city with all haste, meaning he had only a matter of hours left to him, but with the ninth-tier commander of Argos dead, there was only one remaining place that his pride demanded he level.

Slowly, his eyes turned toward the west, toward the fairly close-by Heaven's Eye enclave.

'Willful traitors, all...' the Jaguar thought to himself. 'Worthless barbarians puppeting the cold corpse of our great Lord...'

The enclave wasn't unoccupied, and even had a handful of eighth-tier mages guarding it. The man standing in front of the defenders looked quite young, but sure of himself, his golden eyes staring back at the Jaguar with what, to the Jaguar, looked like an arrogant smile playing at his lips.

The Jaguar smiled back, though his helmet blocked the view, and began advancing toward the enclave.

Chapter 778: Argos III

Leon watched with much conflict as the Sky Devils rampaged through the impressive defenses of Argos. On the one hand, he wasn't all that keen on seeing the Imperials slaughtered, but neither did he want any potential powerbase he could build in the Sky Devils to be ravaged—not until he'd met with them and determined how much sway he potentially held over them, at least.

In some respects, though, he was utterly fascinated by the assault. The opportunity to see Imperial defenses tested and broken through was a fantastic learning experience. He'd heard great things about the power of the Empires, and yet here were the Sky Devils, their eternal enemy, smashing through them with almost insulting ease. It was surprising and enlightening all at once.

And then Leon saw a ninth-tier mage fall at the hands of another. It had been a terrific battle of intense magic—the man with the cat helmet's red lightning in particular grabbing his interest—that ended in the Imperial's defeat. Even now, the Imperials were falling back to pre-arranged points along the path to the citadel, the original fortress that had been erected on this site thousands of years ago.

The Sky Devils had made good progress, but the fortress was a maze of walls, towers, and secured baileys. The fortress complex itself was made of more than a hundred heavily reinforced buildings, providing all the living and working space the city's massive garrison needed. In short, Leon couldn't imagine how the Sky Devils could possibly take it.

It seemed that the ninth-tier red lightning cat guy agreed, for as the Imperials retreated following the loss of their commander and many of their higher-ranking mages, the cat guy turned in the direction of the Heaven's Eye enclave, and his aura seemed to turn black with killing intent. Leon's magic senses were lost in the swirling maelstrom of his aura, not quite blinding him, but certainly making him feel just a little nauseous as the man's eyes, hidden behind his helmet, unmistakably fell upon him.

Leon had been watching with a fascinated smile, taking everything in as it came and committing the sight to memory. Now, however, he recognized what was about to happen. The Sky Devils weren't going to march to the citadel, but were instead heading to the Heaven's Eye enclave.

Fear, confusion, curiosity, and excitement flooded him, this eclectic blend of emotions causing his smile to widen slightly as the cat guy started leading his troops through the streets in his direction.

"Everyone, get ready!" Leon thundered, and he reached up into the overcast sky. There were clouds of water and smoke up there, as well as the foreign magic of Cat Helmet, but Leon forced his own magic into the clouds and felt much of Cat Helmet's power give way.

The armored man paused as he walked toward the enclave and cocked his head in what looked like surprise, and then a wave of magic power exploded out from him, clearly determined to take back control of the skies.

Leon, without moving a muscle, fought back. Cat Helmet was strong, stronger than he was, and clearly held an Inherited Bloodline. But Leon was the descendant of the Thunderbird, and he wasn't going to just cede control of his domain to anyone else. He pushed back, and his and Cat Helmet's power began wrestling in the sky above, causing the clouds to swirl and natural lightning to fall upon the buildings between them. The buildings in Argos, heavily reinforced with magic, began crumbling under this onslaught of power, and the lightning strikes started a few fires here and there.

Behind him, Leon could sense the enclave's defenders making their last preparations as the Tower Lord and Penelope got everyone organized. It seemed that they understood that he was already locked in battle with the Sky Devils and couldn't take command as his rank would require, so were stepping up in his place.

He was grateful, as it gave him more than enough time to prepare himself to fight a ninth-tier mage.

He couldn't lie to himself; he was *terrified*. As much as he wanted to meet the Sky Devils, he'd always hoped that it would be under more ideal circumstances. Circumstances that he could control by approaching them first rather than standing against them on the battlefield. This was *not* how he wanted his Clan's former vassals to learn about his existence...

... Though, the more he thought about it, the more he kind of liked it. If he were able to live long enough, fight against this guy with the aid of the Heaven's Eye mages at his back, then he might make a good impression, let them know that while he was young, he was anything but weak or powerless.

His hopes of that happening diminished when a number of Sky Devils arrived, reinforcing Cat Helmet's already considerable host. They'd drawn close enough by this point that even with the sounds of battle out at sea and the lightning and thunder between them, Leon was able to just barely hear the eighth-tier Sky Devil mutter as he joined Cat Helmet at the front of their host, "Oh my, oh my, that young boy there is just the bird I told you about!"

His tone and demeanor were soft and delicate, but Leon didn't for a moment think that this eighth-tier Sky Devil was either of those things. His aura was powerful and laced with some of the most potent killing intent Leon had ever felt.

'Ah, *shit*,' he thought to himself as Cat Helmet barely even appeared to react to this other man's statement. '*Shit, shit, shit. I'll be lucky if this goes well...*'

He glanced around at him, at the hundreds of Heaven's Eye warriors arrayed in the courtyard, at the hundreds more on the wall, all ready to defend the enclave. He glanced back out at the city, registering again the citizens of Argos that were, even now, being herded onto Sky Devil transports, fleeing the city, or hunkering down, terrified. And he wondered if there was anything at all that he could do about this. These were not ideal circumstances, and if he were to get the most out of them that he could, while also not resorting to the kind of tactics that would make him a hypocrite in the eyes of Nestor and Xaphan...

'*I could sally out*,' he thought as he watched the Sky Devils advance, Cat Helmet's attention seemingly locked on him. He glanced northward, easily able to see and feel the Sunlit arks flying through the clouds

as they raced to the city. *'I don't have to hold them long, just long enough for those arks to arrive. They won't be stupid enough to continue their advance even with those arks here, will they?'*

As Leon continued to wrestle for control of the sky, he quickly made up his mind and shouted, "Penelope!" The Director's daughter quickly ran over, a curious look in her eye, and before she could ask what he needed, he said, "You're in charge here. I'm going to try and slow them down."

"Are you insane?!" she hissed. "You're just going to get yourself killed!"

Leon glanced in Cat Helmet's direction, then grinned with more confidence than he felt at Penelope. "You know who I am. My death isn't guaranteed. But regardless, I'd rather sally out and meet them than wait for them to come to me. In this case, I have to show strength."

Left unsaid was his concern for those in the enclave who'd die, and those in the city who'd already died.

"That just makes you even *more* insane!" Penelope responded, clearly barely able to keep her voice down. "If the Empires catch wind of what you're doing..."

"I'll deal with it," Leon said, and without another word, he strode out of the enclave to meet the advancing Sky Devils. "It would be worth it to end this sooner, I think..." he muttered so softly that he doubted anyone could possibly hear him.

He was a little surprised when Red appeared behind him. She didn't say a word, but she was at least ready for a fight, Leon could sense that much in her aura.

"You can stay behind," Leon said as he stuck his thumb at the very anxious Penelope watching them leave. "No need for you to put yourself in danger right now."

[I want to see what you're doing,] Red replied. [You take yourself to be my superior. I will watch and see for myself.]

"And if I fall?"

[I will eat you. *If* your body remains intact. If not, I will leave.]

"Delightful. Then just hang back and watch."

It didn't take long for Leon to run into the advancing Sky Devils. At first, they'd slowed their advance slightly as if expecting an ambush, but when Leon halted in a relatively large square with a fountain in the middle, they sped back up. Leon could understand why, for in true Imperial fashion, the fountain was decorated with a statue in its center of an ancient soldier striking down a warrior with the head of an eagle—a depiction Leon knew represented his Clan. From the outside, he assumed it looked like he was mocking them by trying to rub it in their face that they'd been kicked off the mainland so long ago.

However, as they approached, hundreds strong, powerful mages all, Leon did what he felt would draw their interest and potentially give him the exact opening that he needed to solve this as peacefully as he could: he called forth a bolt of golden lightning from the sky to destroy the fountain. As the fountain behind him exploded under his power, the Sky Devils leading their forces toward Leon paused, those few whose faces he could see behind their helmets expressing some mild shock. Out of curiosity, he glanced back at the Imperials, and they were all paying quite a bit of attention to what was going on, so he made no more moves to try and endear himself to the Sky Devils.

The man in the cat helmet showed more poise than the rest of his people, continuing forward with his stride barely broken. It wasn't long before he waltzed into the square like he owned the place. Given the power of the army at his back, Leon supposed if the man were to lay claim to the square, it would be hard to argue against him. He considered himself fortunate that the man didn't immediately attack as soon as he arrived. Instead, Cat Helmet slowed his gait as his people spread out behind him to occupy the square and surround Leon, only coming to a stop a fairly comfortable fifty feet or so away.

Leon stood opposite him, the rim of the marble fountain only a step behind. He wore his armor, sans helmet, and he stared back at Cat Helmet, his smile a little shallower than it had been with the anxiety in his heart reaching a crescendo.

[Leon...] Nestor whispered, [that man is a descendant of the Blood Thunder Jaguar. No doubt about that. With an aura like that, there can be no mistake...]

[Play this *very* carefully, boy,] Xaphan added. [Show strength, but if you can get out of this without violence, all the better. If it comes to blows, though, I'll fight at your side.]

[Look at the demon, playing wise philosopher and experienced mentor!] Nestor sniped.

The two began exchanging barbs, so Leon ignored them both and focused instead on the descendent of the Blood Thunder Jaguar standing in front of him.

For several long minutes they stared at each other, Leon forcing himself to look not all concerned even as Red abandoned the square, though only falling back a couple of streets and leaping to a nearby rooftop where she could still monitor the situation without being surrounded.

It was only then that Cat Helmet spoke, his smooth voice resounding with the confidence of a man completely in control of the situation, "It seems your companion abandoned you, Raptor."

"Raptor?" Leon asked in amusement.

The man cocked his head and asked, "Is that all you heard?"

"All I heard that was of consequence."

Again, the man paused in his response. Leon could see his eyes within his helmet flickering about as if studying him, and he kept up his projection of confidence to match his opponent's.

"You are not human..." Cat Helmet eventually said, half in question and half in statement.

"I consider myself human, though my standards are hardly universal. *You* clearly possess something a little... *inhuman*, don't you?"

Cat Helmet ignored his question. "My subordinate saw you transform, and I have no interest in your name."

Leon sighed. "Raptor'll do, then. What shall I call you?"

"Jaguar."

"What a pair we make, Raptor and Jaguar."

They both went silent again as they studied each other in as great of detail as possible.

The Jaguar was again the first to break their silence. "Have you come here to plead for the safety of your comrades? If your pleas are heartfelt enough, I might just leave your little warehouses alone..."

Leon smiled, the Jaguar having struck at least one reason he'd come here right on the head. But Leon didn't want to admit that. "I'm not here to plead for anything. What I'm here for is to get your measure, Jaguar."

The Jaguar assumed a slightly more aggressive posture. "You wish to fight me? Given the difference in our power, that wouldn't end well for you, but I'll happily oblige. Maybe I'll take your corpse back to Kataigida and have it dissected—let my Tribesmen learn what they can from you."

Again, Leon sighed. "Not everything worth measuring is related to the dealing of death, Jaguar."

"Oh!" one of the Jaguar's followers—the man Leon had heard telling the Jaguar that he'd seen Leon transform—exclaimed. "What *heated* subtext!"

Several others chuckled, but Leon and the Jaguar remained staring at each other.

"You wish to measure me?" the Jaguar inquired, his tone a little less confrontational.

"I suppose," Leon answered. "Not something that can be done in one conversation, but I had to try. Shall we talk before things turn... electric?"

The Jaguar glanced upward where they were still wrestling for control of the sky. Leon counted three breaths before he lowered his head. Leon couldn't help but smile a little wider, knowing without even having to look up that, despite the Jaguar's power, he was failing to make any headway against Leon's front. They were practically evenly matched for control of the sky, though Leon didn't take that to mean their raw power or combat prowess were anything close to equal.

The Jaguar cocked his head, waited another moment, then growled, "Speak your piece, Raptor."

"I'd rather speak inside," Leon said, gesturing toward what appeared to be a café, now abandoned with nearly the entire city having fled. "I'm not one for eavesdroppers."

The Jaguar glanced in the direction of the Imperials as they massed at other chokepoints along the way to the citadel, many of the more powerful mages obviously watching the exchange.

"Very well," the Jaguar said.

A couple of minutes later, they were both seated around a table, the wards in the building preventing their conversation from being overheard by magic senses. The Jaguar himself brought with him only a handful of guards while Leon sat alone.

"Brave of you, facing us alone," the Jaguar said once they were both seated.

"I was reasonably confident you wouldn't attack immediately," Leon replied, his tone carefully controlled to maintain certainty that he internally lacked. "I'm curious, though: why not?"

The Jaguar, still helmeted, didn't acknowledge the question.

"So be it," Leon said, his statement punctuated by the rumble of thunder overhead. "I'll admit to some curiosity, Jaguar. I'm not from the Empires, but ever since I arrived in this region of the plane, they've done nothing but spit on the very mention of your people down there in the southeast. I've never been one to buy into that kind of mentality, and I couldn't help but wonder who these people were who drew such ire from the Empires?"

"We are the fangs of Kataigida," the Jaguar declared. "We defend the Ten Tribes from all who would seek them harm. For thousands of years, the Empires have attempted to kill the lot of us, to devour our land and resources, and we have stopped them every time. We are here to repay them for their barbarity."

Leon nodded, what little body language the Jaguar was showing off not giving him any impression of deceit.

"Who are your leaders?" Leon asked. "What gods do you worship? What stories do you tell your people? I'm curious about all of these things."

"Worthless to tell an enemy such things."

"If we are enemies, then so be it. But your people *must* have history, don't they? Culture? You know where you came from, and where you're going?"

The Jaguar answered quickly, but he sounded almost a little insulted by the insinuation. "We are not lost people. We know where we are and why we're here. We know our histories and our traditions. These we protect against *all* who dare threaten them."

"You just won't tell me your history, or give me the name of your gods, or tell me anything at all how your people their lives?"

"You will die when we cross blades; what would be the point?"

"To show a little respect to an opponent, with the hope that it's returned?"

"Respect? From an Imperial? No chimeric magic could possibly make these two compatible."

Leon chuckled softly. "They *have* been quite zealously railing against your people as long as I've cared to keep track. They hate you."

"You speak as if you're not one of them, Raptor. You are Heaven's Eye: among the worst of them."

"Yeah, they're not great... but they have their uses."

Leon guessed the Jaguar heard something in his bitter tone, for he didn't respond as Leon fell silent for a long moment. After that moment was over, Leon said, "Where I come from, we have no gods, but we venerate our Ancestors deeply. If you kill me today, then I ask only that you not mutilate my corpse, that I might be sent north to join them in death."

The Jaguar didn't verbally respond, but he nodded ever so slightly despite his earlier threat of taking Leon's corpse back to the Sky Devil's Hell.

"Are there any requests you might make, should the impossible come to pass and I win this fight? Will you not even tell me the name of your gods?"

"We do not worship any gods," the Jaguar rumbled as a flash of red outside destroyed another building close by. "But we, too, venerate those who came before us. *If* you win today, then I would ask the same of you. If you win, my people will bring you no immediate harm and allow you to retreat back to Heaven's Eye."

"An easy thing to agree to," Leon said with a smile, and with that, he stood up. "Let's get this over with, shall we?"

"Indeed," the Jaguar replied as he, too, rose.

When they walked back outside, Leon found that the Jaguar's ranks had swollen in just those few minutes they were in the café. About fifty Pegasus-riders had landed in the square led by a hard-looking eighth-tier woman who stared intently at both him and the Jaguar, yet she spoke not a word.

So, Leon ignored them and walked back into the center of the square, where the Jaguar joined him. The Jaguar's warriors circled around them, though they didn't come quite close enough to be in any real danger when the magic started flying.

"Ready yourself for death, Heaven's Eye Raptor," the Jaguar growled as he raised his hammer.

"Think of your Ancestors, Jaguar," Leon said. "In just a moment, you'll be closer to your past than you ever thought possible."

With that, Leon donned his helmet and drew his family's sword. He channeled his lightning, but he kept a strict leash on it, not letting even a spark leave his body and reveal itself. Instead, he kept an eye on the Jaguar, and a split second after he finished speaking, he raised his hand.

A blood red bolt of lightning fell from the sky that very instant, but Leon, calling upon all of his skill with lightning magic, swept his hand above his head and diverted the bolt into a nearby building.

The Jaguar cocked his head again, but said nothing. Instead, he extended his off-hand and conjured his lightning claws. He then slammed his fist down into the ground, sending a wave of red lightning Leon's way.

But again, Leon, straining his muscles and mind, used his prodigious skill and talent in lightning magic and halted the wave before it reached him. The Jaguar, however, then stepped forward and thrust out his fist, and Leon fought hard to hold the crackling lightning in place as it pushed against his control.

But he held the wave there, unmoving. He was vaguely aware that he'd started to sweat, but he kept his mind sharp.

With a wave of his hand, the Jaguar dispelled his lightning and took a few steps toward Leon. He grasped his hammer, filled it with red lightning, and then lunged toward Leon.

The Jaguar was *fast*, but that surprised Leon none. It took everything he had to dodge the Jaguar's first deadly swing, aimed at his chest. It took him greatly exerting his body to dodge the second strike, but he was knocked off-balance enough that he knew he wasn't going to dodge a third.

Leon realized in a flash that he couldn't play around with the Jaguar as much as he'd hoped. The Jaguar wasn't taking this fight *too* seriously given what Leon knew he was capable of, but in a matter of two exchanges, Leon could already tell that for all his skill with the sword, he wasn't going to match the Jaguar in this kind of fight. The Jaguar was just too strong and too fast—the difference a single tier and who knew how many centuries of experience made.

He had to use magic.

He gritted his teeth as the Jaguar flowed from the second strike into the third, and instead of trying to dodge again, Leon swung his blade forward.

His family's sword, the blade that Jason Keraunos had brought to Aeterna, the weapon that had once been host to one of the Universe Fragments that had formed the bedrock of his Clan, that had been forged quite literally with the blood of the Thunderbird, erupted in silver-blue lightning as Leon blocked the Jaguar's third swing.

Leon put everything that he had into that swing; all of his power that he could push into his sword in that moment, he did. The stones shattered beneath their feet with the meeting of their power as their colored lightning exploded upward, reaching for the clouds.

Leon was thrown backward, and he fell in a most undignified manner back into the remains of the fountain. The Jaguar wasn't pushed back nearly as far, but Leon was gratified to see that he hadn't managed to stand firm.

However, as Leon pushed himself back to his feet, the Jaguar didn't move. The helmeted man's eyes were locked on his right arm, where the last few arcs of Leon's silver-blue lightning still danced across his gauntlet.

Chapter 779: Argos IV

Leon breathed deeply as he walked away from the square, hardly believing that that had worked at all. He'd taken quite the risk in blasting the Blood Thunder Jaguar's descendant with the Thunderbird's lightning, hoping with little evidence at all that he would recognize it, or at least be affected enough not to continue the fight.

He was right, but he was surprised, relieved, and all manner of other similar emotions. He was mostly sure that he had more adrenaline coursing through his veins than blood, his hands shaking with excitement, incredulity, and lingering fear at what he'd just done.

'It worked...' he told himself. *'It worked...'*

Of course, he knew that that wasn't entirely why the Jaguar had turned around—or at least, there was a ready excuse for the man: the approaching Imperial arks, likely bearing hundreds of the best warriors and most powerful mages that the Sunlit Empire could throw together on a few days' notice.

The Jaguar had stared at him for long moments after being hit by his lightning, more than long enough for some of his subordinates to start looking a little concerned, but when that moment was over, he'd glanced at the incoming Imperial arks and ordered his thoroughly confused troops to fall back. Leon had watched them leave, smiling at the Jaguar as the ninth-tier mage stared back, regarding him from behind his jaguar head-shaped helmet.

In the end, once he and Leon were the only ones left in the square, he asked one final, quiet question.

“Who are you?”

Leon had let the question linger in the air for several seconds before finally answering truthfully, “Leon.”

They’d stared each other down for a few more seconds, and then the Jaguar turned and followed his warriors back to the docks. Leon had stayed in the square for a little while longer, practically leaning against the shattered fountain for support, noting that, at this point, his magic was the only one in the sky. The Jaguar had ceded him the heavens.

And now he made his way back to the Heaven’s Eye enclave as he did his best to project confidence and control, knowing that many eyes were upon him. Red returned along the way, but said not a word, simply falling in beside him.

When Leon returned to the enclave, he was met with a Penelope that looked irate, nervous, and scandalized all at the same time.

“Leon,” she greeted. “Think we could speak in private?”

“Make sure the Tower Lord is getting everything back to normal,” Leon ordered. “The Sky Devils are going to retreat, though there’s not going to be much fighting still until they’re gone. I want Heaven’s Eye in full order before morning.” He paused, then quietly added, “Give me a few minutes. Then we can talk.”

Penelope, for just a moment, looked like she wanted to argue, but when Leon removed his helmet and locked eyes with her, she relented. Leon knew what she saw: all the fatigue, excitement, and anxiety that he could feel.

With that, Leon made his way into the Heaven’s Eye Tower.

—

“Lord Jaguar, what is the *meaning* of this?!” Elina demanded as the Jaguar led them back aboard his flagship, the rest of the troops that had landed in Argos not far behind them, their subcommanders herding them all back to their designated transports. The battle in the air above the sea wall and on the sea itself had largely ended in their favor, so there was no opposition to their ordered retreat.

Their raid was a victory, though not entirely complete. Argos still stood, the city not quite sacked. They’d seized thousands of hostages that they could ransom back to the barbarians and seized quite a bit of material and magical loot, to be sure, but the city itself would survive this gentlest of sackings.

But the sea wall had been breached, the local Imperial navy now lay at the bottom of the sea, and thousands of Imperial soldiers were dead, and all for little comparative cost. That was a victory by any measure.

And yet, all the Jaguar could think about as he wordlessly made his way to his office on his flagship, Elina trailing him still barraging him with requests for elucidation, was silver-blue lightning, and the deep rumbling voice that filled his mind after it had touched his armor.

He'd only heard that voice once before, when he'd undergone his ritual for bloodline awakening. He'd visited his soul realm, and there confronted the Blood Thunder Jaguar itself. It had inspected him top to bottom, and in the end, merely said, "Acceptable." In the hundreds of years since, the Jaguar hadn't heard so much as a growl from the Blood Thunder Jaguar, until just a moment ago.

The Blood Thunder Jaguar had said a single word, one that sent tremors up the Jaguar's spine and shockwaves through his mind.

[*Thunderbird.*]

The ancient Lord that had reigned over the stars, the dead god that all the Ten Tribes venerated, the progenitor of the only acceptable Bloodline that could rule over them all. The Jaguar could barely fathom it, a surviving member of that Clan. And, more than that, one skilled enough to compete with him magically on fairly even ground. The Jaguar had felt some frustration at the boy's power and control over lightning during the duel, but with the reveal of his lineage, it all made perfect sense.

He didn't care if it was a trick, though from the way 'Raptor' had conducted himself, he didn't think it was. Besides, he didn't think anyone could do anything that would fool his Ancestor's senses.

'No, that boy is a member of the ruling Clan! A Prince, in the hands of savages!'

The concept was terrifying, exhilarating, and above all, *deeply* concerning. The Jaguar knew only that he had to return to Raikos as soon as possible. His Tribe had to know that there yet existed a Prince of Thunderbird blood. He certainly wasn't going to do anything that would extinguish that line, and suffering the mild humiliation of pulling back his forces when he could remain for another couple of hours if he had to was nothing compared to what he'd just learned.

As the Jaguar entered his office, Elina just behind him, her face red with anger at how long he'd been ignoring her, he ordered them left alone.

"What *is it*?" she demanded as the door shut behind them, leaving them alone in complete isolation, preventing even the most skilled spy from listening in. "What is going on in your head?! Why did you retreat?! Who was that?!"

The Jaguar locked her in his steely gaze, his face inscrutable behind his helmet. "Our future..."

—

Leon sighed as he stretched out on one of the sofas in the meeting room he and Red had commandeered. He wanted to stay out of the way as things returned to normal in the city, and he most certainly wanted to stay out of the limelight after his confrontation with the Jaguar.

Red stayed mercifully silent, not disturbing him as he first took a few minutes to stop and process everything that had just happened, and then as he retrieved Tikos' lotus from his soul realm and briefed those back in Occulara about what had gone down over the past few days since they'd last spoken. He was left feeling a little apprehensive about his return given just how upset Elise, Maia, and Valeria apparently were—Tikos being quite diplomatic in its description of their response—but he was still alive, and he'd made some kind of contact with the Sky Devils that didn't leave them mortal enemies.

Or at least, such was the case with the Jaguar. Leon got the impression that their politics were rather complicated at the moment from his short discussion with the ninth-tier Sky Devil, but he had to imagine that the Jaguar had more than a bit of pull with his people, and he didn't think he was currently enemies with the Jaguar.

For half an hour, he lost himself wondering just what was going to happen next. The Sky Devils knew of him, and he was inclined to, for the foreseeable future, leave the initiative with them. *'Ten years,'* he thought. If they didn't try and contact him in ten years, then he would start reaching out to them on his own—assuming this whole 'raiding Argos' thing didn't spill over into a massive war between the Empires and their island. He had much on his plate already, and he needed to see to those he was already responsible for first and foremost.

It was with that thought in his head that a knock came at the door and, without waiting for a response, Penelope entered looking none too thrilled.

Red, on Penelope's entrance, shot up from where she'd been quietly sitting on the floor, her arms lighting up with bright orange flame. Penelope paused a moment in the face of this hostility, her aura rising to match, and then exceed Red's, until Leon stood up and used his own fire magic to suppress Red.

"We're all friends here," he stated more than asked. "No need for unpleasantness."

[Maybe she ought to wait after knocking?] Red retorted, though she dutifully stood down anyway.

"Penelope seemed more than willing to brush this off as she shifted focus to Leon.

"You have left quite the mess, haven't you?" she growled.

"Have I?" Leon innocently asked as he slumped back down on the sofa. "Seems like everything in Heaven's Eye ought to be fine; has the Tower Lord gotten things in hand?"

"Things were never really *out* of hand here. It was easy enough to start shifting everyone back to their peacetime posts and to prepare to distribute aid once we were sure the Sky Devils were in retreat, but that's not the point. What matters is that you *very publicly* interacted with the Sky Devils. That's going to cause some big problems."

"I sent them away," Leon replied, pretending that he didn't know exactly what Penelope was referring to. "The sack of Argos stopped early because of me."

"You might not find many people grateful for that if news of who you are leaks. You had quite a few spectators to that little display."

Leon frowned slightly, but he wasn't too worried. "The Sky Devils attacked Argos, and since they did that, then there're probably much bigger problems in the Argonaut Sea and Veins of Vigilance right now. I'm not worried about the public because they'll be talking of those bigger problems, and anything they hear about me will have been filtered through so many official and unofficial channels that any truth of the matter will be lost. Likewise, anyone who's anyone in the Sunlit Empire probably already knows who I am, so I have little to fear from revealing my identity. Any friction will likely arise if those at the top think me a threat if this spills out into a wider war, but I plan on ameliorating any of those concerns by returning to Occulara as soon as possible to properly take up my post, and not leave the city for a hot minute."

“Have this all figured out, have you? Everything’s going to be all right, is it? Absolutely nothing unexpected is going to happen? Everything that the public talks about will not hurt you at all? Or Heaven’s Eye? You *don’t know* what’s going to happen! You can’t say that this isn’t a problem!”

“I’ve interacted with Lord Protector Anastasios and the Grand Druid. The people of the Empires—those who matter, anyway, those who have power—want me on their side, and they’ll, if not bend over backwards, at least indulge a few whims if I’m not posing a serious threat. They care about the peace and prosperity of their Empires, and so long as I can guarantee that I won’t upset those carts, then I’ll be fine.”

Penelope sighed in frustration and collapsed in an armchair across from Leon, looking about ten times as tired as he felt. She remained quiet for several long seconds, finally saying exasperatedly, “Whatever happens, it’s on your head. Do be a dear and ensure that you don’t drag Heaven’s Eye down with you when you next indulge a whim, yeah?”

Leon shrugged. “If you insist.”

“I do insist.”

“I can tell, you’re being *very* insistent.”

“Now you’re just mocking me.”

“I am shocked and scandalized! I would *never* do such a thing!”

Silence settled over them for a short moment, during which Penelope stared at Leon quite curiously.

“What’s going on with you, Leon?”

Leon laughed. “Buzzed on adrenaline. Huge case of can’t-give-a-fuck-about-Imperial-concerns right now, clashing with deep anxiety and insecurity about the future. Just saw the remnants of my Clan’s vassals sack a city, killing thousands and doing billions of silvers of damage, if not more, to the city. Just confronted a ninth-tier mage in front of the entire world and am worried about the response. I’m also really tired and kind of hungry.”

Leon saw Penelope’s face contort as she put in titanic effort to prevent it, but after a few seconds, she burst out laughing. After a few good guffaws, Leon joined in, letting his pent-up emotions vent.

When they were both done, Leon glanced out the window and frowned slightly at what he saw. “Looks like we don’t have much time for rest or relaxation right now: we have some guests...”

—

As Leon and Penelope emerged from the Heaven’s Eye Tower, they were greeted with the sight of a huge ark of such ostentatious design that not even the luxurious ark Cassandra took to the Scorched Fields could compare. The thing looked like it had been completely plated in gold, then embellished with glittering gemstones. It looked less like a war ark and more like a pleasure yacht built by someone desperate beyond measure to show off their wealth.

It hovered over the courtyard, slowly inching downward as a number of Heaven’s Eye personnel rushed about clearing space below for it to land, just in case it was going to. The Tower Lord was already

waiting with a large delegation as the rest of the enclave's personnel scrambled about, trying to go about their duties even as this ark descended upon them.

Leon could see the other few arks that had been flying toward the city had already arrived and taken up important strategic positions. The Sky Devil fleet was still hurrying out of the destroyed sea gate, but the Jaguar's flagship was still in the harbor, covering them with its massive Lances. The three Sky Devil arks that had taken control of the sea wall were still there, too, but it seemed like no one wanted to commit to an aerial battle. All of the fighting so far had ended, so it seemed the Sunlit Empire was content to simply let the Sky Devils flee without putting their newly-arrived arks at risk when the rest of the city's reinforcements were still days away.

As Leon and Penelope joined the Tower Lord's delegation, the Tower Lord whispered to Leon, "This is the Imperial ark."

Leon whispered his thanks just as a door on the side of the ark slid open, revealing a spectacularly handsome man dressed in a manner just as ostentatious as his ark. He was bedecked in sparkling silver plate armor with heavily emphasized shoulder pauldrons, and a comically large codpiece.

But as over-the-top as his ensemble was, Leon didn't feel any desire to laugh—the man was smiling quite widely, but his aura was raging and laced with chilling killing intent. After getting to know the Lord Protector and the Grand Druid, Leon immediately recognized the man's weighty aura as belonging to that of a tenth-tier mage.

This was the Sunlit Emperor.

The Emperor stepped out of his ark as casually as he would step off the gangplank of a ship, and he slowly glided down to the square, followed by several dozen more Sunlit mages, four of whom Leon identified as ninth-tier mages.

Once he hit the ground, the Sunlit Emperor was smiling so brightly that even with a sky overcast by clouds and smoke, he still looked as sunlit as his title claimed. Leon couldn't help but feel himself relaxed slightly even with the Emperor's furious aura pressing in around his shoulders.

"It gladdens my heart to see Heaven's Eye so unscathed by today's turmoil," he intoned, his voice smooth and bright, without even a hint of gravel. "So stalwart a partner my Empire could never hope to deserve!"

Silence followed for a short moment, until Leon realized that, as the highest ranking Heaven's Eye member there, it was his duty to respond.

"You flatter us, Your Imperial Majesty," Leon replied, channeling the etiquette lessons that Elise had done her best to drill into him. He smiled pleasantly, though he felt more than a little ridiculous as the Emperor strode confidently, though unhurriedly, toward them.

"I but state the truth, Leon Raime," the Emperor said.

Leon was only mildly surprised at this—he didn't doubt for a second that the Emperor already knew who he was, but he thought that the man would play that information a little closer to his chest than this.

Without waiting for Leon to respond, the Emperor then turned to Penelope and his smile faltered for so short a moment that Leon thought he imagined it.

“Lady Penelope. Welcome back to the Sunlit Empire; we are joyous to have you back here after so long. Truly, you are a shining ray of light that brightens this dark day.”

“Your Imperial Majesty,” Penelope said, her voice strained.

Leon immediately clued into these two having a history more complex than simple professional familiarity.

“Tell me, My Lady, have you given any thought to my earlier proposal?” the Emperor asked, his attention so thoroughly locked on Penelope that Leon wondered if he’d lost track of the city around him.

Scowling, Penelope replied, “Perhaps you ought to see to this burning city rather than to me.”

“What is a city, compared to a beautiful woman?” the Emperor asked, though he did turn away from Penelope. He briefly nodded to the Tower Lord, then glanced back across the city. “It would gladden me if you, Leon, were to join me in the citadel tomorrow for a victory celebration. It seems the Sky Devils have wrought their carnage and sated themselves; they now retreat. Worrying news has reached my ear from across the sea, weighing down my heart greatly with thoughts of the war to come, but I would love if you could lighten it ever so slightly with stories of what happened here?”

The Emperor’s eyes landed upon Leon, deep brown and warm as a familiar hearth, and Leon knew then without a shadow of a doubt that the Emperor was counted among those who’d witnessed his duel with the Jaguar.

Chapter 780: Sunlit Emperor

Turning down a monarch, let alone a tenth-tier Emperor, wasn’t an easy thing, but there was nothing Leon wanted to do more as he readied himself to head to Argos’ citadel. He’d be heading there alone, without Penelope or Red. In fact, Penelope had told him that there would likely be no women attending at all, it being codified in law that women weren’t allowed in the government and had many of their public freedoms restricted. Given the way she spoke about the Sunlit Emperor, Leon could tell she also hated the man, but for why, she wouldn’t say. Heaven’s Eye had the clout to negotiate for better treatment of their guild members, but it was the exception, not the rule, and even Penelope was restricted in what she could do if she were to leave the Guild’s property.

All of that in mind, Leon still found it rather odd that the local Tower Lord hadn’t received an invitation, if only to act as cover for the Sunlit Emperor’s intentions, but given the way the man dressed and acted, Leon wasn’t so sure that the Emperor even knew what subtlety even meant. It jived well with what he knew of the Grand Druid and the Lord Protector—being old, powerful, or both generally meant fewer restrictions on behavior. After all, who was going to openly criticize their Emperor if that Emperor was brushing against the doors of divinity?

Leon wouldn’t openly criticize the Emperor, but he was sure thinking many critical thoughts as he left the Heaven’s Eye enclave on his way to the citadel. He was surrounded by Heaven’s Eye guards assembled by the Tower Lord, but he was the only one of any real rank heading there.

The old fortress around which the rest of the city had sprung over the millennia was an imposing thing. It didn't quite cover the same footprint as the Bull's Horns, but as far as defensibility went, it was still effectively impregnable to conventional forces, as far as Leon could estimate. Three layers of wall protecting the complex within, every building fortified, and numerous isolated baileys separated by additional walls and towers.

Leon passed through many of these baileys on his way to the palatial keep and was met outside of its front doors by the full red carpet treatment—including an actual red carpet leading into the keep. More than a hundred servants were there to see to any needs the guests had, and Leon could hardly believe that the city had been getting sacked less than twenty-four hours prior given their professional demeanors.

He was led to an opulent ballroom more suited to a proper palace than a keep, wherein more than fifty high-ranking mages in either luxurious formal wear or military uniforms were present with their adjutants and personal assistants. The Emperor himself sat in a gilded throne at the opposite end of the room quietly chatting with two other men who Leon could tell were ninth-tier mages.

Despite this illustrious company, as soon as Leon entered the room and was announced, the Emperor's eyes—as well as just about every other eye there—turned in his direction.

But Leon stood strong against this withering fusillade of attention. He was on the lookout for it, but he sensed not much killing intent, calming some of his anxieties about coming effectively alone. However, his other anxieties, especially those of a more social nature, only grew. Most parties of this sort that he'd attended had been with Elise on his arm, ensuring that he was never really left alone, and that he always had something of a lifeline keeping him from drowning in social expectations and traditional ceremonies.

But after so long with his wife, he knew at least a few standard courtesies, even if he felt more than a little awkward observing them.

So, he strolled further into the ballroom with as much confidence as he could display and made his way toward the evening's host: the Sunlit Emperor himself.

Leon was dressed fairly modestly, in a mostly black ensemble that hugged his figure in a way that had made Elise and Valeria—who'd both selected it for him—practically swoon. Almost invisibly embroidered on his vest were bolts of silver lightning that followed the lines of an almost comically idealized male physique.

The Emperor, on the other hand, was dressed quite loudly, in bright, garish yellows, oranges, and blues. Again, he wore what Leon could only assume was a padded codpiece given its size—he wasn't the only one present doing so, Leon observed. The Emperor's colorful jerkin was cut very tightly, accentuating his lithe physique, while his underlying doublet was far looser, making his arms and shoulders look even bigger.

"Leon Raime," the Emperor exclaimed as Leon approached, the two ninth-tier mages at his side dutifully stepping aside as their monarch's attention shifted. "A joy to see you, my friend! Welcome to my little get-together!"

"I wouldn't have missed it," Leon said far more genuinely than he felt. "Thank you for your invitation."

“Ah, it was the least I could do when a man of your station and position went out of his way to defend my city!”

Leon’s smile became just a little more strained; Argos was technically jointly administered by all four Empires, but since it was so close to the Sunlit Empire’s southeastern border, it was essentially in the Sunlit Emperor’s pocket and it was the Sunlit Empire’s laws that held sway within the city. However, while that was the reality, Leon was a little surprised to hear the Emperor lay such overt claim to the city given the presence of nobles and officers from the other Empires present—or so he assumed. A quick glance around confirmed that most of the men present at least looked fairly similar and had roughly similar clothing choices.

‘Maybe there aren’t men from other Empires here?’

“You know, Leon,” the Emperor said, drawing Leon’s attention back to him, “I heard some stories about what happened here after your arrival, but I’d rather hear it from you. So, tell me a story.”

Leon smiled with as much cheer as he could, but his heart rate accelerated. He’d spent the past day altering his story just enough to sound plausible enough without being dishonest. The last thing he wanted was to draw Imperial attention for dealing with the Sky Devils.

“Well, Your Imperial Majesty,” he began, “how good can a story be without a drink in hand?”

“Well said! Bring us something to wet our tongues!”

Leon took a deep breath, satisfied with having bought a few seconds, but barely a moment later there was a cup of heated wine being offered to him as the Emperor stood up from his throne, his own cup in hand.

“Come, Leon, let’s talk. Tell me your story.”

With a sigh, Leon began with his journey north from the Pegasi States—personal business had drawn him there, he assured the Emperor—when he heard about the assault on Argos and the call to arms to all Heaven’s Eye forces in the area. He and one of his retainers arrived a few days later, and when Leon noticed a lightning mage wreaking havoc in the city after the sea wall was breached, he just couldn’t help himself and challenged the man to combat—both to satisfy his own desire for battle, and to stop the man’s rampage. He challenged the Jaguar that if he were to hit him just once with his own magic, then the Sky Devils would have to leave.

“... and obviously, I won the bet,” Leon finished.

“A story well told!” the Emperor exclaimed as he clapped Leon on the shoulder. “I’m still surprised the Sky Devils would honor such an arrangement, especially given who you are.”

Leon did a slight double take at just how open the Emperor was being, but fortunately, most of the others in the ballroom were giving them a wide berth.

“Listen, Leon,” the Emperor said, finally leaning in a bit and lowering his voice, “that was a good story, and I applaud your attempt, but we both know that that was packed with a least a little bit of bull shit.” Leon had to fight to keep himself from scowling at the Emperor’s choice of words. He wasn’t overfond of the Bull Kingdom, but he still held Trajan in the highest esteem. “You should rethink ever going near the

Sky Devils again. I understand that you don't have much interest in conquest, but there are those in the Empires that desire your death regardless. Keeping you away from the Sky Devils was one of the only ways we could get those particular cocksuckers to back off."

Loen cocked an eyebrow and asked, "Who?"

"That's unimportant—what *is* important is that you're being protected right now. I am one of those who've put his name and reputation on the line to guarantee that you would keep away from these terrorists, you understand, and I'm not thrilled at the idea of you making any further contact with them."

"I'm with Heaven's Eye," Leon said with a conciliatory tone, seeking to end this particular discussion as quickly as he could so he could make good his escape from the party. "My interests lie in Occulara, not in the Sky Devil's Hell."

"That's wonderful to hear, my friend, simply wonderful!" The Sunlit Emperor threw his head back and laughed in a manner that Leon thought rather fake. "Now, then, my friend, I'd like to extend to you another invitation!"

The Emperor's arm around Leon's shoulder tightened, and Leon felt a slight pinch up near his shoulder. He quickly shook off the Emperor's arm.

"Ah, I apologize if I've been too informal," the Sunlit Emperor stated apologetically as he let Leon pull back a couple of steps. "I tend to do that. However, as I was saying, I would like to invite you to consider my Empire your home away from home! I won't be quite so shameless as to try and bribe you to join my Empire as those old fools in the north and west have done, but I want you to feel welcome here. Don't every hesitate to come visit!"

As he spoke, the Emperor extended a hand and let a few tiny bolts of golden lightning dance across his arm.

"And don't forget: we have the best lightning mages in all of Aeterna. I, personally, would love to test my skills against a trueborn descendant of the Thunderbird, that great monster lurking in the dark that we all tell our children about to make them behave!"

"I think that might be easily arranged," Leon said with a far more genuine smile than he'd shown thus far spreading across his face, his competitiveness kindled by the Emperor's attitude.

"Fantastic. Now, I have to make sure the rest of my guests are having a good time and that they'll be ready to get back to work tomorrow. But tonight, we shall celebrate driving off the Sky Devils with plenty of wine and women!"

As he made this exclamation, one of the nearby doors opened and a long line of beautiful women of all shapes and complexions came streaming in, their faces hidden behind veils while their bodies were otherwise put on display with skimpy dancer's wear. The Emperor gave a great cry of delight as he seemed to forget all about Leon and scamper over to the ladies, immediately taking three of the most beautiful with him back to his throne. The rest of the women spread out amongst the other couple hundred men present, doing their best to be as seductive as possible.

One even approached Leon, a gorgeous woman with striking red hair and glittering green eyes. Leon smiled bitterly as he turned her away—he wondered if someone had purposefully sent her after him, knowing who he was married to. The woman greatly resembled Elise in almost all ways. She was voluptuous and forward, and were she not nearly half a foot shorter and had a higher-pitched voice than Elise, Leon might've even thought for a second or two that his wife had come here incognito.

After fending the dancer off, Leon didn't stay too much longer. He wanted to get back to Occulara as soon as possible, and he'd made his plans to leave the city almost as soon as he returned from this party. So, sparing only the Emperor the dignity of a goodbye—having been the only person he'd had a meaningful conversation with—he soon took his leave.

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The Sunlit Emperor grinned with delight as the dancer writhed in his lap. He was half-considering taking her right then and there, in front of all his men. He had no children of his own despite his massive harem, and that had led to a few untoward rumors about his virility, so he'd taken it upon himself of late to be even more public about his desires than he already was.

However, just as he was about to make a decision, one of his ninth-tier guards approached from behind.

"Your Imperial Majesty, I must ask one last time: give us your permission to take that bastard's head! To have him in our lands is a danger we cannot bear, especially after what we saw on our way to the city!"

"You can shut your bitch mouth," the Emperor retorted. "My word is final: Leon is not to be touched by unclean hands. Those pole greasers in the north and west are watching him too closely, he'll leave our lands safe and fucking secure."

"But the risks—"

"—Are *negligible*!" The Emperor finally turned his face from admiring the suddenly very nervous dancer who was hearing things far above her pay grade and facing his ninth-tier personal guard. The Emperor let his aura spill forth, making it quite clear exactly what would happen if the man continued to press his luck. "Go find a good pussy to stick your cock in," the Emperor commanded. "Blasting a few loads in a good woman has never failed to calm me down. Gods know I would welcome it if you were to relax and get the fuck off my dick, exactly where you're *not* welcome."

The guard barely contained a snarl, but left anyway.

The Emperor smiled as he did, reveling in how his power ensured that he always got his way. His guards might not like it, but he was not only the Emperor, but his power also made him completely untouchable.

But even then, unchecked political power, and nearly unrestrained personal power wasn't enough. He wanted *more*. Ascension past the tenth-tier hadn't been done by anyone on Aeterna in so long that many didn't think it was possible with the plane's current magical developmental standards, but the Sunlit Emperor had just secured exactly what he needed to give him that extra boost, to bypass that restriction entirely.

Despite having a dancer in his lap, he couldn't help but think about Leon for a moment. It infuriated him to no end, thinking of the power the boy had just fallen into simply because his family had managed to

hold onto their ritual to awaken bloodlines. As far the Sunlit Emperor had been able to ascertain over the past decade, Leon's family was the only one with a direct link to the Thunderbird that had managed such a thing.

'I am the Emperor, not him! And yet, he's the one with the power!' the Emperor jealously screamed in his head. He thought about his Empire, its people constantly snickering behind his back at just how much of a failure he was compared to his mother. She'd been a rare sort, achieving such power in the Sunlit Emperor despite the inherent limitations of her gender that were apparent to all Sunlit men. Compared to her, he had achieved nothing at all.

In a fit of insecurity, he retrieved a small glass orb from his soul realm, needing to see it with his own eyes just to make sure that he still had it, that it hadn't spontaneously vanished, or been merely a figment of his imagination this entire time.

The glass orb was heavily enchanted, and contained within it, hovering in the exact center of the nearly-transparent sphere, was a single drop of fresh blood, glowing bright red with magic power. A quick invoking of some of the orb's enchantments had a couple sparks of silver-blue lightning erupt from the blood, protecting it from his probes.

He quickly pulled it back into his soul realm, his grin growing for a moment until he realized that the dancer in his lap had slowed her gyrations, a look of nervous fear on her beautiful face from what she'd overheard over the past few minutes.

"Keep moving, whore," the Emperor commanded, and the woman practically jumped to continue her moves.

He lost himself in the body of his dancer, and thoughts of the glory he was soon to cover himself in once he unlocked the secrets hidden in Leon's blood.

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"Ready to go?" Penelope asked as Leon arrived at Heaven's Eye's only arypad in Argos.

"Absolutely," Leon growled. "Where's Red?"

"Your wyvern friend is already inside," Penelope said, and she lost no time in leading Leon into her ark.

It was spacious enough, but Leon was more concerned with its speed. He was fast in his Thunderbird form, but an ark built for speed was always going to be faster.

As he entered the ark, he found Red walking around, her amber eyes wide open in wonder. However, as soon as she saw him and Penelope, her expression hardened.

[About time.]

"It takes time and finesse to extricate oneself from an Imperial party," Leon replied as he collapsed in the first seat in his way.

"Was the party that trying?" Penelope asked.

"Trying enough. Red, how're things with you?"

[Wondering just how humans are capable of building something like this.]

"You've seen arks before, haven't you?" Penelope asked.

Red nodded without too much enthusiasm, but Leon could still see her looking around the cabin with much more excitement than she was otherwise showing.

"What's on your mind?" Leon asked her.

Red frowned. [Nothing.]

"Doesn't look like nothing. Looks like something."

[I have said it was nothing, and nothing is what it is.]

"Fair enough. But if that nothing turns to something, don't hesitate to talk about it. That's what humans do: they share their thoughts."

[Perhaps a bit too much...]

"Is that a subtle attempt to get me to shut up?"

"I think it was," Penelope interjected. "If Red's not too willing to talk right now, Leon, how about satisfying a curiosity of mine? Now that you have more power within Heaven's Eye, what are you planning on doing with it?"

Her question was fairly neutral, but Leon picked up on a slight waver in her tone.

'She's nervous?'

"Research," Leon quickly answered, eager to assuage any anxiety. "I have two goals right now: get stronger, and get smarter. Learn and grow. I'm in the perfect position to do both now."

"I suppose that's true. Any projects worth pursuing right away?"

Leon thought of his Hesperidic Apples. "Nothing in particular," he answered.

"All right..." Penelope said as the ark began to lift off now that they were all onboard. "Finally! I can't wait to get out of this damn Empire!"

Leon nodded in solidarity. He just wanted to get home, and woe to anyone or anything that got in his way.