

Storm King 781

Chapter 781: To Know Fire

Leon sighed as he sat back in his chair, the past few days of paperwork weighing as heavily on his mind and sanity as his recent visit to Argos.

He'd returned to Occulara almost a week ago and had been expecting to meet immediately with the Director. However, the Director had simply sent him a curt message saying that they'd talk later. That irritated Leon greatly, but instead of dwelling on it, he had spent most of that week locked in meetings with his department heads, interviews for replacements for those Talal had marked as Rufus loyalists or of relatively low character, reading reports on current research projects, and relocating assets according to his preferences and priorities. The branch had *a lot* of assets tied up in blood magic research, and Leon had all of that research archived and canceled, leaving him with quite a few people to spare.

His new priorities included putting his Lightning Lance designs in the hands of professional weapons developers and seeing what they could do with it, reprioritizing ark development, and studying the effects of Titanstone. Given his desire to maintain fairly strict security regarding these more sensitive issues, those teams were as small as he could make them, though quite well-funded, while many researchers who'd been looking into blood magic were reassigned to more humanitarian projects, such as studying nature, agricultural, and healing magic.

Upon his return to Occulara, he'd also received word of Valentina's acceptance of his offer, to Xaphan's relative chagrin. That being said, the demon had come around to the idea of having another contract, the new Mist of Chaos enchantment that Leon built in his soul realm doing much to convince him that he was strong enough to dominate Valentina should she make any hostile moves against him.

So, Leon, still rather surprised that Amon hadn't killed his wayward vampire, made another trip down to Heaven's Eye's supermax prison, summoned Xaphan into Valentina's cell, and let them do their work. A few hours later, he and Valentina walked out of the prison side-by-side, and Leon had her sent back to her home under heavy guard. He'd speak with her later, but for now, he allowed her to focus fully on her recovery from vampirism, with Xaphan's assistance.

But as exciting as taking complete control over so many of Heaven's Eye's resources was, he could only stand the paperwork for so long. He quietly considered himself lucky that he had Talal to take up the slack, because he wasn't sure what he would do if he didn't have a capable second-in-command willing to alleviate his administrative duties.

The end of the day couldn't have come soon enough, and for Leon, it came a little early as Elise entered his office.

"Leon," she said lovingly.

"Elise," he replied with just as much emotion. However, a moment later, he saw her expression tighten up a bit with some consternation. "Is something wrong?"

"Nothing, really," Elise replied as Leon got up and walked around his desk to embrace his wife. "It's just our neighbors. And some of our workers tending to our farms. They find Red... intimidating. Eliasson, in particular, has been getting his cock all twisted, accusing Red of stealing and eating his cattle."

Leon's eyes just about popped out of their sockets. Elise rarely spoke so vulgarly outside of their bedroom.

"Are things that bad?" he asked, thinking that the complaints against Red had to have rather fiercely irritated her to bring that kind of language out.

Elise sighed and melted into his arms. "In a way, they're exaggerated—I don't think she's stealing any livestock, for example. In others, though, Red's quite a bit worse than that. She *is* quite intimidating."

Leon cringed slightly, knowing that it was partially his fault. When he'd made the offer for Red to join him, he'd done so under the assumption that he would still be a Hand of the Director upon her arrival and that he'd have plenty of time to spend with her, helping her get acclimated to human society. Instead, he'd spent the past week holed up in Rufus' old office, overseeing the transfer of power and changing of priorities.

Fortunately, he was just about done.

"I'll go and see her now," Leon said.

"What about your work?" Elise asked.

"If things have gotten so bad that my wife had to come and see me during work, then I have to deal with it now. Besides, I didn't promote Talal for nothing—he can handle most everything from here."

Elise giggled, but poked him in the cheek and said, "You shouldn't be lazy."

Leon put on a mock-outraged tone and said, "This isn't me being lazy, this is me acknowledging my shortcomings and delegating as needed."

Not waiting for another word, Leon lifted Elise off her feet and carried her out the door, where several of their personal assistants were waiting with several of Leon's assistants that came with his post.

A few minutes later, they'd piled into Leon and Elise's horseless and wheelless carriage, and homeward bound they were. Under normal circumstances, Leon would've been loath to ride in a carriage instead of flying, but he was in a far more relaxed and conciliatory mood after finally getting his house in order. Besides, while he was more than willing to fly everywhere, Elise had more relaxed tastes, and typically took carriages whenever she needed to head into town.

About half an hour later, they were back home, and Leon could immediately see that things were fairly bad, if the looks he was getting from one of his neighbors was anything to go by. Normally, he wouldn't see any of his neighbors as he pulled into his villa's front courtyard, their properties being fairly large and surrounded by hedges and trees, but this particular neighbor was now standing outside of his front door, arguing with the head of Leon's household staff with about much anger as a dignified and well-respected man who valued his reputation would.

The man was Arsenios, a local government bureaucrat. Occulara was, in practice, a semi-autonomous city-state under the suzerainty of the Ilian Empire, but on paper, it was still a city completely under the control of the Ilian Emperor. To handle the problems that this discrepancy caused, the Ilian Empire did have some token governmental presence within the city.

Of course, the Ilian Emperor still held supreme authority over the city, but such authority was rarely, if ever, used.

It was a delicate system, but since it gave Heaven's Eye in all practical senses complete control of the city, no one was too willing to rock that boat. Arsenios was fairly high-ranking within the local bureaucratic apparatus, and if there was a list of men and women who could've brought greater Ilian attention to Occulara's affairs, it was Arsenios. That didn't make him a coddled and pampered bureaucrat in Occulara, but it did mean that Leon couldn't exactly throw him out on his ass for raising a stink over a personal grievance—especially if it was justified.

"What's the problem?" Leon demanded as he exited the carriage, holding the door open for Elise as he did.

"Arsenios, good to see you," Elise said, her noble cheer acting as the perfect counterbalance to Leon's obvious displeasure as she followed him out. "Our home is always open to you, but what brings you here with such passion?"

Arsenios glared at them both and, after taking a moment to rather obviously collect himself, stated, "Your pet wyvern has rampaged throughout the neighborhood. Many of us are nearing the end of our patience, and we demand that you restrain your new pet immediately!"

Leon smiled dangerous as he walked toward Arsenios, Elise on his arm doing much to help him restrain his anger—his knowledge that he wasn't exactly in the right here going even further in that regard.

"Please, come inside for a drink," he said diplomatically. "Red is not our *pet*, and I'll go and speak with her about restraining herself while she's in the city."

Arsenios glared at him, but accepted the invitation.

Leon left him with Elise to handle, knowing that he'd be in good hands. He, meanwhile, headed outside, knowing exactly where Red would be even without projecting his magic senses. Indeed, he found her lounging in wyvern form in one of his courtyard, bathing in the last few rays of sunlight before the sun slipped below the distant horizon.

"Hey there," he said as he joined Red, lying down on the warm stone tiles. "How's it going?"

Red made a chuffing sound, then spoke into his mind, [This place is comfortable. I like it here.]

"Better than a cave?"

[Yes.]

"Is it better in human or wyvern form?"

Red chuffed again, then made a strange low-pitched whining sound. After a long moment, Leon realized she wasn't going to answer that question, though given her attitudes towards human society so far, he took her lack of answer to be, itself, an answer.

"Have you been flying around, lately?"

[I've stretched my wings, yes.]

“People have been complaining about you. You haven’t been stealing livestock, have you?”

Red snorted. [No.]

Leon nodded. “Then things are fine, as far as I’m concerned. Still, keep in mind that flying *is* technically illegal here.”

[That didn’t seem to stop you when you came to pick me up.]

Leon smirked and cringed at the same time. “Yeah, well. Something’s only illegal if people have the will to enforce that illegality. For me to head down and pick you up is one thing, flying around for leisure is another. Besides, there are some powerful people, relatively speaking, that live in these parts. If you continue to harass them, then they might make enough of a racket for someone to come and try and enforce the flying regulations.”

[You would ground me?] Red asked, sounding dangerously, if rather subtly furious.

“No. Not so much. Look, Red, you agreed to come and learn about human society, right? And humans like making rules that ensure their world is safe and brings them prosperity.”

[And they do so by restricting flying? Foolish; are they humans or worms, these who have imposed this rule? So fond are they of wallowing in their precious dirt that I can hardly tell.]

“That’s just the way we do things around here,” Leon replied, brushing off her attitude, reasoning that it would probably change in due course as Red found more things about human society that she enjoyed and was willing to make sacrifices for. “It’s good not to attract undue attention, though that’s something I’ve not been doing very well these past few weeks... and years...”

A deep, unpleasant silence settled around them, and Leon almost decided to leave right then and there. However, something was bothering him a little bit. Tikos and Red had ostensibly joined his retinue for the same purpose: to experience new things, and human civilization in particular. Tikos took to its purpose quite well, observing through the local flora as people went about their day all while helping Leon with his apple orchard and thunder wood. Red, on the other hand, for the past week had done little except fly around and lounge around in the sun.

Leon knew that he was the one who’d elicited her coming down from the mountain, but he’d thought that she would’ve been a little more eager to head out and experience human culture.

“Why are you here, Red?” Leon asked.

Red stirred slightly, perhaps out of confusion from his non sequitur. He was also fairly confused and wasn’t all that confident that he’d get an answer, but Red proved him wrong.

[You remind me of someone,] she said. [A woman who came tearing through the aeries years ago. Her power was radiant—*inspiring*, even. She intruded upon my territory and nearly killed me. When she had me at her mercy, she spared me.]

“How long ago was this?” Leon asked, his brow furrowing slightly as he wondered just who she was talking about.

Red thought for a moment and answered, [Thirty-five years, more or less.]

Leon nodded again, but a strange possibility occurred to him. It was only a few years before he'd been born that Red encountered this woman, and he reminded him of her...

[She wielded black fire, too,] Red explained, [and her eyes matched yours.]

Leon's heart damn near stopped as his eyes went wide.

[Nothing could touch her in the aeries,] Red continued. [When she fought me, I was younger and weaker than I am now, and it doesn't surprise me at all that she put me in such a state. Even now, I don't think I could take her as she was back then, let alone how strong she must be now.]

"Wha—what happened?" Leon croaked. "She... didn't kill you, obviously..."

[No. Instead, she left—for a time. I retreated to my lair to heal and recover, but only a few days later, this woman returned. We didn't fight—I'd learned that I was no match. I postured, but I was gravely wounded, and it had little effect. Instead of running away in fear, as most creatures do when faced with me, she came into my lair as if it were her own. She tended to my wounds and brought me food, but spoke little. What few things she did speak of were the comforts and luxuries she wished she had—better healing papers, better food, servants to handle menial chores... And she spoke of magic.]

"Fire?" Leon hoarsely asked.

[Yes. She was a fire mage. But fire deadlier than any I'd ever seen before. Fire that cut through mine without effort. Fire that darkened all the world and threatened to consume my life. It was fire that I'd never seen before, fire that I've not seen since... until I saw you fight my mate.]

Leon raised a hand and conjured a small black flame in his hand, letting it slowly undulate in a way that it rebelled against. This was violent fire, not something that could be put to much practical purpose. It was fire of death and destruction and little else, and it rebelled against his restraint.

[She spoke to me of fire,] Red continued. [As a creature of flame, I pride myself on my knowledge of fire. But the things she asked me, the knowledge she possessed of flame, and the questions she still had, left me feeling like my own young when they try to imitate me and breathe fire. I couldn't answer any but the simplest questions she asked. When she left, I doubt she'd learned much from me about fire. But I learned from her—just those few days of learning were enough to catapult my strength up... I think by human measurements, a tier? Two?]

"That much power in just a few days?" Leon incredulously asked.

[Not in those days—those days were just learning. It was the questions that she'd asked, and the explanations she gave for asking them that led me to think. I thought for years, and it was over those years that I applied the answer to those questions and grew strong. The thoughts she left me with are what led me to real power compared to others of my kind.]

"So, when you saw my fire, you thought that I might have similar knowledge to share?"

Red didn't verbally respond, but Leon thought that he'd hit the nail on the head. Not that he was angry—he didn't expect his people to work for free, after all. If what Red wanted out of this arrangement was knowledge instead of gold and jewels, then he was fine with that. Hells, he was more willing to share with her what he knew about fire than he was to pay her piles of treasure.

[What is this fire?] she asked as she transformed back into human form and knelt next to Leon, her eyes locked on his small black flame.

“The fire of the Great Black Dragon,” Leon answered.

[Dragon?] she whispered as her eyes went wide, wider than his just a moment ago. [But... dragons are extinct...]

“Maybe. There’s a huge and powerful Clan of dragon descendants in the Nexus. Human, like myself, but bearing the power of the seven Great Dragons. The Great Black Dragon wielded this fire, and it’s from him that I’ve inherited it... through my mother...”

[I must know this power,] Red whispered, hardly blinking at Leon’s mention of his mother. [I must grow strong.]

“I think we can talk about fire,” Leon said as he extinguished the black fire and stood up. “I think you, me, and Xaphan—my contracted fire demon—should all sit down and have a long conversation or a thousand.”

Red’s amber eyes were practically glittering with excitement, though the rest of her face was still rather stoic.

“I will go to the Nexus, Red. My mother is there. The remains of my Thunderbird Clan are there. The Nexus is my future. Come with me, and you will know fire in ways you can’t even imagine right now. Come with me, and see just how far humans have pushed the element, and see how much further you can push it, in turn.”

Red smiled as she stood up, too. [I want this power. I would know this power. I would know fire. I will follow you to this power.]

Leon smirked. Hardly a declaration of undying loyalty, but he wasn’t looking for one. It was enough to know that Red was here not just for some vague notion of ‘experiencing human culture’, but had a more defined goal—and, more importantly, a goal that he could work toward with her.

“How soon would you like to get started?” Leon asked, a wry grin on his face.

[Now,] Red replied, to Leon’s utter lack of surprise.

“Sure,” Leon said. “But on one condition: you tell me about this woman with the black fire. I want to know everything that you can share with me about her. What did she look like? What did you two talk about? Where did she go after leaving you? Everything.”

If Leon was right, then he already knew where this woman went after leaving the aeries: she went north. She went almost as far north as north went on Aeterna, reaching the Bull Kingdom. Once there, she signed up to be a gladiator—out of boredom or for some other purpose, he had no clue. During one of her fights, she greatly impressed a young Artorias Raime, who began courting her.

Not long after, they got married, Artorias was disowned by his father for marrying an unknown woman, and, almost thirty two years ago, had a son. But not long after that, their home was attacked, Artorias fled with their baby, and the woman was teleported away to who-knew-where by distant family members. For whatever reason, she never returned.

Leon could only hope that she was still alive. Right then, with the solidest information on his mother he'd ever gotten since his father's death, he felt closer to her than ever. After Artorias' death, he'd felt alone and vulnerable, feelings that hadn't diminished nearly as much as he would've liked even with his growing family, retinue, and power. He could've found some solace and motivation in the possible survival of his mother, but he didn't know her, and he refused to get too heavily invested into her without knowing more. Still, there were few things he wanted to do more than finding her.

But now, he was finally starting to learn a little more. The shadow in his mind that was his mother was now just a little more defined. And he was a little more determined to find her. Once he did, perhaps then he could feel a little less alone and vulnerable.

Chapter 782: Consequences

Victory. A fantastic word.

Honor. Glory. More great words, depending on the ideals specific to each person.

The Jaguar never put too much stock in vague notions of glory or honor, but victory was something he could measure and achieve. When he returned to Kataigida, victory, honor, and glory were the words on every tongue. The Thunderer's forces, while the Jaguar had been busy giving Argos its modest sacking, had annihilated the barbarian forces on the Sword, razing their bases and putting their people to flight. The barbarian fleets even now decorated the bottom of the Veins of Vigilance, the vigilance the straits were named for not doing the usurpers any good.

The Thunderer was still there, though a goodly part of the invasion force had returned home, bringing the news. And so, victory, honor, and glory were all anyone could talk about. The Jaguar added to that, his destruction of the barbarian fleet and humiliation of their armies at Argos lifting many spirits even further. They were still waiting on news from the east regarding the seizing of forts and cities along the coast of the Shield mountains, but at this point, all anyone could talk about were their triumphs. Even if the eastern forces were defeated, the Ten Tribes had already done far more than anyone would've thought possible even just a few months before.

But the Jaguar was not particularly enthused by these events. It was not victory, honor, or glory that filled his mind. He always sought victory, but honor and glory were two notions that he rarely allowed himself to indulge in. Rather, the foremost idea in his mind was always duty: duty to his Tribe, and duty to Kataigida as a whole. Duty to their culture and history, duty to remember the sacrifices they'd made in order to survive all those millennia ago.

A duty to remember their legacy, and their King.

Kataigida knew no King. Its Tribes were represented by the Elder Council, made up of delegations of the eldest and wisest from every Tribe, and periodically, they might elect a Thunderer from amongst themselves. But this Thunderer was not a King, but first among equals, someone empowered to guide the Ten Tribes through a period of turmoil or some other time of upheaval.

The current Thunderer had been elected by his promise to bring death and destruction to the barbarians, and to guide the Ten Tribes 'into the future', whatever he meant by that. In the years since, the Jaguar had taken that particular sentiment to mean that the Thunderer wanted to make himself a

King, and to do so, he was destroying all of their traditions. Consolidating power, breaking down Tribal loyalties, erasing their identities.

The Jaguar would never stand for it. He knew others who wouldn't, either, but they were disparate and couldn't agree on the color of the sky—the Jaguar had only been half joking when he'd once said that he could declare that the sky was blue, and the more obstinate among his fellow Tribesman would drag him outside at sundown to witness the red sky—let alone how to proceed or deal with this threat to their heritage.

But now...

There was only one King of the Ten Tribes. Only one who could unite them, lead them into the future, whatever that might entail.

'The Thunderbird...'

The Jaguar, all along his journey home to Raikos couldn't stop thinking of that silver-blue lightning, nor of the young man who'd wielded that power. The Blood Thunder Jaguar itself had confirmed it: it was the power of their highest and noblest of gods, the Thunderbird. The bloodline, long thought dead, yet lived.

But he was with Heaven's Eye, working with those who'd usurped much of the old Kingdom's infrastructure. He'd opposed them in their sacking of Argos. Yet, he'd revealed himself in dramatic fashion, all-but declaring his existence to the Jaguar and all those who'd accompanied him.

Including Elina.

The Jaguar could only frown as he thought about the Inquisitor. She'd left his ship as soon as they passed through the misty veil and the northern coast of Kataigida came back into sight, flying her Pegasus straight for Stormhollow. The Jaguar knew exactly why: she knew exactly who that was and what his existence meant. She was going to inform the Thunderer and the Elder Council, but what they'd do with it, the Jaguar knew not.

He'd briefly entertained the thought of refusing Elina permission to leave, but he knew that would only result in conflict. He'd either be forced to hand her over and be punished for overstepping his authority, which would then allow her to relay the information she carried anyway, or at worst, it might spark a civil war. There were few things he wanted to do less than kill his fellows, even if they were from different Tribes.

Of course, that conviction could be tested when some of the more belligerent Tribes had cause to come to Raikos, but now, when the entire world had changed with the reveal of the existence of one person... It was a chance to truly unite the Ten Tribes behind a strong ruler, without destroying their culture and traditions to do it.

When he returned to Raikos, the Jaguar wasn't surprised to find that his Tribe's elders had already congregated in the central gathering hall. The entire Tribal Council was there to greet him and their returning warriors, ready to hear word from their own mouths of their great victory, news of which had already likely permeated the entire island. The Jaguar thought it likely that his dour and pensive

demeanor elicited quite a bit of confusion as he took his place amongst the elders, but by the time he'd finished his explanation, the entire council wore similar expressions.

The blood of the Thunderbird yet existed.

There wasn't much debate. The stories and legends of the Thunderbird were still strong amongst the Jaguar Tribe. They would now be silent and drop any of their formal objections to the Thunderer as the first amongst equals consolidated the ten Tribes' hold over the Sword. Then, with the Tribes' newfound control of the Veins of Vigilance, the Jaguar himself would lead a small company to try and make contact with this descendant.

What would happen next... none of them could say.

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Leon stood with the Director, each in front of the man's desk. No longer was the Director sitting behind it, his aged face shrouded in shadow, passing his judgment upon Leon like a King to a subject. Now, they stood in front of it, as equals.

Of course, the Director still spoke as if he were the senior partner in their relationship, but Leon wasn't going to push the subject too much. The Director's well of support and power was still far greater than his own, after all—he'd made Talal his Vice-Chief, but they would need years before the ranks of the branch had any amount of loyalty to Leon.

Fortunately, the purges were over, though they hadn't been quite that extensive to begin with. They'd amounted to only twenty firings and one arrest when one department head refused to vacate his post. Thirty other department heads were deemed reliable enough to retain, and replacements were promoted from within the branch. Leon hoped he wouldn't need to purge any more than that; after all of his rantings and posturing to Nestor, Xaphan, and the Thunderbird, he'd look quite the fool if he couldn't make things work without resorting to more widespread purges, or even more extreme measures.

But the administration of his branch of power wasn't Leon's concern right now. Instead, he and the Director were pouring over the detailed reports of the recent Sky Devil's raid on Argos, their seizure of the Sword, and how the forts along the Shield's edge had fallen silent. The raid on Argos was the one of most concern, though the capture of the Sword and the routing of Imperial forces upon it were of far greater consequence.

Without the Imperial fleets patrolling the Veins of Vigilance, the Sky Devils would be essentially free to raid the cities of the Pegasi States all the way to the Indra Raj. Control of the seas had been lost, and it would be hard-won back.

And still the raid on Argos was of more concern, if only because Leon's role in repelling the raid was quite extensively documented. And, as the reports were telling them, of immense interest to many people.

"The Lord Protector is on his way," the Director angrily murmured as he pushed a letter toward Leon. "Not the start of a good working relationship, I should say."

"Say what's on your mind," Leon said. "Don't let this fester."

The Director hardly seemed to need his prompting. “Leon. What was going on in your head?! You should know why making contact with the Sky Devils was going to raise eyebrows! And you did it anyway!”

“And in doing so, I ended the raid on Argos. Maybe I saved a few lives, and just at the cost of making a few old mages a little jumpy.”

“Don’t be so flippant, you know that this incident’s done so much more than that. Anastasios wouldn’t be racing here if the situation weren’t serious. The Ilian Empire is mostly happy to let us run this city, but for someone so powerful to come here is unprecedented. Heaven’s Eye doesn’t need this!”

Leon nodded in understanding, though he wasn’t as concerned about the matter as the Director was. Not completely unconcerned, of course, just *less*.

“The Lord Protector has been trying to get me on his side for a while...” Leon muttered. “Maybe, if it will quiet him down some, I’ll work with him a bit. Not leave Heaven’s Eye, obviously, but maybe giving him a bit of what he’s been after will ensure that we’re left in peace?”

The Director sighed, then turned to regard Leon quite seriously. “It’s good that you’re willing to make that sacrifice, because that’s probably why he’s coming. I would be surprised if he were actually angry at this event. I would guess that he’s going to use this event to try and squeeze for concessions.”

“Depending on those concessions, hardly that big of a price to pay. Especially since we’re not going to be staying on this plane for too long, are we?”

The Director smiled bitterly. “I was not hoping to leave Heaven’s Eye gutted on our way out...”

“Who’s to say we will? But I was thinking... If we could get the Sky Devils on our side, then we could take them with us when we left. At that point, are there going to be any real problems with strengthening the Empires in the process? What do we stand to lose if they gain access to better ark tech? Other than immediate leverage.”

“Without that leverage, then they could very well move against us immediately. The *potential* that you might work with them is all that’s keeping them from looking at you with suspicion. The Lord Protector wants what your blood can unlock. The Grand Druid wants your blood in her lineage. If they get those things, then you—and all of Heaven’s Eye, by extension—lose power over them.”

“Yes, but the problem is that power, on occasion, *has to be used*.”

“And you’re quite possibly about to be forced to use power that you didn’t have to, just because you went out to meet the Sky Devils in Argos. This would’ve all been so much simpler if you hadn’t done that.”

“What’s done is done, and I don’t regret my actions at all.”

“You don’t even know if the Sky Devils will be on your side!”

“No—that’s quite the gamble on my part, I’ll admit. But given their reactions after seeing my power, then I think the likelihood of them being on my side is strong. And besides, I protected Argos after their commander was killed, and the Sunlit Emperor himself seemed not all concerned about my intervention.”

The Director scowled lightly. "Yes, well, don't take his reaction to be the rule. As... *friendly* as he might seem, the Sentinels to the east will be all the more hostile."

"Why's that?"

"How much do you know about the fall of your Clan here?"

"Not much, admittedly. After my Clan fell, our vassals started infighting. Most of them who could do so rallied behind the strongest and evacuated the plane. Those who remained were either killed off or retreated southward, becoming the Sky Devils."

The Director nodded, then closed his eyes and spent a moment quite obviously gathering his thoughts. "Leon," he said, "you should know that the Sky Devils despise Heaven's Eye. Why that is should become clear in a moment."

"You see, most of the Clans that remained on Aeterna either killed themselves in petty wars, while those who were more unified gathered in the east, creating something of a rump state of the Empire that your Clan built here. But even then, they were hardly unified, and by the time the Brilliant Eleven came along, they were able to build an army strong enough to take the war to the east. And there, in the mountains and valleys that your Clan took as their own personal fief, the armies of the Brilliant Eleven fought the bloodiest and most destructive battles in the entire war. Millions were killed, the entire region was left so depopulated that it took tens of thousands of years to recover. The land itself was so scarred by the fighting that when the Sentinels formed their state, they named themselves thusly to remind themselves of exactly what happened, to always keep the brutality of those vassal Clans at the forefront of their thoughts."

Leon nodded along, utterly fascinated. Within his soul realm, he could feel Nestor paying attention, too.

"But why do the Sky Devils hate Heaven's Eye, then?" Leon asked. "As far as I know, Heaven's Eye didn't even exist back then. The guild didn't get its start until almost thirty thousand years later!"

"That's the official story, yes. About fifty thousand years ago, the entity that this guild was became Heaven's Eye, but it has existed in some form or fashion since the days of your family's conquest. It collaborated your Clan and with its vassals, though, back then, the guild was much less centralized and regulated. That changed when your family took direct control of the guild, using it to essentially build their local logistics chain on this plane. In effect, they took the decentralized guild and made it Heaven's Eye."

"When your Clan fell, proto-Heaven's Eye lost much of its power, but its leaders from your family were killed, and those who replaced them were planar locals who were far more sympathetic to the Brilliant Eleven than they were with the remnants of your Clan's vassals. They worked with the Brilliant Eleven, turning what remained of your Clan's supply chain and plane-spanning trade network to the purpose of defeating those who would become the Sky Devils."

"And that's why they hate the guild?" Leon whispered.

"Yes," the Director confirmed. "As far as they're concerned, though it's been so long and we've changed our name, the guild is still an organization that turned against them when they were at their most

vulnerable, using the systems and infrastructure given to us by your Clan to do so. Their hatred of us is only exceeded by their hatred of the Empires.”

“Well, that would make some sense, then,” Leon responded thoughtfully. “Instead of proceeding on to the citadel once they’d breached the walls of Argos proper, they instead marched on our district in the city. I mean, it was probably clear that they weren’t going to be able to destroy Argos entirely, not with how close Imperial reinforcements were, and were likely just trying to do what damage they could in the short time they had, but instead of just burning the city mindlessly, they marched on Heaven’s Eye.”

“Yes, and you went out to meet them. And now we have to deal with overly inquisitive minds from the Empires, and a great deal of scrutiny that we don’t need when we’re just now trying to get our partnership off the ground!”

The Director didn’t speak too much more loudly than he did when he wasn’t angry, but Leon could tell he was *furios*. His aura flexed and writhed, though the old man’s body remained calm and serene. He wore a fairly neutral expression, but his eyes were narrow with displeasure.

“For what it’s worth,” Leon replied after a moment of silence, “I am sorry for that. The consequences of actions that I feel necessary aren’t

Chapter 783: Anastasios’ Arrival

When he returned home after his meeting with the Director, Leon went straight to a quiet meditation chamber where he could ruminate on the upcoming problems he had to deal with on his own. He didn’t regret his decision to face off alone against the Sky Devils, but the consequences of that decision were undoubtedly going to give him a headache.

It wasn’t long before a knock came at the door, soft but insistent. With his magic, Leon pulled the door open, revealing Elise standing there with an amused smile.

“Surprising that my husband came here as soon as he came home,” she observed. “Did your meeting go that poorly?”

Leon smiled at her appearance and held out his arm, inviting her to join him on the floor cushions. Elise happily accepted, bounding into the room, kicking the door shut behind her, and cuddling up against him with his arm around her.

As soon as the door closed, Leon launched into his explanation of just what had been discussed with the Director in the Hexagon, and the increased attention he was getting from the Imperials.

“He’s right to be upset, I think,” Elise stated once Leon was finished. “I don’t think you were wrong to intervene, but the Director isn’t for being upset, either.”

“I’m glad to hear that you don’t think I was wrong,” Leon playfully said. “I only went to Argos after receiving your message.”

“Yeah...” Elise replied. “I think Maia might’ve overstated the need for you to go...”

“Are you sure it was her who overstated it?” Leon asked, his playful smile turning a little accusatory.

"I... might've been scared at the time, too," Elise admitted. "Something like a Sky Devil invasion is terrifying, even with your connection to them..."

"You don't need to fear them," Leon whispered as he pulled her just a little tighter against him. "As long as I'm here, they can't touch you."

Elise snuggled in and said, "Then do what you can to stick around."

"Really? You don't want a man who'll head out at the first opportunity to act a hero?"

"I would rather have a living husband no better than any other than a dead husband whose praises everyone sings. The days when I could be excited by a strong, ruggedly handsome barbarian walking into my Tower are over, and it's all your fault!" Though she stared at him intensely, her tone was soft and teasing, and she punctuated her 'outburst' with the weakest of slaps to his chest.

"Oh no," Leon replied with mischievous sarcasm, "did I turn you off guys like me? Did I ruin you for all other stupid, selfish, idiots who act without thinking?"

Elise giggled and turned to face him instead of leaning against his body. With a tone dripping with sultry need, she said, "You've ruined me for all other men, Leon. The thought of having other women around that we can play with excites me... but the thought of another man does not. How could it, when I already have the best one?"

Leon smiled, happy, awkward, and uncomfortable all at the same time. But he acted decisively, pressing his lips against hers. Her lips parted, and his tongue commenced its invasion. She put up valiant resistance, her tongue greeting his with strength, but when they parted, her eyes gleamed with desire and she moaned in pleasure, his hands having roamed all over her body.

But instead of diving back in for round two, Elise took a deep breath and asked, "Are we going to have to plan to host an Emperor?"

"I wouldn't put it past Anastasios," Leon whispered as he pressed his forehead against hers. "He's going to exploit this to the hilt."

"Then we're going to have to prepare for a large retinue, as well... Have food and drinks, hire extra attendants and servants, make sure the estate is in top presentational state..." As she spoke, Elise wrestled with Leon's shirt, desperately trying to pull it off of him without disentangling herself from his embrace.

"I hope we won't need this preparation..." Leon murmured. "But if we do... we're going to have other guests too..."

"Right..." Elise whispered as she finally lost patience and simply tore the offending garment off Leon, revealing his well-built chest and tight abs. With an almost maniacal grin, Elise repaid Leon for his roaming hands with some of her own. "And after?"

"I'll be staying in Occulara..." Leon whispered, his breath stolen as Elise lowered her head and began kissing her way down his neck and chest. "Let Gaius and Marcus and them head out if need be for a while..."

"And Anastasios?" Elise asked, only pulling her lips from his skin for long enough to voice her question.

"Might have to... work with him... too..." Leon gasped as she teased at his waistline.

But then, he sighed in disappointment as she pulled away. "Do you think we should've done this to begin with?" she asked.

"Yes, we should've done this before talking business," Leon said as he wrapped his arm around her waist and twisted, flipping her onto her back as he took his place on top, his lips turned up in frisky grin. "But, also yes. Throwing them a bone probably would've sooner gotten the Empires off our backs."

"They'll come back... for more..." Elise gasped as Leon lightly grasped her calves and began pushing upward, raising her dress at the same time.

"Then they'll get what they want. After all due delay, and with some concessions of their own..." Leon replied as he pushed farther, propping her legs up on his shoulders. "No reason we can't work together. No reason we *have* to be enemies. And the more they get from me, the more I can get from them..."

As Leon dove between Elise's legs, all talk of business ceased. For the next few hours, only the sounds of pleasure echoed throughout the meditation chamber.

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Leon's villa was a hive of activity. Elise had made good on the need to prepare themselves for Anastasios' arrival, her and Leon's hunch that the Lord Protector and former Emperor would, at least initially, refuse to stay at any local properties owned by the Ilrian crown in favor of Leon's residence. Word of his 'request' came almost a full day before Anastasios' own arrival, but by then, Leon and Elise had already had more than a day to prepare. Extra servants were hired, the entire villa was cleaned as thoroughly as it could be under such short notice, and the estate was prepared to host an Imperial delegation.

By the time Leon departed his home to head down to the docks, the white marble gleamed even in the relatively overcast sky, appropriate quarters had been arranged, and his family and retinue were all in their proper places for who was about to visit. Only Red and Tikos weren't ready to greet Anastasios at the door, and that was because Red hadn't yet adapted to human culture enough to be even remotely polite, and Tikos was down in the apple orchard tending to the Hesperidic Apples.

So, as he made his way through Occulara with his retinue at his side, Leon felt that his home was about as ready as it could be for an Imperial visitor.

Soon enough, he found himself down at Occulara's largest dock, where an enormous Heaven's Eye welcoming party was awaiting the Lord Protector's arrival. Standing there at the front was the Director himself, Penelope at his side. Just behind him were three of the other five branch Chiefs, including Emilie and Narses, the remaining two not yet arrived.

"We sure about this, boss?" Alix asked as they started making their way over.

"Having doubts?" Leon responded.

"Just wondering at the wisdom of welcoming those who'd enslave us into this city is all..." Alix explained.

"Anyone else have doubts?" Leon asked the remained of his retinue.

"I'll admit that I'm a bit curious," Marcus said, and when Leon glanced at Gaius, the other man nodded in agreement.

"I'm less than enthused that we're going to be making any offers at all to Ilion," Anna stated. "If we had to work with any Empire, why not seek support from Evergold?"

Answering Anna first, Leon explained, "We're *in* the Ilian Empire, so having them on our side is more crucial than the Sacred Golden Empire. That being said, Anastasios is only a few miles out, and the Grand Druid is probably back in Evergold. Still, it's not like we're not going to be working with them, they're just not priority number one."

"So we're not going to be exclusive?" asked a voice from above.

Recognizing the voice, Leon's heart plummeted. He could see the Lord Protector's ship on the Scamander River slowly winding its way through the dense urban sprawl that lined the river, and had assumed that the man was still on board. Besides, if the Lord Protector was going to be anywhere, Leon assumed he would've been interacting with those who'd gone down to the docks to greet him.

But, looking up, Leon found that Anastasios was sitting on the roof of the customs building they were standing beside, a wide grin on his face and one of Leon's flight belts around his waist.

Leon's group fell silent, and Leon found himself at a complete loss for words for a moment.

Taking advantage of the silence, the Lord Protector pushed himself off the four-story building and floated downward, borne by his power.

"It pleases me that you're coming to welcome me to this marvelous city," the Lord Protector said as he gently landed in front of Leon, "but the circumstances that demand my presence are... *less* pleasing."

Recovering himself, Leon quickly replied, "Well, let's see what we can do about that, shall we? But we'll do this the proper way."

With that, Leon gestured to his people and began walking toward the welcome delegation, showing the Lord Protector his back in the process.

For the briefest of moments, Leon expected *something* to hit him from behind, some blast of magic that would rend his defenses and turn him into red mist. But nothing of the sort happened. With his magic senses, he couldn't even sense a single hint of killing intent from the Lord Protector.

After a moment, Anastasios quietly followed, looking for all the world like nothing more than an old tourist, looking around at the welcoming delegation and the luxurious dock that had been prepared for his arrival. Heaven's Eye had even rolled out an actual red carpet down to the dock's moorings.

What struck Leon as particularly odd, though, was that as he parted the delegation in front of him on his way to the Director, he didn't see anyone react to the Lord Protector. Anastasios simply followed him, everyone else treating him as little more than air. Leon could feel some kind of magic at play, but all he could really tell about it was that it was light-based, and his experience with light magic didn't extend much further beyond healing magic, and he most certainly wasn't going to ask the Lord Protector about it right now, when it was all he could do to maintain his composure.

Soon enough, he approached the Director and the rest of the high-ranking representatives of Heaven's Eye from behind.

"You're all facing the wrong way," Leon quipped as he arrived, drawing the attention of the most powerful men and women of Heaven's Eye. The Director himself glanced over, taking in Leon, but sliding over him and coming to rest on Anastasios, who seemed utterly unbothered by the looks he was only now receiving.

"Your Imperial Majesty..." the Director said, his words echoed throughout the delegation with far more volume and respect than he'd shown. As the words were repeated, it seemed to Leon that only then did people start to really take notice of the Lord Protector.

"Let's save the welcoming for later," Anastasios said impatiently. "We can leave most of these people here to welcome the rest of my people, but I'd rather we get down to business as soon as possible."

"Of course," the Director replied, appearing to be not all concerned with the Lord Protector's demand.

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"So," the Lord Protector said as everyone sat down around the conference table in the local Imperial administrative building, "I'm in no mood for small talk. How's about we cut right to the chase?"

Leon was mildly surprised that they had gone to the rather small and unimportant admin building, but he supposed it sent a clear message that going to the Hexagon wouldn't have: the Lord Protector wasn't happy, and he wasn't going to speak with them on Heaven's Eye's ground.

There weren't many people in the meeting—mostly reserved for the Lord Protector, Leon, the Director, Penelope, and Emilie. The last seemed to Leon to be a concession on the Director's part for his sake, letting Leon retain a friendly face in the room of sufficient rank that her presence wouldn't be questioned—after all, they didn't even have any assistants or secretaries with them to record their meeting.

"You made contact with the Sky Devils," the Lord Protector coolly stated to Leon, all traces of his earlier joviality long gone.

"I did," Leon replied, not seeing any point in trying to hide or minimize what had happened. Too many people had been paying attention to his little 'duel' with the Jaguar for that sort of thing to fly.

"Tell me everything that happened," the Lord Protector demanded. "I want to hear it all from you."

Without hesitation, Leon launched himself right in. "I was on my way back after picking up one of my retainers from the Pegasi States when I received word of the assault on Argos. I raced there as soon as I could, arriving just in time to see the sea gate fall and for the Sky Devils to seize the harbor. I watched as they spread throughout the city, rounding up civilians and burning and destroying much of the property they passed. The Sky Devils broke through the inner gate, killed the garrison commander, and then started making its way in the direction of the Heaven's Eye district, so, thinking that I at least had some kind of chance of ending things with them on a more peaceful—or at least, a less blood-soaked—note, I went out to meet them.

“Fortunately, I was right. They left after a few exchanges, despite outclassing me in power. And Argos was saved, left only lightly sacked. I doubt it would take more than a few years to completely repair all of the damage, though the loss of life was, I’m sure, quite significant.”

“It was...” Anastasios whispered. “I’m going to want a more detailed explanation later, but for now, that’ll do. I want you to know, Leon, the way I’ve behaved towards you has been predicated on one assumption: that you’re not a threat to my Empire. If anything, you represent a significant opportunity to provide much greater prosperity for my people than just about any other single person within the lands of Ilion. If that assumption were to change, however, then so to will my behavior. And you making *any* kind of contact at all with the enemies of all the Empires is *definitely* something that can change that assumption...”

“Well, I don’t consider myself to be any kind of threat to your Empire at all,” Leon countered. “And I’m prepared to prove it.”

Anastasios smiled, though his eyes narrowed with both amusement and suspicion. “You can’t be suggesting that you’ll take me up on my offer, are you?”

“No,” Leon replied. “Though, I’ll admit, that having you here in person does make responding to you much easier, rather than having to write you a letter. No, what I’m suggesting is something a little more and a little less.”

The Director’s smile didn’t change, but he briefly glanced at the Director. “And what about you? Do you have anything to add?”

“If I did, then I would add it,” the Director responded. “Everyone present knows what the score is right now, so let’s end the games.”

“If that’s what you want, then so be it,” Anastasios replied. “I’ll warn you both, though, that while I’m upset, and there are many people back in Ilion demanding a harsh response to young Leon here, if only due to outrage, anger, and humiliation over Argos and the loss of the Sword, the far more concerning response will be from the east. The Keeper, in particular, I’m sure will be furious.”

Leon blinked, recognizing the name of the last tenth-tier mage in the Empires that he had yet to meet: the Keeper of Memory, the de facto Emperor of the Sentinels in the east.

“I can hold him off,” Anastasios continued, “but doing so will not come without cost...”

Leon quickly replied, “Then it will be a cost shared by us both. You wanted to work with me, Lord Protector. I’m not going to join you, but I am willing to reach some kind of compromise. I want to retain my current position in Occulara and with Heaven’s Eye, but I honestly can’t think of too many reasons not to work with you a little bit, in light of this situation. Make sure that we’re all happy and certain of whose side I’m standing on.”

Anastasios smiled more genuinely. “And you’re willing to work with the Sentinels, as well?”

“Yes,” Leon replied.

“What about the Sacred Golden Empire? And the Sunlit Empire?”

"I'll work them all," Leon stated. "Within reason, of course. Subject to whatever compromise we can work out. I want there to be peace between us all, even if there can't be peace between you all and the Sky Devils. I'm willing to work for that peace, to ensure that even if you can't set aside your grudge with the Sky Devils, then you can at least defend yourself against them if need be. So, with that in mind, would you say that we're enemies, Lord Protector?"

Anastasios continued smiling at Leon, his pink nebulous eyes gleaming with what could've been mistaken for captured stars.

"That... assurance will be enough. For now," he eventually said. "I would speak with you at a later date, Leon. We're going to need to spend quite a bit of time working out exactly what we want from you, what you can provide, and ensure that everything we discuss won't be overheard. Would you be averse to hosting me?"

The Lord Protector asked as if he were springing something on Leon, his grin widening like a shark eyeing prey. However, Leon's near-instantaneous response dulled the expression somewhat.

"I'd be more than happy to have you over for as long as it takes to work this out."

And so it was that Leon found himself playing host to the Lord Protector for the foreseeable future, thankful only that he'd had at least a couple days to prepare.

Chapter 784: Imperial Arrangements

Indentured servitude to the Ilian Empire. If Leon were forced to, he'd have to admit that it wasn't that bad of a prospect as his independent streak insisted it was—though, it wasn't an onerous duty. He and Anastasios had come to an agreement as they were on their way back to Leon's villa that Leon's priority was Heaven's Eye, and that any work with the Empires would come second.

Of course, second did in no way imply 'never'; for someone like Leon, second priority was still *very* high on his to-do list.

Beyond that, he and Anastasios merely chatted as the Imperial carriage brought them back to Leon's villa, followed by Anastasios' rather long and rather put-out retinue. He hadn't told any of them that he was going to meet Leon on his own, and when his yacht arrived in Occulara, his retinue had gone a little crazy at his disappearance, something the old man seemed to enjoy watching.

Leon didn't have nearly enough room for the Lord Protector's entire retinue, though, so as the man himself got settled in, he chose half a dozen attendants and sent the rest back to Occulara to post up in an Imperial property, their desperate cries to not leave him alone in Leon's villa falling on deaf ears—or, perhaps not-so-deaf ears, if Anastasios' amused smile as his retinue left was anything to go by.

As the retinue vanished down the road, Leon was thus left with Anastasios, two ninth-tier mages, and four fourth and fifth-tier mages working under them in his living room while the rest of his villa scurried about ensuring that all of Anastasios' party's baggage was properly secured, under the supervision of the head of Leon's household staff. Also present in the living room was Leon's entire family, while his retinue were 'training' nearby, just in case they were needed for anything at all.

“Once again, Lord Protector,” Elise said now that they were properly alone and Anastasios was clearly making himself comfortable, “it’s an honor to have you here in our home, though I’m not sure it’s up to Imperial standards...”

“Nonsense!” Anastasios boomed. “This place is *lovely*, Lady Elise.”

“Just ‘Elise’, please.”

“If you insist. Quite frankly, I love what’s been done with this place. The clean décor, the soothing atmosphere that your farm brings, and a wyvern sleeping just outside! You must know that having wyverns as war beasts is exceedingly rare, even in my Empire...”

“She’s not a war beast, Lord Protector,” Leon replied.

“Please, while we’re in your home, just ‘Anastasios’. If you’re going to insist on first-names, then it must go both ways!” Anastasios’ retainers looked to him, scandalized, but he cut off any words of argument they may have had with little more than a silent glare.

“That’s very generous of you. As I was saying, Red isn’t a war beast, she’s one of my retainers. She’s still getting used to human society, though, and has little care for our customs, so if you want to interact with her, be sure to expect little courtesy. And possibly an attempt on your life.”

One of Anastasios’ ninth-tier guards growled in response, “Sounds like you need to break your pet in better...”

“Sounds like you need to find somewhere else to sleep,” Leon said, his tone light and pleasant, but his aura writhing with killing intent.

The ninth-tier mage glared at him, then went ram-rod straight as he was lifted into the air, courtesy of Anastasios’ magic.

“We’re guests here,” the Lord Protector intoned, his voice rumbling with disapproval. “Even under normal circumstances, such disrespect is entirely unwarranted, and even less so here. Return to the city and stay there until further notice.”

Without waiting for the ninth-tier mage to reply, Anastasios telekinetically opened one of the windows and quite literally threw the offending mage right out of Leon’s villa.

Leon, for his part, couldn’t help but stare at the raw display of both authority and magic. With barely any physical movements, Anastasios had completely man-handled a ninth-tier mage, and the ninth-tier mage had been able to do exactly nothing about it—probably out of both genuine helplessness in the face of Anastasios’ power, and more social helplessness in the face of Anastasios’ position.

And Leon couldn’t help but dream of a day when he could do something similar.

“Let’s get down to business, then,” Anastasios said. “However, as delightful as this place is, Leon, why don’t we talk somewhere more comfortable?”

Leon glanced around at his rather lavishly appointed living room, briefly meeting Elise’s, Maia’s, and Valeria’s eyes, all reflecting his mild confusion. Hadn’t Anastasios just proclaimed this place to his liking?

“Do you have a bath here?” the Lord Protector asked.

With a grimace at what the old man was implying, Leon answered, “Nothing particularly big, but we do have a couple of recreational pools.”

“Then let’s discuss things over a swim,” the Lord Protector suggested, and Leon, seeing nothing more than his own personal discomfort with the idea, didn’t refuse. Besides, even though they’d reached some accord back in their previous short negotiation, having the Lord Protector as comfortable as possible might net him a better overall deal.

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Leon stood in the shallow end of his pool, quietly using his water magic to prop himself up on something that resembled a lounge recliner. He was still wearing attire suitable for relaxing in a pool, keeping everything from his hips to his knees covered.

Anastasios, on the other hand, was swimming back and forth in the large rectangular pool, using not a spark of magic, as naked as the day he was born. They were the only two in the pool, reserving the sight for Leon’s eyes only, something he was both grateful and bitter about—he wouldn’t want to curse anyone else, yet he wished his burden could be shared.

As it was, though, Anastasios, for all his advanced age, hadn’t let his body go to the hells. His skin was a little loose, but beneath that was a well-built body banded in thick muscle. Leon supposed he could understand why the Lord Protector hardly cared about being naked before someone else; he supposed if he still looked that good at the Lord Protector’s relative age, then he would want to show off, too.

“... and I have no problem running a little interference with the Sentinels,” the Lord Protector said as he swam by Leon, their conversation passing largely uninterrupted after they’d got into the pool. “Of course, that will come with its own problems...”

“I have no problem with sharing some benefits with them, or with the Sacred Golden Empire” Leon replied. “It wouldn’t be quite fair, otherwise. If anything, it would only provoke conflict, between both them and myself, and with them and you. After all, if your Empire is the only one receiving any benefit, then there’s going to be quite a bit jealousy, isn’t there?”

“Indeed,” the Lord Protector grumbled.

“I get that you might want to keep any benefits that I can provide you to yourself, but you have to understand that I’m going to be doing this not for you, but for me. I still don’t entirely trust you, especially after being treated like a commodity to be bought and haggled over.”

“It hasn’t been *that* bad, young man! If the Grand Druid and I were to *really* get serious about recruiting you, there wouldn’t have been much you could do to turn us down!”

Leon bitterly smiled. “Well, we can all be grateful that no one has spoiled a potentially beautiful working relationship, can’t we?”

“Given what I’ve heard, that’s quite the accomplishment, young Raime, and seems to be in spite of your actions rather than because of them.”

“Really? Where’d that come from? I haven’t been *that* bad, have I? I’ve been both civil and peaceful!”

The Lord Protector laughed, frustrating Leon a little bit more. “Don’t worry too much about it, kid.”

Leon took a deep breath and forced himself to calm down. *‘If I’m to be the next Storm King,’* he silently reasoned, *‘got to rise to these provocations less.’*

Aloud, he asked, “So, what sort of things did you have in mind that you needed my help with? If it’s small enough, I wouldn’t mind giving you something as a show of good faith.”

Anastasios paused in his laps and, floating there in the pool’s deep end, he smiled quite widely. In a flash of light, he practically exploded out of the pool and, without even the slightest bit of apparent concern for his lack of clothing, he made a bit of room on a nearby table that had been covered with refreshments and conjured a tightly bound scroll.

Curious, Leon exited the pool with significantly less aplomb and gave the scroll a good once-over.

It was an ancient thing, looking like it would’ve crumbled to dust had it not been diligently seen to. The yellowed paper looked like it had seen quite a bit of magical reinforcement ensuring that it remained in as good of a condition as possible. But it was still old and Leon hesitated to touch it.

When he finally poked at it a bit and inspected the seal of thick red wax, he found that it had been sealed with the image of an owl, its body in profile but its face stared directly out from the seal. Leon could feel a relatively large amount of magic flowing through the seal, but not nearly so much that he would’ve thought it was something that needed his help.

“You really need *me* to get through this seal?” Leon asked, incredulity dripping from every syllable.

“The seal has been enchanted to destroy the scroll if forced open,” Anastasios explained. “We’ve managed to subvert these kinds of enchantments, but the failure rate is unreasonably high, and I’ve made the decision to stop that practice. Who knows how much knowledge we’ve lost already?”

“How many such sealed scrolls do you have?” Leon asked, hoping the number wasn’t that great.

“Around three hundred thousand,” Anastasios replied, clearly enjoying the stunned look on Leon’s face. “That’s not even counting what the other Empires have, or what may be lying in private collections, or those that have yet to be discovered.”

Leon lightly scowled and probed the seal with his magic power, trying to investigate it a little more closely, but to his surprise, the seal reacted immediately to his power and popped right off the scroll.

The Lord Protector didn’t hesitate for a moment, snatching the scroll up and, almost paradoxically so, gently unraveling the paper. He wore the expression of a child unwrapping a present, wondering just what might be within. However, as the decayed ink became visible, that glee quickly morphed into disappointment.

“Looks like a logistics report,” he said as he laid the unraveled scroll on the table.

Leon’s curiosity wasn’t deterred, and he leaned down to examine the scroll. Indeed, it was mostly just a fiscal report on just what materials were being shipped and to where. Given the societal and geographic changes to the plane over the previous eighty-thousand years, though, place names and specific logistics reports weren’t that useful.

Interesting to some, of course, but designs for some secret Thunderbird weapon of mass destruction this was not.

"Three hundred thousand scrolls; they can't all be gems," Leon grumbled as he stepped back from the table, doing his best not to react at all to Anastasios' state of undress as he turned his attention back to the Lord Protector.

"True," Anastasios said, before quickly shifting tacks. "Anyways, Leon, it pleases me that you're being so cooperative. So long as you stay well away from the Sky Devils, then in a few decades, all of this unpleasantness should blow right over."

Leon smiled. He didn't verbally agree, but he nodded and let the Lord Protector read whatever he wanted into that gesture.

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"So, you're telling me that you *want* to get into contact with the Sky Devils?" Anshu asked in disbelief.

"Yes," Leon replied.

The two were secretly meeting in Leon's new apple orchard only a day after Anastasios' arrival in Occulara, upon which had been built several buildings dedicated to the maintenance of the apple trees that were already starting to sprout up and down the property, thanks to Tikos' power and Elise's management skills and green thumb. The Hesperidic Apples were taking a little longer, but Leon was confident they'd start sprouting, too, now that their seeds had been planted and Tikos had taken root at the heart of the orchard.

But none of that pertained too much to why Leon had visited the orchard. Instead, he'd ensured that the orchard's small office building had been heavily enchanted to serve as a private meeting place, of sorts. As such, he'd met Anshu here, confident that none could overhear their conversation. Entry and exit to the building were still fairly open, but that was what invisibility was for, as far as he was concerned.

He and Anshu needed to meet fairly frequently if their partnership in this venture was going to work. And since Leon was encouraged by the Jaguar's reaction to his power, he was hoping that the Sky Devils' seizure of the Sword would make getting in contact with them a little easier.

"Don't go too out of your way, though," Leon quickly added. "I understand that you have other things on your mind, and the war down in the southern seas is going to complicate matters greatly."

"There's an understatement," Anshu growled. "Besides, with the number of Imperial and Pegasi ships that are going to be trying to keep the Sky Devils bottled up on the Sword, I can't imagine *any* Sky Devil ship making it to the Pegasi States undetected. No Sky Devil is making it to the mainland for a while, despite their recent success. That much I would bet my name on."

"Just keep an eye open for any opportunities," Leon said, unconcerned with the potential wait.

"Anything to do with the Jaguar that I mentioned before, especially."

Scowling, Anshu asked, "Are you asking me to help them in establishing a foothold on the mainland?"

“No. Only if the Jaguar himself needs to get here are you to directly help him. Otherwise, just try to get in contact. Don’t get too discouraged if it takes a while, too. I’m ready to wait for this.”

“Good, because you’re going to have to wait. Disregarding the navies of the Empires, Pegasi States, and the Raj and Free Cities between them and us, even with Sky Devils all over the Sword, they’re not going to take too kindly to any mainlander, even a smuggler, mooring off their new island. Making peaceful contact won’t be easy at all.”

“Just do what you can,” Leon replied. “I can’t ask for any more or less.”

Anshu sighed, but in the end, nodded in agreement.

—

Leon and Anastasios spoke at great length frequently over the next few days. Rarely, however, was the topic about business. Instead, Anastasios seemed quite eager to hear stories of Leon’s childhood and his adventures and tribulations in the Bull Kingdom.

Leon indulged the old man fairly well, but he didn’t get too detailed when it came to matters regarding his family. He never mentioned the Cradle, for one, implying the stone giants to be natives to the plane rather than descended from Thunderbird golems.

For his part, Anastasios regaled Leon with stories of his youth, though many of the tales were so outlandish that Leon didn’t quite know what to believe. He was quite skeptical that the young Anastasios would’ve indulged in women quite as much as the old Anastasios was claiming, but he supposed if the man had been a relative of the previous Emperor, then it did make some kind of sense. It wasn’t like Anastasios had been a nobody before becoming Emperor, and he had quite likely indulged in some of those unstated social privileges at some point.

Leon found himself enjoying the Lord Protector’s company quite a bit more than he’d expected, and found little reason to complain over unlocking the occasional scroll for the man when he asked. There were many other things that Anastasios could ask of him, after all, and the Lord Protector always allowed him to read what was on the scroll after unlocking it. So far, Leon hadn’t unlocked anything particularly juicy or sensitive, yet.

But he didn’t spend all of those few days around Anastasios—in fact, he only spoke with the man for a few hours each day. Leon had quite a few other things that demanded his time, and perhaps the biggest one was getting a handle on being the new Chief of Magical Research and Development. He spent some time with Valentina, too, and these two things had his knowledge of some of his more neglected elements rising by leaps and bounds. He even visited Sid during this time, receiving her congratulations, while at the same time being forced to endure another lecture on the importance of earth magic to a blacksmith.

He didn’t have much time to himself, unfortunately, but that time was slowly increasing as Talal and the new department heads got settled into their new roles and took much of the workload off Leon’s shoulders. With this slowly increasing personal time, Leon enjoyed the company of his family and retinue. Over the past few months, he’d started to fear that he was neglecting them, and that he couldn’t abide by.

Elise, Maia, and Valeria were more than happy to share his time, of course, and his retinue was enthusiastic and encouraged with his return to directing their training sessions.

Many things had happened over the course of the past few months, but Leon finally allowed himself to relax a little bit, comfortable in the knowledge that he had an ally in Anastasios and that Director had ditched the vampires. He had the opportunity to slow down and consolidate his gains, and he was going to use every second of that time that he could. He just hoped nothing drastic happened that might change his plans in the next few years.

Chapter 785: Alcander's Request

Leon leaned back in his chair, enjoying the quiet ambience of his villa at noon. There were a few workers out in the adjacent field, but they were only doing their daily checks on the medicinal herbs that filled the field and removing any weeds that showed themselves. Anastasios was still around, and he had a few retainers staying with Leon, but they were being surprisingly good guests, not making much noise or unreasonable demands. In fact, for the most part, Leon only saw Anastasios and his people at dinner, when the Lord Protector shared a meal with Leon and his family.

But as he leaned back, his opponent launched an aggressive sortie. Gaius quickly moved an infantry piece forward, eliminating one of Leon's cavalry pieces, who'd charged ahead in an attempt to create an opening for Leon's infantry to exploit. With a frown, Leon realized that that plan was no longer viable as the gap in Gaius' line was closed.

Gaius smiled as he, in turn, leaned back, their game of keeps having been going on for more than an hour already, though both of them still had more than forty pieces remaining. As of yet, neither had achieved much of an advantage, but Gaius had just taken a cavalry piece without leaving his infantry open for retaliation.

"Nicely done," Leon said. "I didn't think you were going to charge like that."

"I think it's about time for me to stop playing so defensively," Gaius replied. "How long have we been playing these games? My wins are too damn infrequent, my strategy has to change *sometime*. Besides, you play too aggressively."

"Really?" Leon asked as he moved his infantry on the other side of the board forward. "It's worked out so far."

"And what if your opponent doesn't break?" Gaius asked as he quickly reinforced his infantry line with his archer pieces, losing two less pieces than Leon did in their quick exchange.

Leon didn't immediately respond to Gaius' question, choosing instead to refocus on the game. It was clear that his retainer was playing to win. Their games were usually more sedate and slow-paced, and Leon was caught a little off-guard. He hadn't been planning any serious strategies, had only been paying attention to the smaller-level tactics on their board. But as the game progressed, Leon quickly realized that he'd fallen into Gaius' trap, and soon found himself down to just half a dozen pieces to Gaius' eighteen.

"Want to give up?" Gaius teasingly asked. "I'm more than willing to accept your defeated soldiers into my ranks, you know..."

"They'll die first," Leon replied with a vicious, but still good-natured smile. "Can't force my people to live with the indignity of serving those who defeated me."

"And what about what they might want?" Gaius asked as he aggressively pushed forward. "Are they willing to stand and fight to the death? Do they believe in their cause that much? Are you so confident that they won't surrender of their own accord?"

Leon's eyes narrowed as he picked up on the fact that Gaius probably wasn't talking about their game.

"They wouldn't be here otherwise," Leon said as he did his best to counter Gaius' charge, killing off two of his pieces at the cost of one of his. "I try not to run off those I trust. I try to make sure that those I trust have reason to stick with me."

"But how loyal are they?" Gaius asked. "Willing to lay down their lives for you? To die for you? To kill for you?"

Leon smiled a little bitterly as Gaius took another of his pieces. "Is there something you'd rather be talking about?" he asked.

With a sigh, Gaius reduced him to three pieces, two infantry and a single archer. "I've just been thinking recently," he explained. "I don't... I'm..."

Gaius paused on his turn, and Leon waited patiently for the man to find his voice. "I think I've been rather bored recently," he finally said. "I haven't done much other than train. It's seemed like you haven't really had much use for me, and I don't quite know what to do with myself. Were I stronger, I could... well, I don't know. I don't know what you need, or what I want to do. Now you're in charge of Magical Research and Development, not a Hand of the Director, and I can't help but imagine that you're going to be doing a lot more admin work and a lot less running around the plane on the Director's orders. What is there for me to do? And if you don't have any need for me, then why am I still here?"

"Are you saying you want to leave my retinue?" Leon asked, his heart skipping a beat. Anshu was hard enough to let go, and even then, the Indradian was still part of Leon's retinue, just possessing a lot more autonomy than the others.

"No," Gaius quickly replied. "I'm just looking for something to do that's a little more substantial than training and twiddling my thumbs."

Leon nodded, but he couldn't immediately think of anything. "Have any ideas?" he asked.

Gaius scowled, then sighed. "I don't," he admitted.

Leon nodded. "Well, you've had my back for years, now, and I'm comfortable saying that I have yours, too. I want to retain you around here. So, if you ever *do* figure out what you want, then just let me know, and we'll work something out."

"Thanks, Leon," Gaius responded as he took the last of Leon's pieces. "These wins don't come often enough. Feels damn good every time."

Leon chuckled, but within, his competitive side had been stoked. The next time he and Gaius sat down for a game of keeps, he wasn't going to allow himself to be distracted.

But for now, he was content with their game, grateful that his distraction hadn't cost him anything more than a little bit of pride.

—

Gaius' request, Leon figured, would be easy to grant. The next retainer he encountered with an issue, however, was a little harder for him to deal with.

He was approached by Alcander, and in the state his retainer was in, Leon immediately mentally prepared himself to go out and fight someone, or something else of that nature. Alcander, however, had something else that he needed help with.

"I need a wingman," Alcander said to him.

"A wingman?" Leon asked incredulously. "Surely someone like Marcus or Alix would be better for this sort of thing? Charisma's not exactly pouring out me, you know..."

"No, I need someone more powerful," Alcander replied.

"All right, I'll bite: what do you need?"

Alcander took a deep breath, then launched into his explanation.

He'd been going to a *very* high-end club over the past few months regularly, though rather infrequently, and while there, had his heart stolen by another regular: a woman who was so far out of his league, financially and socially, that he'd never been able to work up the nerve to even speak with her.

"She's smart, and strong, and *hot*, and just *perfect*..." Alcander had described.

"So, then what do you need me for?" Leon asked. "Even if I have the power to, I'm not going to force anyone to be with you..."

"Nor would I ever ask you to, but she's *connected*, and I need some high-ranking backup," Alcander replied. "Look, I heard that she'd turning twenty-five soon, and is going to be throwing a party to celebrate. Since her family's in Heaven's Eye, I figured that you might be able to get me in there? Maybe catch her eye that way?"

Leon stared at his retainer with great skepticism. "I can't help but doubt that the way to this woman's heart is by just showing up to her birthday party..."

"It's fine," Alcander assured him. "We've already been flirting pretty heavily for a while, I'm *certain* she's into me. If she's not, then I'll leave her alone, I don't want to force anyone either. It's just that she's rich and connected and I can't show up looking like a bum. If I've got you backing me up, then I won't embarrass myself, and make a better show. Besides, this is just a public party, something her family's doing to help her get acquainted with local men of high station, it's not like I want us to crash a private party attended only by her actual friends. Plus, there's apparently going to be some kind of fighting ring there or something, and I can show off that way..."

Leon *really* didn't want to say no to Alcander—the man's eyes were shining like stars, and he could feel Alcander's passion rolling off of him in great waves. However, he also *really* didn't want to agree to this, either. It had the potential to blow up in their faces, or worse: turn into a terribly awkward social

situation. Leon cringed enough in his own social dealings, and he wasn't sure if he was up to adding some more from Alcander.

However, he simply couldn't say no to Alcander when the man was so obviously smitten and earnest, and he eventually agreed to at least do what he could to get Alcander into the party. After that, the man was on his own—so long as he didn't do anything so foolish that it would embarrass him, and Leon by proxy.

And then Leon learned exactly who Alcander had been crushing on: a woman named Sofie, one of Narses the White's nieces.

—

"Leon!" Narses shouted exuberantly as Leon, Elise, Valeria, and Alcander disembarked from their carriage. The enormous man grinned with cheer that Leon hadn't seen in him since before the expedition to the Prota Forest. He quickly rushed forward and pulled Leon into a tight bear hug, practically lifting him off his feet. When he put Leon back down, he said, "Thank you for coming, I'm so glad you could attend!" His eyes glittered with understanding, Leon having gotten in touch with him beforehand to explain the situation. He'd admitted that he'd been looking for an excuse to invite Leon over, but hadn't had the time yet given the rapid increase in military action down in the south in the couple weeks since Argos had been attacked.

"Thank you for the invitation," Leon replied with a wide smile. Thanks to the party that Leon had held that Narses had attended, Narses was already quite familiar with Alcander, and it didn't take much for Leon to convince Narses to extend him an invitation to his niece's 'public' birthday party.

He wasn't going to be making any recommendations on Alcander's behalf, though; if the man wanted to court her, then he'd have to do so himself. Nares just facilitated the opportunity.

"Please, come right on in," Narses said a sly wink to Leon and Alcander. "Eat! Drink! Celebrate!"

"We fully intend to do so," Leon replied, trying to match Narses' cheer and being at least partially successful. "Where might we drop off gifts?"

"Gifts aren't necessary," Narses half-heartedly stated in a clearly token response, "... *but*, if you've brought any, then they can be personally presented at the appropriate moment. Just hold onto them for about two hours."

Leon smiled and glanced at Alcander, making sure his retainer got the message.

Following that, Narses escorted his party inside, exchanging pleasantries with Elise and Valeria along the way. He led them to a large courtyard in the back of his opulent villa where about two hundred people had already gathered. As far as Leon could tell, most of them were either young women friendly with the birthday girl, young men attempting to court her, or those escorting the former two. There were a few older people around the edges of the courtyard, but they seemed to be friendlier with Narses and were simply present as a courtesy, to lend the party an air of dignity and prestige that it might otherwise lack if attended only by younger and less established people.

Leon didn't have much need to speak with Narses' niece, but as Narses escorted them inside, he called out, "Sofie! Come over here, dear girl!"

“Coming!” replied a clear, sonorous voice, and following it, a young, gorgeous third-tier woman appeared from the crowd of other young women in the courtyard. She was dressed to the nines, wearing a long silver dress, simple in design if extravagant in material. She had long, silky black hair, and a pair of piercing blue eyes that Leon thought surpassed in brilliance only by Valeria’s and Maia’s. She was fairly tanned, and seemed naturally so, while her demeanor was elegant and refined, and Leon could hardly believe that Alcander was acquainted with her from a nightclub, of all places.

“Sofie,” Narses said as he wrapped an arm around her shoulders, “this is my good friend, Leon Raime!”

Sofie’s eyes widened in shock, then in muted joy. However, it wasn’t until her eyes slid across Leon and reached Alcander beside him that she looked truly surprised. Leon watched her reaction closely, almost ignoring the rest of the introductions and exchanged pleasantries, and judging by her reaction at seeing Alcander, he didn’t think his retainer had much to worry about in trying to court her.

Introductions didn’t last long, and soon enough, Sofie returned to her friends, and Leon ‘ordered’ Alcander to mingle, leaving Leon and his ladies alone with Narses.

“Now,” Narses said while Alcander practically skipped with glee as he joined the rest of Sofie’s apparent suitors, “what say we get a few drinks in us? There have been quite a few things happening of late that I would love to speak with you about, given your personal involvement.”

“Sure,” Leon acquiesced, and barely a moment later, he, Elise, and Valeria were having cups of spiced wine served to them.

“I don’t have any gifts of the quality that you gave me,” Narses regretfully stated, “but I *did* prepare a little something for you...”

As he finished, another servant brought out a large bottle of wine, and though it was utterly lost on Leon, Elise practically purred with delight.

“You shouldn’t have, Narses,” she whispered as she accepted the bottle.

“Gifts should always be reciprocated, shouldn’t they?” Narses responded with a pointed look sent Leon’s way.

“Indeed,” Leon responded. “What sort of business did you have to discuss?”

Narses momentarily scowled. “This whole mess with the Sky Devils. Not even a month has passed and already we’re having to seriously staff up our security departments in the southern theaters. The Imperial fleets have been tossed about like toys in a bathtub, the Empires themselves are scrambling to deal with their losses on the Sword, and all-in-all, it seems doubtful that the situation is going to improve that much for years to come. That’s going to greatly complicate matters of international trade, the Pegasi States are going to be enormous targets for Sky Devil piracy, and trade routes are going to have to be redirected along land routes.”

Leon winced in sympathy. This was going to be an enormous logistical challenge not just for Narses, but for Emilie as well. His mother-in-law was the Chief of Acquisitions, which meant she essentially controlled the entire logistics branch of Heaven’s Eye. She was going to have to get her hands on a large number of mages fifth-tier and stronger in order to safely and reliably transport the amount of cargo that used to go through the straits between the coast of the Pegasi States and the Sword. Narses, as the

Chief of Security, would have his hands full assisting her in that, but he wasn't going to be the only one doing quite a bit of work down in the south—even Leon had interests down there, as there were several research labs in the south, along with dedicated logistics chains serving his branch of the guild.

Thankfully, he had Talal working hard on that, but he knew that he was going to have to get his hands dirty in that organizational paperwork sooner or later. For now, though, he was relishing his time spent not buried up to his eyes in bureaucracy.

"Sounds terrible," Leon said. "There are some things in the pipeline that ought to make your job a little easier, though. Advances in weapons and transportation magic."

"Any aid would be appreciated," Narses said, looking exhausted for just a moment before he tossed back a cup of something highly alcoholic.

"By the way," Leon hesitantly began, "how are things going with you? Has there been any fallout from working with me to get rid of Rufus?"

"Thankfully, no," Narses replied. "No signs of vampires, either. I'm thinking they've gone to ground, and as far as I can tell, there haven't been any mysterious disappearances that might indicate the presence of vampires, either. I think that if we haven't gotten rid of them all, then we've at least taken care of all the low-hanging fruit. Any more vampires that might be around Heaven's Eye or in Occulara will need to be smoked out."

"Smoking out is something I can do," Leon said as he let a little bit of orange flame burn at his fingertips for a moment.

"As a professional courtesy, then, I'll keep you informed."

Leon smiled in thanks.

As the lull in their conversation settled in, Elise squeezed Leon's arm and said, "Looks like Alcander might be having some trouble..."

Leon glanced over and saw his retainer looking a little flabbergasted with another young man invading his personal space, growling threats and insults under his breath as he got in Alcander's face.

"... out of here, barbarian scum," the man whispered, his voice still perfectly audible to Leon's eighth-tier ears.

"That's not for you to decide, fuck boy," Alcander responded, not giving the other man an inch.

Leon sighed and prepared himself for some kind of violence, though he didn't actually move anywhere.

"What are the rules governing violence at occasions like these?" he asked those around him. "I heard there were going to be some kind of fighting ring?"

"Duels aren't unheard of," Elise replied with a pointed look to Narses. "Given how multicultural Heaven's Eye can be, there aren't any hard and fast rules for decorum."

"A good fight will liven things up, I say," Valeria responded with a look of anticipation. She was madly grinning as Alcander and the man he'd apparently offended somehow continued their exchange of words.

"Yes," Narses practically moaned, drawing the word out and clearly relishing every vibration of his vocal cords. "The only things better than a good drink is a good woman or a good fight!"

Without waiting another moment, Narses surged forth into the center of the courtyard.

"Alcander!" he roared, getting everyone's attention. "Daniel! It seems you two have volunteered yourselves!"

Leon immediately realized that just about all of the 'old people' had been expecting this. Everyone who was clearly attending the party for Narses' sake and not Sofia's walked forward, excitedly whispering as they formed something that resembled a ring around the courtyard.

"What party is complete without a contest of strength!" Narses continued, his voice growing ever louder as Sofia and the two Leon could only assume were her parents joined Narses in the center of the courtyard, all wearing enormous smiles. "What celebration can even be called such without the spilling of a little blood! Alcander! Daniel! Get over here and ready yourselves for battle!"

Chapter 786: Alcander's Duel

Leon carefully sized up Alcander's opponent. 'Daniel', as Narses had called him, was a rather handsome man, but generically so, in Leon's uncharitable opinion. Classically handsome, but his eyes were just a little too close together, black hair that was just a little bit too long, and a long neck. His body seemed fit, but his shoulders were kind of narrow and out of proportion with the rest of him.

Most relevantly, however, was his fairly stable fifth-tier aura. Alcander was fifth-tier as well, so it seemed like this little duel was going to be evenly-matched. However, Leon still found it rather distasteful, as he quickly shared with Elise.

"Violence at a celebration?" he whispered.

Valeria responded first. "Are you surprised?" she asked. "It *is* Narses..."

"I suppose not, but I guess I thought that he might show a little more restraint for someone else's celebration..."

Elise responded, "It really *isn't* just Sofia's celebration, though. This party is a way for Narses to celebrate with his peers and subordinates, for them to become familiar with Sofia who might follow Narses' footsteps and join Heaven's Eye, and for Sofia to allow those in Heaven's Eye who are interested either in her or Narses to try and court her."

"Yeah..." Leon murmured. "Yeah... I figured as much. And now we're part of the entertainment."

Valeria replied, "This isn't entertainment for Al."

Leon grimaced slightly when he saw the deadly seriousness on Alcander's face. He could understand, as Narses had allowed the two combatants to speak while Leon was conversing with his ladies, and Daniel was busy making his hostility clear.

“... for some uncouth ragamuffin coming down here to take our women! I’ve picked more valuable things than you from between my toes, boy! And yet you still have the audacity to reach beyond your station! If no one else will show you the door, then I will take it upon myself to perform this service!”

Alcander had turned red with obvious anger, but he kept himself in check. Leon could feel the killing intent emanating from him, but even then, it still felt quite regulated compared to whenever Alcander found himself in violent situations. But then, as Narses indicated that it was Alcander’s turn to speak, he simply glanced toward Leon, and did so obviously enough that quite a few others in the room followed his gaze, including Daniel.

And Leon smiled as he returned Alcander’s gaze. He held it for a moment, understanding just what Alcander was doing, and then nodded once.

[If you lose, Al, you’ll have nothing but bread and water for a week,] Leon growled into Alcander’s mind, though he had little intention of following through on the threat. He just wanted to make sure that Alcander knew he had license to go as hard as he needed to.

Alcander’s smile widened. He was wearing an immaculately tailored suit, black and trimmed in silver, that hugged his body tightly. With an exaggerated flex, he tore the suit right off his body almost without moving. What few rags were left stubbornly clinging to his torso, he incinerated with a quick blaze of fire.

He didn’t say a word, merely glaring at Daniel like a lion eyeing prey.

Leon felt pride in his retainer, and in the reactions among the crowd. He could tell that Alcander had just made quite the impression, and while it wasn’t uniformly positive, he could see a look of approval in Narses’ eyes, and Sofia herself looked more than thrilled at Alcander baring his fantastically built chest for all the world to see.

Daniel, however, hardly even blinked, and simply assumed a fairly neutral fighting pose, raising his hands and lowering his center of gravity. It wasn’t until Leon felt the air in the courtyard start to swirl around that he realized what Daniel’s chosen element was.

“Now, then,” Narses said, “this is a duel to honor my house, and to honor my niece Sofia! So this fight will *not* be to the death! We will not fight with weapons, but with fists and magic! A true test of personal strength, absent any tools! I will step in when I have decided the fight is over, and Sofia will declare her chosen winner! So fight with honor, and glory will surely be yours, even if you don’t vanquish your opponent!”

Leon smiled, recognizing that Narses had just given Sofia carte blanche to choose whoever she wanted to win, regardless of how the fight played out.

Alcander quickly assumed a fairly aggressive stance, and a moment, Narses and his family backed up. Then, the Chief of Security shouted, “Begin!”

Alcander moved first, blazing across the few dozen feet between him and Daniel in fractions of a second, unarmed, but his hands burning with red fire. With fiery fists, Alcander punched at Daniel again and again, and while the latter didn’t seem to be dodging with ease, he still dodged and deflected all of

Alcander's strikes, not once letting Leon's retainer touch him with even a spark of fire or a single flake of skin.

"You're going to have... to try harder than that!" Daniel shouted, the quiver in his voice apparent to Leon, though it seemed not to many others. Leon saw Narses minutely scowl, though the expression was gone in favor of a wild smile as he tossed back a cup of wine.

Alcander didn't rise to the bait, to Leon's pleasant surprise. Instead, he doubled down, lunging with fist, then elbow, and then with knee and shin, his limbs alight. It seemed that Daniel was having more trouble than he was letting on, though, for in keeping with the traits of fire magic, Alcander moved with explosive speed, but that speed came in bursts and couldn't be sustained. After every strike, he was left vulnerable to a counter for a fraction of a second, but Daniel seemed either unable or unwilling to capitalize on that opening, despite his otherwise superb defense.

Leon quickly formulated a theory as to why as the fight continued: a thin layer of nearly-transparent frost had covered Daniel's arms, showing him to be an ice mage of some skill. It was a subtle use of magic, but one that left him quite well-protected from fire unless Alcander was able to get in a good hit.

However, it seemed that that ice was having a detrimental effect on Daniel's speed. Whether or not he could see Alcander's openings, Leon couldn't say, but it seemed clear enough to Leon that whether or not Daniel could see them, he simply couldn't move quickly enough to take advantage.

It seemed that Daniel disagreed, however, and after several long minutes of being chased around the courtyard by Alcander, constantly on the defensive, Daniel decided to try and launch a counter. Or, Leon wondered, the jeers from the crowd were getting to the young nobleman.

"Get that barbarian upstart!" one of Daniel's companions shouted.

"You've played with him enough, put him down!" another roared.

"End this farce! Put this dog down!" a third bellowed.

To the credit of the crowd, most of those watching were quite well-behaved, as much as spectators blatantly enjoying the show could be. It seemed that it was only Daniel's friends who were being so insultingly loud. Leon thought that maybe a few others might've been inclined to join in, but he could almost feel anxious gazes land upon him from time to time as the duel continued.

Daniel, once he committed to whatever it was he was planning, straight-on blocked one of Alcander's punches. Alcander had been utterly relentless up to this point, not letting his seeming inability to land a good hit on Daniel discourage him, and not letting Daniel take even a single breather. However, with the sudden change in strategy, Leon saw Alcander hesitate for just a moment, and in that moment, Daniel made his move.

A spear of ice perhaps six feet long appeared in Daniel's hand, and he lunged forward with it, aiming directly for Alcander's chest. To Leon's eighth-tier senses, and with a little bit of lightning magic running through his veins, Daniel practically moved in slow motion. If Alcander were truly hurt, then Leon would be able to step in. However, as the ice spear lanced toward his retainer, Leon was completely relaxed.

He could see Narses monitoring the duel far better than he seemed, as deep in his cups as he was, and more than that, Leon could feel Alcander's own aura rising to match Daniel's. As the man who'd done

the most to train Alcander's fire magic, Leon knew that Alcander wasn't going to let something like this slow him down. If Daniel had been trying to get Alcander to exhaust himself, Leon knew that the young nobleman would taste nothing but bitter defeat. Alcander was an experienced warrior, trained personally by Leon, and had received some measure of advice from Xaphan.

Sure enough, fire erupted from Alcander's chest, and Daniel's ice spear flash-vaporized in his hand, practically exploding and eviscerating the nobleman's hand. Before Daniel even had a chance to scream in pain, Alcander was bringing his fist down upon the nobleman's head, and with a burst of fire, smashed the nobleman into unconsciousness.

Daniel hit the floor, and the courtyard fell silent. Narses rather unhurriedly walked forward and tossed a very high-quality healing spell down onto the prone nobleman, then declared to the crowd, "Alcander has won! Is there anyone else who wishes to make a challenge against him?"

Alcander stood strong and defiant, glaring at the crowd with his arms crossed.

Leon briefly wondered if anyone would be stupid enough to follow Daniel's example, but as he began clapping, he glared around at the crowd, his aura menacing, his killing intent palpable.

"Fantastic performance, Al!" he pointedly shouted. In a blatant after-thought, he added, "And well done, Daniel."

Everyone else in the courtyard, even those who'd been clearly hostile to Alcander's presence, began to clap as well, and not a single person stepped forward to challenge Alcander.

Leon spared Sofia a quick glance, and as far as he could tell, she was absolutely smitten. She stared at Alcander with hearts in her eyes, and Leon smirked, knowing that any chance anyone else had against his retainer was nonexistent, for it seemed he already had her heart.

"If no one will fight Alcander," Narses continued, tacitly giving Alcander permission to return to Leon's side, "then is there anyone else who wishes to fight? No good party can be called such without a test of strength, and *many* are tested at *great* parties!"

Narses swept his gaze around the room, making eye contact with all those who'd come for the chance to court Sofia, man and woman alike, clearly impressing upon them his seriousness.

It didn't take long for a couple other young men who'd clearly been unhappy with each other's presence stepped forward. At the same time, Daniel regained consciousness and was helped to some seats at the edge of the courtyard where he could nurse his bruised ego.

As Alcander rejoined Leon and his ladies, Leon said, "Good job."

"I'd never bring you dishonor, My Lord," Alcander said without a hint of sarcasm or irony.

"Good," Leon replied. "Now drop the lord garbage until I've actually earned such title."

"What if you've already earned it?" Alcander asked, flashing Leon a quick smile. Leon met his gaze, confusion lancing through his mind until Alcander quietly added, "You've always had my back, Leon. With the vampires. With the shit we got into in the north. With the civil war and the campaign in the Serpentine Isles... Now with this. I don't think I can ever express my thanks to you, so I'll do my best to

make it clear through my actions. You've always had my back, Leon. It's only fair that I always have yours."

Leon couldn't help himself; a wide grin broke out onto his normally-stoic face and he had to look away from Alcander to keep himself from breaking down completely. It took him a long moment to regain his usual demeanor, during which both Valeria and Elise stared at him, wide grins of their own piercing directly to his core, telling him without words that they were never going to forget this moment, and were probably going to be bringing it up at least a million times before they were all dead and gone.

But for now, he focused on putting his usual expression back on, then turned back to Alcander and finally replied, "Sounds good to me."

Alcander clapped him on the back, hardly looking at all like he'd exerted himself at all during his duel. Leon knew that there was no way in any hell he missed Leon's mad grin, and he was grateful beyond words that he wasn't going to address it.

So, to distract himself, he turned his attention to the rather boring duels that Sofia's friends and suitors subjected themselves to, for her and everyone else's entertainment.

—

Alcander wasn't the only one of Leon's retainers who had business with him; all of them were focusing on their own projects or training, and he made sure to carve out some time to touch base with everyone. Helen and Anna filled their days with their alchemy and beastmaster work, respectively—Anna was especially busy since the two wyvernlings that they'd taken from the aeries were growing rapidly and could no longer be housed in Leon's villa, on top of the problem that their presence was bringing out Red's territorial instincts. Gaius, Marcus, and Alix threw themselves into their training, leading Leon to think that they had no personal business they had to take care of. It wasn't long before that impression changed.

Leon had just been walking back to the villa from his workshop when Marcus came running out to meet him. "Leon!" he loudly called out as he came an almost skidding halt in front of Leon.

"What's wrong?" Leon asked, his heart rate spiking as he thought that something must be wrong if Marcus was so clearly disturbed.

"I need your permission to head out on a hunt!" Marcus asked.

Leon stared at him for a moment, then let out a deep breath of relief. After a moment spent calming himself down, he asked, "What's going on? Why do you want to go hunting?"

Marcus didn't immediately answer, but from the way he avoided Leon's gaze for a moment, Leon thought something was amiss.

"I... I'm..." he sputtered for a moment. Marcus went quiet for a moment, and Leon let him silently gather himself before continuing. When he was ready, Marcus looked him in the eye and, with deadly seriousness, said, "I need a vacation."

"Ah," Leon replied. "I see. Not going to lie, you were making me think something much bigger was going on..."

"No, sorry about that. But Leon, honestly... well, things have been going pretty hard for a while now, even if the rest of us haven't been directly involved in a lot of it. It's been... mentally taxing, shall we say? And I got word from home recently! My older sister is actually in the Ilian Empire!"

"She is?" Leon responded, surprise blasting through his mind.

"She is," Marcus confirmed. "Princess Cristina is still here as ambassador, and my sister was hand-delivering some correspondence from the Bull King to her. Since she was in the area, it seems she decided to look us up. I was hoping for a bit of time off—"

"No need for all the excuses," Leon said with a quick wave of his hand. "Your family is here, I need nothing more. Take all the time you need."

Marcus's face practically split in half from his smile, but he didn't immediately accept. "Leon..." he whispered, "my sister... has also been pestering me for a meeting with you..."

"Has she said why?"

"Just to satisfy the curiosity of those back in the Bull Kingdom. It seems that there are some back home that are curious as to how we're doing, and my sister's job isn't just to deliver some mail for the Princess; she's also here to make sure we're doing all right."

Leon nodded as Marcus gave his explanation. He couldn't deny that he was rather touched that people like the Bull King were interested in checking up on him, but he hadn't thought that he was close enough to any of them to warrant such concern. He hadn't even been that bothered to do likewise. Cristina did come visit on occasion, but for the most part, she was more interested in meeting with Valeria and Elise, so he usually made himself scarce when she showed up.

"I brought up the idea of a hunt," Marcus continued, "and she agreed..."

As he trailed off, Leon got the distinct impression that he wasn't telling him everything. "... Were there some conditions to her agreement?" Leon asked, trying to force out whatever it was that had Marcus so out of sorts.

"No conditions, really..." Marcus anxiously replied. "However, she *did* say that she wouldn't mind if you were to tag along. You've never actually met her, have you?"

"No, I haven't..."

"She's quite curious about you. I mean, she was sent all the way here partially to get an update about you for the Bull King, and from what I can gather, you're still pretty frequently the subject of conversation back home."

Leon sighed. "I'll be honest, heading out on a hunt sounds damned therapeutic right about now, but it's not politically convenient. Given all that's happened recently, I need to stay in Occulara for a while."

Marcus grimaced. "Right. Sorry about that, I almost forgot with my own family business on my mind. You'll still meet her, right?"

"Of course, just send her my way when she's in and has some time. I wouldn't mind hearing how the Bull Kingdom's doing, myself."

Leon surprised himself with just how much he meant those words. It wasn't that much, of course, but it was more than he'd expected.

Marcus quickly agreed, and ran off to arrange a quick meeting, and Leon began to mentally prepare himself for a meeting with his older sister.

Chapter 787: A Memorable Visit

Claudia, Marcus' older sister, looked quite a bit like him: rather tall, though not overly so; sharp eyes that didn't wander; dark brown hair cropped short; tanned skin that spoke of long days spent in the sun; and a body that had been obviously trained for combat. She matched Marcus in magical power, but given there was almost two decades between them, Leon thought that Marcus would be passing her by quite soon.

She rolled up to his villa in a fairly small carriage and without entourage, but Leon, Elise, and Marcus met her out in his front courtyard anyway, treating her as an esteemed guest. From there, Leon escorted her inside, and then to his largest inner courtyard where they could speak.

"I love your home," Claudia politely gushed as she was escorted through the villa's halls. "It feels like I've gone back home a little bit..."

"We were a little nostalgic for home," Elise replied. "It just felt right to bring a little bit of it here with us."

"It has to have been expensive..." Claudia wondered aloud.

"Fairly so," Leon answered. "There aren't many quarries nearby that cut white marble of decent quality. We had to get much of the stone used in the façade imported."

Claudia grimaced as they entered the inner courtyard and could see all the marble on display—and there was quite a bit to see. She didn't have too long to take it all in, though, as Leon gestured over to a small square of couches and tables waiting for them, with plenty of fruit and drinks for them to pick at during their meeting.

As they sat, Claudia and Marcus on one side of the central table, Leon and Elise on the other, Leon decided to cut right to the heart of her visit. "So, how're things in the Bull Kingdom?"

Claudia had been fairly friendly up to that point, but as they got down to business, her demeanor shifted quite sharply, her eyes narrowing and smile thinning. "Things have been going quite well since you left." Her low tone sounding almost sarcastic, as if it were Leon's absence that caused the Bull Kingdom's prosperity.

Ignoring that implication, Leon simply said, "Wonderful to hear. Talfar's invasion, Trajan's death, August and Octavius' disagreements, and the campaign in the Serpentine Isles led to great suffering for the Kingdom, it's good to hear it's been on the mend."

"Yes, we've been at peace for these past few years," Claudia continued. "Our fleets and Legions have been rebuilt and our defenses have been restored. Our suzerainty over the Northern Vales and Serpentine Isles has crystallized, and our economy is growing again. All-in-all, the Kingdom's future is looking bright right now." Claudia seemed to be bragging at this point, taking a great deal of pride in the

Kingdom's restoration. Leon could understand that, but she stared at him quite strangely the entire time, as if the most important thing to her was his reaction.

"Has the volatile political situation stabilized?" Elise asked while Leon stared back at Claudia, wondered just what was on her mind.

"Yes," Claudia swiftly replied.

Marcus quickly interjected, sounding a little nervous, as if he were expecting them to start fighting at the drop of a hat. "It seems like there haven't been any revolts since the remnants of Octavius' faction finally surrendered. The power of the nobles has been crushed, and their lands have mostly been confiscated by the crown. It seems like much of the Kingdom's prosperity is due to the immense wealth this has generated for the Bull King, allowing him to finance the reconstruction."

"Smart man, that Julius," Leon observed. "Would've been easy, I think, to just give those titles back out to people he liked and kept the status quo—same system, just new management deal. Harder to implement change. How has your family been handling all this change, if I might ask?" Leon smiled at Claudia, hoping to prod at her a bit for her attitude so far. He didn't want to start an actual fight, but she was just rubbing him the wrong way.

"Quite well," Claudia answered, her statement accompanied by a slight smile from Marcus. "We're wealthy, and even without our titles, that hasn't changed."

"Fantastic to hear!" Elise exclaimed as she subtly pinched Leon's arm, a silent signal to get him to back off.

Leon complied, asking, "And the Royal Family itself? How has August and the King been doing?"

"Happy and healthy," Claudia responded. "His Majesty formally declared August the Crown Prince about a year after your departure, and has been slowly handing off more and more responsibilities to him these past few years. King Julius is still quite healthy, but it seems to many that he's preparing for retirement."

"August himself wed the former Duchess of Vesontio, and they already have two children."

"Already?" Leon asked, his surprise genuine. "Good for him!"

"He certainly works fast," Elise said with a pointed, though still loving smile sent Leon's way.

Leon returned it with a smile of his own, and he hugged her tighter against him, Marcus and Claudia forgotten for a moment.

He was about to ask more questions when he suddenly felt a burst of intense killing intent erupt from the sky seemingly out of nowhere. He barely had time to summon his magic power before his villa shook down to its foundations as the earth itself seemed to try and swallow it whole. Enormous cracks opened out in the fields that spread around the villa, destroying many crops and causing many of Leon's workers to run for their lives.

The wards on his villa remained strong, however, and even though Leon could hear and sense much damage being done to his home, it largely remained intact under this onslaught.

“Get back!” he roared as he shot to his feet. His body blazed with silver-blue lightning and his magic power reached up into the sky, forming storm clouds in a moment. He cast his magic senses upward, hoping to catch a glimpse of the course of the killing intent he’d sensed, and when he saw it, his blood ran cold.

Three figures hovered over his villa, all radiating auras greater than his own. All were dressed similarly, and with similar austerity. They wore ill-fitting brown robes and all had shaved their heads clean of hair. They were powerful, but the man in the center radiated the kind of pressure that Leon had only ever felt from Anastasios, the Grand Druid, and the Sunlit Emperor.

It seemed that the Emperor-figure of the east had finally come to pay him a visit, and his villa was suffering for it.

‘Had to happen while Anastasios was in the city, didn’t it?’ Leon thought as fear and anger went to war within him for the position of dominant emotion.

Leon could feel these three’s power suffusing the earth around his villa, and he knew without a shadow of a doubt that they were responsible for this attack on his villa. Without hesitation or any expectation that he would be able to do much against them, he summoned the biggest lightning bolts he could from the clouds above. Clearly sensing what was about to hit them, the two ninth-tier mages raised their hands and conjured a pair of simple iron bars above themselves. Leon’s called lightning then fell from the sky, but the powerful golden bolts, aimed at his villa’s assailants, were wrested from Leon’s control and struck the iron bars.

Leon scowled, able to feel the lightning magic within those bars. He felt insulted and degraded that his power could be so easily redirected, but he did his best to keep a cool head.

Instead of following up, he glanced at his companions. Marcus already had his armor on, a bow in hand, and an explosive arrow nocked. Claudia had retreated further into the villa, covering a terrified Elise, who’d also donned her armor. The rest of Leon’s family and retinue were already moving towards him, and it looked like Maia was going to reach him first.

But with two ninth-tier and one tenth-tier mage above him, Leon wondered if they’d reach him in time...

That thought had barely crossed his mind before the tenth-tier mage plummeted like a meteor, smashing into the center of Leon’s courtyard so hard that it sent cracks spider-webbing from corner to corner.

Without hesitation, Leon conjured a silver-blue lightning bolt and hurled it at the mage, intending to hopefully consume his attention as Elise retreated. His blood filled with lightning and adrenaline, and as the bolt left his hand, he roared into his soul realm, [XAPHAN!]

The demon didn’t respond verbally, but Leon felt his fiery power open up, and without hesitation, he pulled on that thread that connected them. A moment later, Xaphan erupted into being at his side, while at the same time a water dragon carrying Maia came roaring over the rooftop, depositing the river nymph on Leon’s other side.

Only a moment later, Marcus' arrow and Leon's bolt reached their target, but the tenth-tier mage hardly seemed to care as his skin hardened into black stone. The power of Leon and Marcus' attacks didn't even chip off a pebble from their tenth-tier assailant.

Maia's water dragon charged, barreling through the courtyard as its own outer body froze into icy plates, while Xaphan conjured a hundred burning bats in the air to follow.

The courtyard's marble floors, however, erupted upward, spikes and shrapnel tearing the ice dragon and fire bats to pieces, the magic making them up forcibly dissipated. Maia's serpentine dragon practically vaporized while Xaphan's fire bats simply vanished.

The tenth-tier mage then began walking forward as calmly as if he were just taking a leisurely stroll, the marble spikes bending around him as if they were terrified of getting in his way. The man flicked his finger and the ground beneath Marcus cracked open, but the villa's wards flared and the crack didn't open wide enough to swallow him up, giving him plenty of time to leap backward and nock another arrow.

For the first time, the man spoke, his voice seeming to resonate within the earth and stone beneath and around Leon's group.

"Lay down your weapons and surrender. None of you are responsible for this Devil, whose lineage must never spread."

In unison, Leon conjured the most powerful bolt he could and hurled it at the mage, Xaphan unleashed a hellstorm of fire, Maia summoned a dozen ice spears and launched them, and Marcus let his arrow fly with one of Leon's most powerful spells attached.

However, the marble in front of the mage curled upward like bent sheet metal, shielding the mage from Leon's bolt. The marble exploded backward, but the man simply clenched his fingers and conjured a more powerful wall, the thing barely snapping into place to block the fusillade of additional magical strikes.

"Keep it up!" Leon shouted, and Marcus pulled more spell arrows from his soul realm to fire, Maia conjured another ice dragon to snake around the stone wall in a flanking action, and Xaphan kept up the pressure with his demonfire. Leon, meanwhile, took the risk to glance upward, noting that the two ninth-tier mages hadn't made another move. He could sense the lightning magic swirling around the iron bars floating above them, and after noting that the tenth-tier mage seemed more than willing to wait a moment for their barrage to peter out, he shifted his target.

Leon reached upward with his magic, sending the vast majority of it into the clouds above. This wasn't missed by the two ninth-tier mages, but what they did seem to miss were the few strands that he snaked into the iron bars. They'd pulled his bolts in with lightning magic, and he wasn't going to allow that.

Two more bolts fell from the sky a moment later, and Leon snapped the relatively unprotected enchantments on the iron bars at the same time. The bolts struck the bars, the heat from his lightning flash-melting them, and both ninth-tier mages had to suddenly use their magic to prevent molten iron from falling down upon them, clearly not expecting Leon to subvert their lightning defenses.

Without giving them a moment's pause, Leon called a dozen more bolts from the sky apiece, each one striking the ninth-tier mages, and since they were hovering in the sky, they took the full brunt of Leon's magic.

The flash of his lightning was blinding, the thunder was so deafening that it shook the villa's weakened foundations, but the ninth-tier mages fell from the sky, their brown robes all but burned off and a few small burns and bloody gashes torn into their bodies.

But they landed on their feet next to the tenth-tier mage, their eyes burning with fury, their killing intent flooding the villa.

"Monster!" the tenth-tier mage roared as his stony shield exploded outward. Expecting something like this to happen, Leon reached into his villa's wards and activated a light enchantment he'd hoped to never have to use. A shield of white light snapped into place between the columns forming the courtyard's peristyle, separating Leon's group from their assaulters. At the same time, he conjured the enchanted gem that allowed him to telekinetically manipulate stone and attempted to deflect the incoming rain of sharp stone, while reaching for the tau pearl and attempting to get it to form another shield of light in front of him and his people.

His enchanted gem did next to nothing, though given he was competing with a tenth-tier mage for control of the stones, he wasn't surprised. His villa's light shield held a little better, but each stone, none bigger than Leon's palm, struck with force great enough to blast the columns into dust, and the shield collapsed after only half a dozen impacts. Leon watched practically in slow motion with lightning rushing through his body as hundreds more stones rocketed towards him and his people, until at the last possible second, another shield sprang up between them, this one powered by the acquiescing tau pearl.

The pearl's shield didn't collapse under the onslaught, the stones exploding upon it with such force that Leon went sliding backward with every impact. Marcus, Xaphan, and Maia followed him back, staying behind the pearl's shield.

After three agonizingly long seconds, the stones stopped impacting the shield, and the tau pearl dropped the shield of its own volition.

Leon, breathing dreadfully hard, stared defiantly at the three who'd assaulted his villa, but as the tau pearl's shield finished dissolving, all three were staring at him with what looked like the deepest shock and surprise that they could express.

For several long seconds, no one moved, Leon's side summoning all the power they could, while the ninth-tier mages went from staring at Leon to staring at the tenth-tier mage, clearly seeking guidance.

However, before the tenth-tier mage could give any, a voice boomed from Occulara so loudly that it sent a wave along Leon's storm clouds and echoed for miles further.

"KEEPER!!!"

Leon recognized the voice of Anastasios, and he felt no small amount of relief as the Lord Protector crossed from the deepest part of Occulara to above Leon's villa in a matter of seconds, his body glowing like a new sun above Leon's home.

Following him just a second later were four more ninth-tier mages, all riding in flying chariots and armed and armored to the teeth.

“STAND DOWN!” Anastasios roared.

The two ninth-tier mages that were assaulting Leon’s villa looked once more to their leader, doubt more clearly entering their eyes, and after one of the tensest moments of Leon’s life, the tenth-tier mage held up his hand, silently telling them to stand down.

As they relaxed, Leon did not, and neither did his people. But a fraction of a second later, Anastasios appeared between them, his back to Leon as he glared at the three who’d assaulted the villa.

“You have violated our peace, Keeper,” Anastasios growled, his aura and killing intent easily matching that of ‘Keeper’. “Explain yourself.”

“You have harbored the enemy of all life on Aeterna,” Keeper replied as if he were merely discussing the weather. However, his attitude quickly shifted into an accusatory glare, his white pupilless eyes still seemingly staring right at Anastasios. “It should be *you* explaining yourself, instead...”

“This is *my* Empire, and those within it are *my* responsibility,” Anastasios growled. “You have no power here to do as you please. Depart *immediately*, or you will suffer my wrath.”

Keeper remained stoic, hardly visibly reacting, but he seemed to glare back at Leon and deliberate with great care. After almost five seconds, he simply nodded, and he, with his ninth-tier comrades in tow, rose into the air and began roughly northeast. Anastasios’ four ninth-tier mages followed them, apparently ensuring that they were actually leaving.

Only then did Leon allow himself to start relaxing.

“Marcus,” he whispered, his voice hoarse. “See to Elise and your sister.”

Marcus nodded in thanks and ran in their direction.

Without another word, Leon looked to Xaphan. The fire demon nodded to him, but a quick suspicious glance to Anastasios was all Leon needed to know that the demon was still good to go, if need be. Xaphan then shrank into a tiny ball of fire and shot into Leon’s chest, returning to Leon’s soul realm.

Maia, Leon didn’t for a moment consider sending away. However, he did remove his helmet and sent a message to the rest of his family and retinue, letting them know that the danger had passed, at least momentarily. He also sent a message to the head of his household staff to get an accounting of the damage and get the rest of the staff organized.

Only when all that was done did he turn back to Anastasios, who in that time had turned around and approached him, but kindly waited until Leon was done getting reorganized.

“Thank you, Lord Protector,” Leon formally stated, his composure now regained.

“Think nothing of it, Leon,” Anastasios replied. “But I think we should have a quick talk, no?”

Chapter 788: Another Guest

“That all happened much sooner than I anticipated,” Anastasios murmured as he and Leon sat down in one of Leon’s private sitting rooms, the enchantments in the walls still robust despite the damage that Leon’s villa took during Keeper’s assault. “Leon, I humbly apologize, the Keeper never should’ve gotten this far.”

Leon, his mind still reeling from his villa barely managing to remain intact despite suffering an attack by a tenth-tier mage with two ninth-tier mages providing back-up, sighed and slouched into his chair.

“‘Keeper’, huh? Was that the Emperor of the east? The leader of the Sentinels?”

“Yes,” Anastasios confirmed. “Not exactly an Emperor, but close enough, I suppose. He’s always been dedicated, but extreme. I believe you already know that you’ve been watched for years, since even before you came south?” Leon nodded. Anastasios grimaced slightly as he continued, “Keeper has been against the idea of an alliance with you right from the start. He’s always advocated killing you as soon as possible, to end the threat you might pose to the Imperial order with as little bloodshed as we can manage. He’s not interested in what you can offer to us, he doesn’t care if you are the complete opposite of your ancestors, he doesn’t believe in redemption. In his eyes, the crimes your ancestors committed here have damned your entire bloodline, and the worst possible thing that could happen—according to him, anyway—would be you linking up with the Sky Devils and making another go of conquering Aeterna.

“Ever since you came south, I and the Grand Druid have been running interference, so to speak. We’ve managed to keep him from doing anything more than advocating for your death, but it seems you speaking with a few Sky Devils spooked him into action.”

Leon absorbed all of this with a rapidly-deepening frown. “How did he get this far into the Ilian Empire?” he asked. “I get that he’s a tenth-tier mage and, as the leader of his people, likely has access to magic and powers that few, if any, can match on this plane... but I figured that entering your Empire without notice would’ve been beyond even his capabilities...”

Anastasios sighed again and responded, “Our border defenses are strong, but nothing’s impregnable. Besides, we’re not at war with the Sentinels, so we’re not exactly on the lookout for anything from the east. We’re not going to war with them, but I think we’re going to be giving our current defense strategy quite the makeover in the next few weeks...”

Leon nodded.

“Leon, again, I have to apologize. Even with all of this happening, I thought that my presence in the city would’ve prevented something like this from happening. I can only count us both lucky that you’re powerful and that the wards on your home are strong.”

Leon waved his hand dismissively. “You don’t control the Keeper, don’t apologize for his actions. Just help me keep something like this from happening again, and we can call ourselves even.”

“Of course.”

Leon and Anastasios both smiled, but their expressions weren’t as warm as their words might’ve implied. *‘Can’t have me dying before squeezing all you can from me, can you?’* Leon cynically thought, and he imagined Anastasios was thinking something similar.

"The Grand Druid will be coming soon," Anastasios said, surprising Leon a bit.

"So soon? And she's coming here? To Occulara?"

"Yes. If you're open to cooperation, then she wants in, and I would never try to monopolize your talents and generosity..."

'Of course you wouldn't...'

"Together, I believe that we'll be able to keep Keeper off your back."

"How will that work?" Leon asked. "I can't imagine either of you will be happy to stay here in Occulara for long, not when your Empires might need you. You'll have to leave soon enough, and what will happen then? Should I expect another attack from Keeper?"

Left unsaid were Leon's plans for rapidly gaining power. With the Hesperidic Apples, he figured that he might be to close the gap between himself and the Keeper within a short enough time to startle the rest of the plane, but even if it only took another decade, that could still be far too much time. At any point during those years, the Keeper could return and kill him properly this time, and the only things between him and the Keeper right now were Anastasios and the Grand Druid. He was under no illusions that they would remain in the city for as long as was needed to keep him alive—and that was even assuming they would allow him to reach the tenth-tier, anyway.

If he were to grow that strong, then he could potentially tell them to suck it the next time they came by for help with some old things they had of his Clan, and there wouldn't be much they could do about it. As 'cooperative' as he might be, he didn't for a moment think that they didn't consider him a threat.

'I could always marry Cassandra,' Leon thought as he fought to keep the scowl of disgust off his face at the prospect. *'That would certainly guarantee the Grand Druid remaining on my side. Ugh, but fuck that. Fuck that.'* He liked Cassandra, but not that much, and he wasn't about to whore himself out for protection, no matter how much it might make his life safer and easier.

"As much as I'd like to stay here and chat for a bit," Anastasios said as he rose from his seat, "this confrontation is going to have some political consequences. I'll keep an eye on your home, but I need to head back to the city and deal with this."

Leon suppressed a scowl, but understood. Two Emperor-level figures having a confrontation like that in his villa sounded like the kind of political headache that would give him a migraine, but after a moment of thought, he realized that it was something he was going to have to get used to. There would likely be more confrontations of that nature going on in his life, if he were to achieve his goals.

Leon rose to see the Lord Protector out, both of them returning to the courtyard where Anastasios lifted up into the sky and flew back into the city—though the four ninth-tier mages who'd accompanied him stayed behind.

After seeing the Lord Protector off, Leon sighed and, before he started inspecting the damage, checked back in with everyone. Despite a few of his field workers having fallen into the massive cracks that the Keeper had opened in his field, everyone was relatively fine. Scrapes, bruises, a couple of broken bones, but nothing that couldn't be fixed with a healing spell or potion, both of which Leon was more than

happy to hand out. Leon could only count himself lucky that the Keeper was focused entirely on him during the attack.

But, for as undamaged as his people were from that confrontation, his estate was another story. The fields where Elise and Helen grew medicinal herbs was torn asunder, the foundations of his villa were cracked and shattered in a thousand places, his wards were ripped apart, and a few empty rooms had their ceilings collapse. Leon conservatively estimated the damages as at least ten million silvers, and likely double or even triple that amount. It was going to take either a lot of workers, or the attention of a powerful earth mage to fix all of this damage, and neither of those things came cheaply.

Fortunately, he was a Chief in Heaven's Eye, and he could afford to fix all of it. So, he put the damage to his home out of his mind, content in the knowledge that no one had been irreparably hurt, and went to spend some time with Elise. This was the second time their home had been attacked by his enemies in so overt a manner. When Leon found her, she was practically hysterical, barely able to get a coherent word out as she latched onto him and cried out all of her terror into his shirt. During this time, Marcus saw his sister out, and Leon found himself mildly amused at the prospect of just what she might report back to the Bull Kingdom.

After a while, Maia and Valeria joined Leon and Elise, and they were all able to go over just what had happened, and what was going to happen shortly. With her emotions vented and with a purpose in mind, Elise sprang up and got to work. If the Lord Protector was going to continue to stay here, then they had to clean up—doubly so if the Grand Druid was going to be putting in an appearance.

So, Leon set aside any thoughts of work for the next few days. He needed to get the wards on the villa back up and running. It had been years since he'd put them up, and in that time, his skill and experience in enchanting had grown; he already had ideas about stronger and more secure enchantments he could put on the villa...

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"It's honestly terrifying..." Alix muttered.

"It is what it is," Gaius whispered back. "If we're going to be following Leon, then I think you have to prepare yourself to rub shoulders with the strong."

"But still... *one* tenth-tier mage and his folks who spend most days in the city is one thing. Having *two* around just makes my knees shake!"

Leon quietly sighed as he stood on his front steps, Elise, Maia, and Valeria at his side, the rest of his retinue just behind him. Out in his front courtyard was the Lord Protector, his four ninth-tier guards, and several others in his entourage who weren't staying in Leon's villa, all decked out and array in formal clothes and formation.

Notable by their absence were any local magistrates or Heaven's Eye officials. *They* were waiting back at the docks for the Grand Druid's ship, but the Grand Druid herself wasn't going to stay long in the city before coming straight to Leon's villa. Consequently, Anastasios had floated the idea to Leon of waiting for her at his home instead of at the docks. Leon, not wanting to head down to the docks and wanting to send a subtle message by having the Grand Druid come to his villa instead of meeting her partway, agreed.

Before he responded to Alix and Gaius, he glanced back at his villa. Only three days had passed since the Keeper's attack, but with Elise's management, Leon's wealth, and Anastasios' embarrassment, the three of them had managed to completely fix the villa's structure in less than a day. Fixing up the fields didn't take more than a couple of hours on the second day, and Leon took the opportunity to practice a bit of his earth magic.

However, what had taken up just about the rest of Leon's waking hours since getting his home physically fixed was reimplementing his defense wards. His light shield had performed quite well, considering what it had gone up against, but he upgraded it with more power. The reinforcement enchantments, however, had done little to stop the Keeper from destroying so much of his villa.

He supposed that the fact that there was so much of his villa left after the attack was proof that his wards were effective, but a failure was still a failure, and he knew he could do better. Still, he needed more time to get all of those wards back into place, and were the Grand Druid not due to arrive in a matter of minutes, he would still be working on them.

"Just avoid them as much as you can," Leon whispered back to Alix. "If it matters that much, then double down on your training and close the gap between you. Interacting with a tenth-tier mage is one thing when you're only fifth-tier, it's quite another when you're much stronger."

"I'm not you!" Alix protested. "I don't have super fancy storm blood that these people are interested in!"

Leon just smiled. "All the more reason to train. Once I get these damn wards set back up, I'll be right there with you. I may have super fancy storm blood, but it's proven quite lacking in recent days, hasn't it?"

Alix nervously chuckled, but whatever was to be her response died in her throat as the Grand Druid's entourage finally arrived.

It wasn't that large, being much smaller than Anastasios'. Her entire party was spread out over about a dozen steel carriages, and totaled less than a hundred. However, the average power of each of those hundred startled Leon as he noted four more ninth-tier mages, a dozen of the eighth-tier, and more than thirty of the seventh-tier. The sheer amount of power that the Grand Druid brought with her left him completely speechless as they climbed out of the carriages and revealed themselves.

The Grand Druid was the last one to show her face, emerging from the largest and most ornate carriage and looking both worried and furious. For a moment, Leon expected Cassandra to pop out of the carriage too, and was both relieved and disappointed when the Princess remained absent.

Without any fanfare, the Grand Druid, completely silently, wasted no time in walking towards Leon.

"Grand Druid!" Anastasios called out as she approached. "Lovely to see you aga—"

The Grand Druid barely even spared him a look as she brushed past Anastasios' assembled party in favor of approaching Leon. To his credit, Anastasios didn't look at all put out by her apparent snub.

"Leon!" the Grand Druid exclaimed, sounding for all the world like nothing more than a concerned, doting grandmother. "Are you all right? I heard what happened and came here as soon as I could!"

Utterly ignoring Leon's rather blatant, if silent, indications not to, the Grand Druid rushed forward and pulled him into a deep, familial hug.

"You were already on the way," Anastasios retorted with some humor as he followed the Grand Druid over. "It's not like you were in Evergold and dropped everything to come here after the Keeper overstepped."

"Oh hush, you!" the Grand Druid responded, still holding Leon's head against her shoulder. "I was *deeply* concerned for my future grandson-in-law!"

"When was that decided?" Anastasios wondered.

"It wasn't!" Leon declared as he finally managed to extricate himself from the Grand Druid's grasp. "It wasn't!" he said again with a little more poise and dignity. Then, he plastered a smile across his face, doing his best to make it seem genuine, and said, "Grand Druid, welcome to my home. I would be honored to host you for as long as you are to remain in the city, if you find other accommodations unsuitable."

Leon desperately hoped she did have other accommodations, but he knew that that was unlikely. Indeed, he was proven right when her face lit up like a Lightning Lance and she exclaimed, "I would love to stay here! While I fully endorse you marrying my precious granddaughter, I *do* have to do all my due diligence, after all!"

"Uh huh," Leon replied as he moved to complete the greetings with the rest of his family and retinue. Fortunately, that didn't take too long, and ten minutes later, he was taking seat in a private sitting room, just him, Anastasios, and the Grand Druid.

"All right," Leon said, "I'll give you the same deal I gave the Lord Protector: you get a room for yourself, and I'll put up with four of your entourage. Everyone else has to find somewhere else to sleep."

"Fair enough," the Grand Druid replied, looking about as interested in such matters as she was in the dust beneath her fingernails. "Leon, I have to congratulate you on your promotion. Quite an accomplishment for someone of your age."

"Thank you," Leon said, unfazed by her change in topic. "Shall we get down to business? I've had some time to think, and I know what you're here for and what you want, so let's just dispense with the garbage in the way and get working, yeah? I have a *lot* on my plate right now..."

"Just going right for the kill, huh?" Anastasios quipped. "Can't even give us some warning, first?"

"I have less patience than time, and I have very little time."

"So be it. Now, the Keeper..."

"Right," the Grand Druid whispered with a hint of contempt in her voice. "He seems to have forgotten the old accords."

"What?" Leon asked.

"Informal agreements between those of us at the top of our respective mountains," Anastasios explained. "All the plane would suffer if those of our power truly clashed. So, while we have no treaties

in writing—we leave that sort of thing to our Emperors, proper—we do our best to adhere to a couple rules.”

“First,” the Grand Druid continued as Anastasios paused, “is that we don’t solve our problems with violence. We meet up to discuss topics of interest, and any disagreements we have are to be solved during these conferences. If we’re unable to come to some conclusion to any disagreement, then an unrelated tenth-tier mage is to act as mediator—and, if need be, an arbitrator.”

“Second,” Anastasios jumped back in, “is that we’d respect territorial boundaries. Conflicts inevitably happen when two of us are in any one place for too long—unaligned motives and goals, and all that—so we stay out of each other’s hair as much as is possible. When we do meet up for our conferences, it’s never in person. We simply communicate as best we can in other ways.”

Leon nodded, expecting more rules. When none were forthcoming, he gave both of them a confused look. “Is that it? Just two informal agreements? Just staying out of each other’s way, is it? And if that’s the case, why are you two so eager to be around each other? Wouldn’t that cause problems with the Keeper and the Sunlit Emperor? If I were either of them, I might think that you two were putting together a political bloc that could upset the balance of power...”

“Oh, Sunlit is too absorbed in his own proclivities to think of that,” the Grand Druid said with far less disguised contempt than when she spoke of the Keeper.

“And old Keeper is suspicious of everyone,” Anastasios added, “so his reaction to us is the same no matter what we do.”

“But we’ll keep him in line,” the Grand Druid stated, a dangerous look in her gleaming red eyes. “Someone making moves against you before my Cassandra has properly asserted her territory can *not* be taken lightly!”

Leon grimaced. “I would really rather you stop referring to me like that. I’m not Cassandra’s property.”

“Of course you aren’t, dear!” the Grand Druid replied. “Not *yet*, anyway!”

“Not *ever*, more like.”

“Of course!” the Grand Druid repeated. “But... if you don’t want Cassandra, then what is it you *do* want? I can be accommodating, if you’re willing to be the same... After all, I’ve heard that you and Ana over here have your own arrangements...”

Leon’s eyebrows rose at her shortening of Anastasios’ name, but he let it go by without comment; Anastasios himself seemed taken aback and a little embarrassed that she’d said it. But his response didn’t wait a moment longer.

“I want your crown,” Leon declared, and he reveled in her look of sudden shock, momentary though it was.

When he’d first met the Grand Druid, she’d been wearing a beautiful crown that Nestor had identified as belonging to his sister, the only daughter of Jason Keraunos. When Leon wondered just what the Grand Druid might be able to pay for his services with whatever legacies she’d taken from his Clan that

she might want him to help her unlock, aside from security guarantees, the crown was an easy choice. He didn't even care that much if the thing had any practical value, though if it did, then all the better.

"So..." the Grand Druid whispered, "you recognized it as something of value, then?"

"It's something I want," Leon said, not wanting to offer up any information that she might not have.

"That's my price. Lord Protector Anastasios has given me his support and a guarantee of security in exchange for helping him with some of my Clan's old stuff lying around Ilion or wherever it's been squirreled away."

"Is my security guarantee not worth as much?" the Grand Druid asked.

Leon candidly replied, "Given that I'm living within the Ilian Empire and have no plans to change that, yes, his security guarantee is most valuable than any others on offer. Now, I also plan to ask for yours, but I believe that with your duties keeping you thousands of miles away from Occulara, that anything you might want my help with will cost a little extra. And that little extra is that crown.

"So, weigh keeping that crown with whatever you might gain from me. Is it wor—"

Interrupting Leon, the Grand Druid simply said, "Done." Without another word, she conjure the golden crown from her soul realm and casually spun it on her finger.

[Nestor?] Leon whispered into his soul realm, a little nonplussed at her reaction, but taking it as much in stride as he could.

[It's real...] the dead man replied.

"Very well," Leon replied as he leaned forward and held out his hand.

The Grand Druid betrayed her thoughts a bit when she hesitated for a fraction of a second, but in the end, put the crown in Leon's hand, who immediately pulled it into his soul realm.

"And it's done," Leon said with a smile on his face. He had two tenth-tier mages in his corner—at least, for now. He had some obligations to them, of course, but at the very least, he didn't think he'd have to worry about another attack on his villa anytime soon.

Chapter 789: Preparing for the Future

The Director seethed, and for that, Leon felt a strange sense of glee. Sure, he was infuriated that the Keeper had attacked him and broke so much of his villa, but in the days since, he'd calmed down enough that seeing the Director so irate was far more fun than wallowing in anger against the Sentinels' head of state.

Still, Leon could tell that the Director's ire wasn't solely reserved for the Keeper, though the Keeper was certainly getting most of it—the fact that this meeting had been delayed until after the Grand Druid's arrival stuck in the Director's craw, too, but Leon had been careful not to leave his villa following the attack, and the Director had been unwilling to leave the Hexagon for too long, either. As a result, they hadn't been able to touch base with each other until now. Now that they *were* speaking, Leon's story of that day destroyed any calm that might've settled over the Director.

"I can't *believe* that he did that..." the Director wrathfully muttered as he leaned over his desk.

"Is it really so hard to believe?" Leon asked. "He seems rather zealous in his beliefs, or such is the impression I have from the Grand Druid and Lord Protector, and combined with his obvious power, maybe he felt untouchable? Maybe his concerns about me prompted him to do this?"

"Trying to excuse his behavior, Leon?" the Director asked, his tone sounding genuinely surprised.

"Not at all," Leon replied with a vicious smile. "He came damn close to killing Elise, Marcus, and Marcus' sister. People trying to kill me is easy to forgive; it's when they try to hurt those close to me that grudges form. And Keeper tried to kill someone *very* close to me."

The Director grunted. "Good thing he was run off, then. This whole thing was brought to an end before anything could be done that couldn't be taken back."

Leon sighed and jumped up to sit on the Director's desk, eliciting a look of reproach from the man, who still stood in front of it. "We knew that Keeper was going to be the most problematic, but I've gotten an alliance with the Lord Protector and Grand Druid. I'm not going to be leaving Occulara for a while, either. Hopefully, with the application of plenty of time, all of this will cool off a bit and we can get down to business."

The Director scowled. "I'm not letting you anywhere *near* my arks until we can be *sure* that you're not being watched."

Leon's vicious smile returned. "*Your* arks, is it? Seems like you're just keeping them warm for me since you can't access their critical functions. But I'll let that slide; I don't entirely disagree with you on staying away for a while. Besides, I have more than enough to occupy myself with in the meantime."

The Director grunted again in acknowledgment. "Then, for now," he said, "I'll see what I can do to discourage the Keeper from coming back, and you can get back to settling into your new role."

Leon frowned slightly and nodded. "I can do that. But, out of curiosity, what measures do you have in mind?"

"I don't have any in mind, yet," the Director growled in dissatisfaction. "It's not for nothing that the Sentinels have a reputation for austerity. The guild has less of a presence in the east than we do even in some outer Kingdoms. They have the weakest and least developed economy of all the other Empires, so the economic sanctions or bureaucratic red tape that we might've thrown at any other government for such an act won't be as effective as they'd need to be. Instead, we're going to have to reroute trade and look at other sources of goods that they provide. It means a large-scale rework of the way that Heaven's Eye manages Aeterna's trade. And all of this going on just as the Sky Devils are causing major disruptions in trade flowing from the south..."

Leon's lips thinned as he pointedly looked away. Such matters were so beyond his skillset that he had nothing constructive to add, and he got the impression that the Director wasn't exactly looking for suggestions, either.

"You're working with the north and west," the Director said after a moment of silence. "How much have you committed to?"

"I haven't sworn myself to them, but I have agreed to help them to unlock and study any legacies they might have in storage. I didn't place many restrictions on that, but Anastasios, so far, has been quite

moderate in his requests, bringing me nothing more than a few scrolls to unseal, and the Grand Druid hasn't made any requests of me yet. I'm sure that both of them will ramp up in the coming months and years, but for now, they're not getting too onerous."

'Hmm. Good. If that's what it takes to keep the peace, then so be it. What are your intentions regarding the south and east?"

"The east, I'm sure you can guess after the Keeper's stunt: sweet nothing. As for the south... I suppose if they want in, the Sunlit Emperor can ask, but I'm not going to go and offer them anything."

"Fair enough."

Another silence settled over them for a long moment, and Leon figured their short meeting was over.

"Well," he said as he jumped off the desk and back to his feet, "I'll just get back to research, then, and leave the paperwork and stuff to you."

A third time, the Director grunted, and Leon left the office. He actually *did* have some work he needed to do, but there was something else he wanted to devote much of his day to studying: the crown that the Grand Druid had handed over in exchange for expanding the deal he had with Anastasios to include her, as well.

—

"What a mess," Nestor murmured. "What barbarity, what lack of taste, what vandalism!"

Next to Nestor's ruby in Leon's soul realm lay the Grand Druid's crown, in all of its glory.

The entire piece featured much of the same floral themes that typified Evergolden art, but the core of the crown was a band of gold with reliefs of birds—obvious depictions of the Thunderbird herself—covering its exterior. To anyone else, though, these birds would likely not demand much notice, like being seen as just additional artistic flourishes to accompany the rest of the floral crown. Set in the center of the crown, right in the center of the wearer's forehead, was a large ruby about the size of a chicken's egg that glowed like a star.

"Is there something wrong with the crown?" Leon asked.

"*Look* at it!" Nestor shouted. "They covered it in golden garbage! Tried to erase us by covering us with golden flowers! Erasing us by altering the image of our Honored Ancestor! Though, it's indicative of what they are and what they aspire to be, isn't it? For all they speak of hating what we did, they want to be us, but they aren't and never will be. So they grow around us, never quite erasing us from view, and just clinging onto our old greatness like garish weeds. That they take what was ours and try to make it their own is insulting on its own, but that they add all of this other trashy gold to it adds insult to injury."

Leon shrugged. "Is there any need for the flowers to stay there?" He couldn't sense any magic within the flowers and felt like removing them from the crown wouldn't have any deleterious effects, but it was always wise to consult with those more knowledgeable, he supposed.

"Get rid of them," Nestor growled.

Leon chuckled and conjured his armor's gauntlet, and then stuck his fire scalpel gem into it. Following that, he, with great care and a complete lack of sentimentality for the Evergolden additions, began to cut off the golden flowers that had been attached to the crown. With every cut, Nestor groaned in dismay as the quality of Evergolden metallurgy and goldsmithing was put on display. The flowers looked like they'd been rather haphazardly welded on, and some of the Thunderbird reliefs they'd been attached to had been irreparably damaged. The shape of the crown had been well-maintained despite gold being soft and prone to warping from extended use, but even after the flowers were removed, it still looked quite sad given the now-obvious damage done.

For his part, Leon wasn't so much offended as he was simply disappointed. The crown was heavily enchanted and, thanks to the glowing ruby, had access to quite a bit of magic power. However, none of the crown's enchantments seemed designed to maintain its appearance and to enhance the appearance and aura of the one wearing it.

"What kind of enchantments are in this thing?" Leon asked.

"Few that will be of much help, now," Nestor despondently replied.

"I... didn't damage it myself, did I?" Leon worriedly asked.

"Nothing you did just now would've damaged it, no," Nestor answered.

Leon breathed a sigh of relief. It had taken almost twenty minutes to get all of the flowers off the crown, perhaps double the time it would've needed if he'd been less careful. He would've hated it if he'd been that careful and still wound up damaging Penthesilea's crown.

"Still," Leon continued, "what could it have done back in the day, then?"

"It acted as one of my sister's many IDs," Nestor explained, his tone still dull and depressed. "In effect, it acted as a key for several of Penthesilea's vehicles—arks and other such magical transportation. Just about all critical magical infrastructure that she used required the use of such keys.

"But that crown was quite special to her, and I personally enchanted it with a couple other functions, to wit: a storage gem for her magic power she could draw on if needed; it allowed her to communicate with our father and eldest brother whenever the need called for it; the crown amplified her aura for social effect; and finally, it significantly raised the potency of her lightning magic by altering how it flowed through her body."

With every function revealed, Leon's eyes bugged out of their sockets even more. A magical storage device was valuable, though hardly game changing since he already had a couple of those. Communication with those who were now dead was obviously about as useful as shouting into the uncaring Void. However, the aura amplification and raising the potency of lightning magic was something he was *very* much interested in, as well as the possibility of finding and taking possession of any nice bits and pieces Penthesilea might've left behind using the crown's ID function.

However, before Leon could gush about any of this, he restrained himself and asked, "And why would 'few be of much help', dead man?"

“Most of the enchantments are too decayed or damaged to be of use,” Nestor explained. “The crown still stores magic power, and it *might* still be usable as her old ID, but the other enchantments are unusable.”

Leon practically deflated with every word Nestor spoke. “Is there any point to trying to repair the crown?” he asked.

“None,” Nestor replied.

Leon grimaced, but he understood; no reason to re-enchant the crown when he could simply apply those enchantments to something more sturdier and more suitable to hold them.

“Well,” Leon said, “at least it’s back in the Clan’s hands.”

“At least there’s that,” Nestor sighed. “It’s good to see you reclaimed the Clan’s property, even if you’re not going about it as zealously as you should be.”

“Let’s not get all caught up on *things*, now, dead man,” Leon said rather unseriously.

“You’ve spent how long complaining about the Clan and declaring that you’d ‘do things yourself’, how can I *not* feel some pride in you seeing the light?”

“I’m not sure about seeing the light, but—and I’m fairly certain I’ve said this to you before, Nestor—I’m taking what I want and leaving the baggage behind. Like this crown, I want to cut off the weeds and leave only what’s valuable. I don’t need a lot of what the Clan brought with it, but if I want it, I’ll take it. I’m more concerned about the Sky Devils, to be honest; restoring the Clan is far more about reasserting our place in the universe than collecting a bunch of rusty junk, isn’t it?”

“It is, though a lot of that ‘rusty junk’ could *help* in reclaiming our place in the universe. But fine, do what you will, ignore the advice of those infinitely your wiser, as is your wont. How are things going on the Sky Devil front, by the way? It’s been more than two weeks since that duel you fought with the descendant of the Blood Thunder Jaguar—at his tier, I would’ve assumed he’d have been able to try and contact you by now.”

Leon scowled as he remembered some of the reports he’d received over the past couple of days. Details from the south weren’t the easiest things to come by, but as a Chief of Heaven’s Eye, he got the best that could be expected.

And the reports weren’t good for his future plans. He was glad that he redirected Anshu’s attention to include contacting the Sky Devils because he wasn’t sure they’d be able to get to the mainland on their own with what they’d shown so far.

One of the biggest fears of the Sky Devils were their dread ships. The island that became known as the Sword was a critical piece of the Imperial defense strategy that kept the southwestern nations safe, from the Indra Raj to the Pegasi States, from Sky Devil raids. Any dread ship that tried to raid the coast would have to either bypass the Sword—not an easy thing to do—or contend with the Imperial fleets. Without the Sword, the Sky Devils theoretically had such a good position that they could practically raid the southwest with impunity, and from what Leon had heard of the southeast, it wasn’t much better since most of the forts along the Shield mountains had fallen, too.

The curious thing was that the Sky Devils had yet to press their advantage—the Sword was now in their hands, the Imperial fleets had been crippled, the navies of the other nations were not up to the task of defending against the Sky Devils who might be out in force, and the land armies of the defending parties were still mustering. If Leon had been in charge of the Sky Devils, he would've launched an invasion of the Pegasi States by now, or if his logistics couldn't support that, then at least led a couple of raids just to keep the Aeternans on their toes.

The Sky Devils had instead apparently done nothing. Their fleets, only a few days after Argos had been sacked, pulled back to the Sword, and a great number of ships were noticed pulling back to the Sky Devil's Hell. It wasn't clear exactly what was happening, whether they were simply fortifying the Sword against Imperial attempts to retake it, if there was some kind of instability back on their island, or what was going on. There were even a few scattered reports of relatively sizable contingents of Sky Devils coming to blows, though not quite to the extent of true infighting.

Regardless, current Heaven's Eye and Imperial thinking was that the Sky Devils were now weaker than they appeared, despite the light losses sustained during Argos' sacking, the seizure of the Sword, and the taking of the Shield forts. The pull-back to their island added some credence to the theory that there was some infighting amongst them, but whatever the reason, it seemed that it might be some time before their dread ships started plying the waters off the coast of the Pegasi States, let alone nations even farther away from their waters. If whatever this was persisted for even just a couple of years, then it would give the Empires more than enough time to rearm, rebuild their fleets, and come back to the Sword with vengeance in their eyes and enough force to retake the island.

Leon explained all of this to Nestor as succinctly as he could, and Nestor reached the same conclusion he did.

"... Sounds like the Jaguar will take years just to reach the mainland," the dead man observed.

"That was already our working assumption," Leon said, "so nothing's really changed. It's just... disheartening. I would've liked to meet them partway, but it seems like we're going to have make more of an effort to get in contact than I might've guessed."

"Such is the hand we're often given," Nestor muttered. "Nothing to do but play it as best we can. What are your priorities going forward? I'll need to arrange your lesson plans if you're to continue advancing in your studies of the art of enchanting."

Leon took a deep breath as he threw himself into a nearby chair. "Maybe it's a blessing in disguise; I need power more than anything, and I'd like to have it before dealing with the Sky Devils," he said. "The Keeper damn near ripped me to pieces before Anastasios showed up. I'm rubbing shoulders with giants, so I need to grow or I'm going to get crushed underfoot. Ninth-tier before doing anything else is a must. If I can swing tenth-tier, then even better, though even Anastasios and the Grand Druid might have problems with that. Can't be *too* threatening, now; they're only being as indulgent as they are since they think themselves far superior to me."

"I assume those apples are going to come into play, then?"

"Yes," Leon confirmed. "Tikos has indicated that the orchard should be ready to start producing Hesperidic Apples in a year or so. Should get all of our power shooting upwards, I think."

“And what does your sprite friend say about thunder wood?”

“That I’ll probably have some proper samples long before I reach ninth-tier,” Leon said. “Assuming, of course, that it takes years for me to reach ninth-tier, which I think is a reasonable estimate. So Helen’s on that, right now, while Elise is making sure our fields are getting back to normal and Tikos is managing the orchard.”

“Sounds like things are falling into place,” Nestor observed.

“Certainly feels that way,” Leon replied. “Feels like I can start finally relaxing a little bit. Relatively, I mean. Nose will still be to the grindstone, but I don’t think I’ll have much cause to worry about being in harm’s way for a hot minute. That’ll be nice.”

“For you, that *would* be an accomplishment...”

“Hey, those years between arriving in Occulara and the wyvern hunt were *very* peaceful!”

“And you screwed them up, didn’t you? Everything went to shit following that hunt, didn’t it? And you were left scrambling and without much assurance of safety, weren’t you?”

Leon scowled again. “That won’t happen this time.”

“Prove it, kid. Prove it.”

Leon’s scowl turned upward into an unabashed grin. He was ready to do just that. So, he stood up and made his way back to his throne, leaving Nestor with barely more than a goodbye.

He smiled as he sat down, though, for the future seemed bright, at least. He had momentum and some measure of peace. He just had to make sure not to waste this time, for he didn’t know how long he had before some new crisis came knocking at his door.

There was a lot that needed his attention, and it was time to get back to it all.

Chapter 790: Thunderous Return

The Jaguar stared out at the scene before him with utter disbelief. The fleets that had taken the Sword, sailing back into port at Raimondas. So many had returned despite the barbarians undoubtedly still reeling from their losses. Now was the time to press their advantage, not return to Kataigida and kick back!

And yet, return to Kataigida was exactly what the Thunderer had done, apparently. He’d pulled thousands of their warriors, more than a dozen arks, and hundreds of warships back from the Sword, hopefully leaving enough to hold the island against the inevitable counterattack, while refusing to press against the savage Kingdoms along the coast. It was utterly baffling...

... Or at least, it *would* be, if the Jaguar didn’t know exactly why the Thunderer returned. He hadn’t thought that the Thunderer would care that much, or treat the matter with such seriousness, but the Jaguar had known that Elina would’ve informed the Thunderer about the Raptor. The Thunderer knew as well as anyone in the Jaguar Tribe that an heir to the old Storm Kings had been located.

'By now, many of the Chiefs and elders will know...' the Jaguar thought with some cynicism. Though none, he thought, would know any of the specifics. It was the Thunderer that most concerned him, though.

A challenger to his power, one with a claim stronger than the Thunderer's own, had been located.

The more the Jaguar thought about it, as he stared at the hundreds of ships slowly sliding into dock, the more sense it made. The Thunderer, if he wanted to retain his power, *had* to return to Kataigida, and he had to bring his most loyal troops with him to ensure his hold on power was retained.

And therein lay the crux of the matter that had so concerned the Jaguar for so many years. It was in the best interests of Kataigida to keep the war they'd now re-escalated as far from their shores as possible, to keep their people safe and their base of operations intact. The usurpers could get through the misty veil protecting their island, but if the Ten Tribes pressed them hard enough, then they wouldn't have the opportunity. It was in the best interests of the Ten Tribes to push onward from the Sword to the mainland. It was in their best interests *not* to recall the bulk of their fighting forces to their island, no matter how smashing their successes had been, so far.

It was only in the Thunderer's interest to return.

The Jaguar fought to keep the scowl off his face as he stood shoulder-to-shoulder with others of high standing among the Ten Tribes. Many were already present in the city, awaiting word from the Thunderer of his next movements so that they could relay that news back to their respective Tribes. The largest contingent, though, were the huge group of elders present from the local Tribe.

The city of Raimondas was one of the largest on Kataigida, and as a result, was the center of power for one of the largest of the Ten Tribes: the Screaming Eagles. The Tribe was composed of more than a hundred Clans, and had a council of a hundred and one elders. They were almost double the size of the Jaguar Tribe, though in strength, the Jaguars were a little more favorably compared.

Fortunately, the Jaguars and Screaming Eagles were on remarkably good terms, a relationship that the Jaguar himself had done much to foster, having been in command of the fleets guarding the western shores—the Screaming Eagles' territory, for the most part—for centuries. He was quite proud to stand next to them.

Unfortunately, they were far more loyal to the Thunderer than he was—though, thankfully not fanatically so. Still, he'd refrained from telling them any specifics of the Raptor, unsure of what their response would be. He could easily see them supporting his attempts to get to the mainland, but he could just as easily see them attempting to stop him from attempting to bring back the old order.

As a result, his feelings were quite low as he watched the Thunderer's flagship slowly slide back into dock. His mood was fouled even more when the Thunderer himself came into view.

To his credit, he barely waited the time needed for the gangplanks to lower before he strode down to the docks, his powerful frame striking an imposing figure as he hurried to greet the elders.

He was a tall and powerfully-built man. He stood more than six feet tall, his body rippled with muscle, and his thick red hair was cut short. His chiseled face was clean-shaven, presenting the image of a consummate, respectful professional, despite his Booming Brown Bear Tribe being known for long, wild

hair and thick, bushy beards. He wore an immaculately tailored suit: a black shirt, long black jacket trimmed in gold, plain gray trousers, and dark brown boots—a plain uniform that the rest of his entourage following him wore that eschewed the excesses that a man of his station might've otherwise embraced.

He was clearly a man projecting the image of competent humility, not one that the Elder Council needed to worry about. But he also radiated a tenth-tier aura, and the Jaguar didn't trust any man with such power.

"Lord Thunder," greeted the first of the Eagle Chiefs present, his gray hair pulled back into a tight braid with white feathers woven throughout, "we're honored to receive you."

"As am I for being so augustly received," the Thunderer replied, his voice surprisingly high-pitched for his size. "But, please, and I mean no disrespect when I say this, but could we move this inside? My troops are tired after seizing the Sword from the barbarians, and we must get them accommodated first."

The Thunderer's words spat in the face of their traditions, disregarding their typical formal greetings, and emphasized 'his' troops. The Jaguar couldn't help but glare, but no one else seemed perturbed—or at least, those that might've been insulted wore their anger a little less obviously than the Jaguar presumed he was.

The Thunderer's intense gaze swept over the entire crowd, lingered briefly on him, and then moved on. The Screaming Eagles moved to fulfill the Thunderer's 'request' and moved their entire tribal council back to their gathering hall while the Thunderer worked to disembark his people.

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As the Jaguar stood outside of the Screaming Eagle's gathering hall, he couldn't help but watch the Thunderer the entire time. The man ordered the local dockworkers around like he was supreme in the city, and allowed his Inquisitors to lock down the entire route from the docks to the gathering hall, not letting anyone through. The Jaguar even saw several local Eagles beaten for not moving out of their way quickly enough.

When the Thunderer finally deigned to head for the gathering hall, hours had passed, and he yet he seemed in no hurry at all. When he reached the central courtyard outside of the gathering hall, where the Eagles had their own Tribal Totem similar to what the Jaguars had in Raikos, the Thunderer stepped right up to it, flanked on all sides by a dozen ninth-tier tribesmen, and made quite the show of paying his respects to the images of the Screaming Eagle itself, and the founding members of the Tribe.

And, of course, the image of the Thunderbird at the top of the totem pole.

Accompanying the Thunderer were a hundred officers and their adjutants, though only two drew the Jaguar's gaze, each ninth-tier: the first, a tall, thin woman with pale skin and severe features. Even here, she was fully encased in armor save for her helmet, with a vicious-looking mace hanging from her belt. She regarded her surroundings with gray eyes narrowed in suspicion, constantly on the lookout for potential threats.

Linda, the High Inquisitor.

The second didn't glare around at their surroundings as Linda did, but instead reserved his disdain for the Jaguar. As soon as they came within visual range, his glare never once wavered from the Jaguar, and from the way he clutched his fingers and flexed his aura, if the Thunderer were to order him to attack the Jaguar, he'd be halfway across the courtyard before the Thunderer finished speaking.

He was a powerfully-built man, worthy of his Star-Tearing Tiger lineage. He was rather dark of skin, with bright orange hair kept rather long, and yellow eyes perpetually narrowed in a predatory glower.

Hector, twin brother of the Chief of the Raging Tiger Clan, the leading Clan in the Tiger Tribe descended from the Star-Tearing Tiger. The Tigers were also close allies of the Jaguars, but none of that warmth could be seen in Hector's glare, not that the Jaguar could expect any after all these years. He and Hector had once been good friends, but neither had considered the other a friend in centuries.

"Lord Jaguar!" the Thunderer exclaimed as soon as the ceremonies were finished. "I apologize for any insult I may have made earlier, long voyages tend to muddle the mind, as I'm sure you're aware..."

The Thunderer smiled at him with nothing less than complete honesty, but the Jaguar found it mocking, at best. He certainly didn't appreciate the Thunderer walking forward with his arms outstretched as if to pull him into an embrace.

"Old friend," the Thunderer said as he walked over and wrapped his arms around the Jaguar, the Jaguar's feeling on the matter ignored if they were noticed at all. "I heard of your triumph over the barbarians at Argos. The twin blades pointed at our throat, the Sword and that accursed city both, have been blunted or seized, and the cities of the Shield have been razed. This truly is the beginning of a glorious age, wouldn't you agree?"

For what he thought might be the first time, the Jaguar found himself agreeing with the Thunderer. "Indeed," he whispered as he extricated himself from the Thunderer. "And for more reasons besides..."

"Do you speak of the young boy that you found in Argos? The one that good Elina almost fell over herself to inform me of? Supposedly descended from the Most Venerable, isn't that right?" The Thunderer glanced backward at the Tribal Totem—specifically, at the carved avian figure at the top.

The Jaguar schooled his expression as best he could to avoid an overt grimace. "Indeed. To see the lineage of the Thunderbird itself survive after so long was a joy. I spared Argos some brutality for that fact alone."

The flesh around the Thunderer's eyes tightened slightly, but the man wore nothing but a welcoming smile. "A commendable decision, of course! A commendable decision! Now, as much as I would love nothing more than to swap stories with you over our respective triumphs, I think we ought to head inside, no? We've left these elders to their own devices for long enough, I say!"

Without waiting for a response, the Thunderer marched right into the gathering hall, his followers living up to that title as they filed past the Jaguar. Only Hector paused long enough to exchange words, whispering with bitter hatred, "Was almost surprised to see you here instead of over the ashes of Argos. But then, you've *never* been reliable, have you?" Without waiting for a response, Hector continued on inside.

The Jaguar himself was in no mood to engage, sighing as his one-time-friend followed the Thunderer inside. Instead, he paid attention to exactly who followed the Thunderer inside, for he'd noticed something earlier, and he wanted to confirm it with his own eyes.

Every single officer that followed the Thunderer into the gathering hall were from the Thunderer's personal forces.

The armies of Kataigida were formed by each individual Tribe contributing a force to their mutual defense. The Jaguar commanded his Tribe's military arm. The Thunderer, however, ever since his accession, had formed a new force, one without reliance on voluntary contributions from the Tribes. Instead, it only required a voluntary enlistment by individual tribesmen.

The Jaguar didn't see much wrong with the concept—it had even been tried before by other Thunderers and other acts of the Elder Council in Stormhollow. However, such forces were typically fairly small and short-lived, none lasting for longer than a millennium. Still, the Jaguar wasn't alone in his thoughts, and when the Thunderer had first proposed such a force, there hadn't been much pushback.

However, the Thunderer's force was much larger than any formed in Kataigida's history. That in and of itself was a problem, but not what was triggering the Jaguar's suspicion in that moment.

Instead, what had him suspicious was what he wasn't seeing: other Tribal representatives.

The Thunderer's army, as large as it was, wasn't nearly large enough to take on the Sword all by itself. It needed ships and arks provided by the other Tribes, it needed supplies and equipment that it couldn't get all by itself, and it needed the armies and navies of three other Tribes to accompany it to the Sword.

None of those Tribal armies had returned, as far as the Jaguar could tell. The Thunderer had returned to Kataigida with his personal army, and left the armies of three Tribes behind on the Sword.

The Jaguar sighed, but inside, his heart raced. He wondered if leaving for the mainland was even a wise idea at this point. If the Thunderer wanted to cement his rule over the Ten Tribes, then now was perhaps the best time to do so militarily, but the Jaguar didn't think that the Thunderer was quite there, yet. He didn't know if the army the Thunderer had built, comprised entirely of tribesmen, would fight their own brothers and sisters if the Thunderer demanded it of them.

The Jaguar walked into the gathering hall, hoping he'd never have to learn the answers to those questions, but fearing that such knowledge would be his sooner than he thought.

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The meeting with the Thunderer and the Screaming Eagles' elders went smoothly, and the Jaguar was at least gratified to see the Thunderer observing proper customs this time around. However, as a guest himself, the Jaguar didn't participate at all in the ceremonies, and left as soon as he could get out without showing any disrespect.

His goals, at least, weren't here in Raimondas. However, before he could proceed, he found himself chased down by the Thunderer himself, now unburdened by followers, all of whom had remained behind in the gathering hall. The Thunderer caught up with him just a few streets away from the gathering hall as the Jaguar proceeded back to the docks.

“Lord Jaguar!” he’d called out as he swiftly ran over, apparently disregarding any potential harm to his dignity that such a scene might cause. “Please, wait a moment!”

Unable to refuse such a blatant and reasonable request, the Jaguar acquiesced, and turned to face the Thunderer.

“I saw you leave, and simply had to check in with you,” the Thunderer said by way of explanation. “I was hoping to break words with for a while, besides. This whole thing with the boy in Argos is news that ought to be discussed, no?”

“Indeed,” the Jaguar tersely replied.

The Thunderer waited a moment for the Jaguar to continue, and when the Jaguar silently refused, he asked, “Do you have some problem with me, my friend? Have I offended you in some way? If I have, please be honest with me and tell me of it, so that I can make it right...”

The entreaty seemed honest enough, but the Jaguar didn’t believe a second of it. “I distrust all those in power,” he simply stated.

“That can’t be all,” the Thunderer replied. “Please, if there is some discord between us, let us put it to rest, I would hate for fellow sons of Kataigida to be at odds with each other.”

“There is no need,” the Jaguar replied with a thin smile.

“Still, I can’t help but feel that there is some gulf between us. We both act for the greater good of our people, we should be working together without allowing any issues between us to fester! Why don’t you tell me what brings you to Raimondas, and we can work out a solution to this problem together!”

“Why does any problem need to exist for me to visit my friends in the Screaming Eagles?” the Jaguar innocently asked. “My Tribe’s fleets are moored not far from here, and I must remain in constant contact with them. If the barbarians attempt to retaliate, even if they have been greatly weakened we would suffer greatly if they caught us unawares.”

“Such vigilance is worthy of great commendation,” the Thunderer responded enthusiastically. “I feared that you were going to attempt to reach the mainland in a vain attempt to make contact with this Argossian ‘Raptor’. I’m glad that I don’t need to talk you out of such foolishness. After all, this ‘Raptor’ belongs to Heaven’s Eye, our sworn enemy, does he not? Even if he possesses ancient power, we must assume hostility, especially since he contested your righteous sacking of Argos!”

“I only do what I must for of my Tribe and for the Ten Tribes,” the Jaguar said, wary of directly lying to the Thunderer. Such an act might prompt intervention by the Inquisitors, and if that happened, then Kataigida might truly be drawn into civil war.

“As do we all,” the Thunderer seemingly agreed as he threw an arm around the Jaguar’s shoulders and began strolling down the street, practically dragging the Jaguar with him. They were heading in the direction of the docks, the Jaguar couldn’t help but notice... “Listen, my friend,” the Thunderer continued, “the other reason why I hoped to catch you before doing anything foolish was to update you on the situation in the west, given that you’re our valiant aegis from threats born in that direction.

"The Sword has been taken and secured. However, the seas are still contested in the adjacent seas. To have a hope to reach the mainland right now is to delude oneself. Unfortunate though it is, we must temper our desire to acquire more glory and content ourselves with these gains. For now, we must consolidate our position and ensure that the inevitable barbarian counterattack doesn't render all of this death moot."

The Jaguar contained a smirk, seeing through the Thunderer's act. He was spooked by Elina's news and had returned to Kataigida to hold his position. At the same time, the Jaguar's mission to reach the mainland was made that much more complicated. Without the Thunderer's ships patrolling the seas around the Sword or raiding nearby barbarian cities, the Jaguar would have to contend with barbarian patrols and sizable military forces to accomplish his task.

"I might just see what I can do about that," the Jaguar flatly stated. "Head over to the Sword, see if I can whip those garrisons into shape."

The Thunderer didn't hesitate a moment to agree, practically roaring, "Capital idea, old friend! But does this not leave your armies without a leader? What might happen if you are needed back here?"

"I trust those left behind in my stead," the Jaguar said with a pointed look, a subtle warning to the Thunderer's subtle threat. "I am not the only capable war leader amongst the Jaguars."

"Of course," the Thunderer replied good-naturedly. "The stories of Kataigida are replete with stories of your Ancestors diligently guarding the rest of us from danger! All of Kataigida owes much to the Jaguar Tribe!"

After a few more minutes, they started approaching the docks. As a result, it was only then that they started walking past other people, the streets locked down by the Thunderer's Inquisitors now behind them.

"Well, my friend," the Thunderer said, "I wish you luck in your endeavors. It brings me no small amount of peace of mind to know that you secure our western flank against those who do Kataigida harm."

"I am but a humble servant of the Ten Tribes," the Jaguar replied.

"And we're lucky to have you. May our enemies tremble at the mention of your name."

The Jaguar smirked. "With bloody fangs, our enemies will tremble," he recited.

With that, the Thunderer finally released his iron hold around the Jaguar's shoulders and halted as the Jaguar proceeded further into the docks.

He couldn't help but seethe inside, though. Now, he wasn't sure quite how he was going to reach the mainland. It seemed he'd have to improvise and wait for an opportunity. Unfortunately, it seemed that his mission, which had at first seemed like it would take months at most, might now take years.

'Yet another benefit for the Thunderer...' the Jaguar thought with dismay. But his resolve was unshaken. He'd find the Raptor even if it took a century. A Prince of the blood was too valuable to all of Kataigida to leave in the hands of barbarians.