

## Storm King 821

### Chapter 821: Tests of the Needle

Leon sighed as he waited for Anzu to return from flying around the Border Mountains. The griffin was taking his time, and as far as Leon was concerned, he could take all the time he needed to explore the domain of his kin. So, as he waited, Leon cast himself down into his soul realm. After all, he had a new Universe Fragment, and while he felt like he was going to have to wait until he got home and put it into Nestor's containment unit to get any hard data on the Iron Needle, since the Thunderbird had mastered it first and held it the longest out of anyone—as far as he knew, anyway—then she ought to have more than a few insights to bestow as to the nature of its power.

So, as he closed his physical eyes where he was sitting on one of the hexagonal pillars outside of Rakos' cave-palace, he awoke on his throne in his Mind Palace. Once there, he found the Thunderbird in human form staring lovingly at the Iron Needle while Xaphan watched from a distance. However, after a moment's inspection, he realized that the Thunderbird was doing something else, as she was emitting just a little bit of magic that surrounded the Needle.

"What's going on?" Leon asked, a hint of concern in his tone as he hopped down from his throne and went to the table that the Needle hovered over.

"It's been so long since I last saw it..." the Thunderbird whispered in awe, her eyes gleaming as they remained locked upon the Iron Needle, only straying away a moment later as Leon moved around to the other side of the table. "I need to make sure it's all right. Much can change in eighty-thousand years, and the will of Universe Fragments aren't immune to the ravages of time."

"Does that mean... it may have weakened?"

"No, they don't weaken in that sense."

Leon grinned thinly and asked, "Then are you saying that your insistence that the Iron Needle would only accept one of your blood may have been wrong?"

"I'll admit that that was certainty born of experience with the Iron Needle, but there was always a chance that I could've been wrong..." the Thunderbird smiled and took a step back away from the Needle, her magic withdrawing as she did. "But, as always, I wasn't wrong. The Needle still responds to my power, as it always has. It's still yours, of course, but the Iron Needle will always have a connection to those who bear my power, for my power is as much born of it as it is of me."

Leon's bitter grin softened, and he turned his attention back to the Needle before calling over his shoulder, "How are you doing, demon? What do you make of all this?"

"Tis a curious thing," Xaphan haughtily responded. "A Universe Fragment is a unique existence, and even though it's of lightning rather than fire, I'll admit that I would've loved to possess such a thing back in my prime. As I am now, that thing would likely destroy with a single touch, so do be a good little human and keep it over there."

Leon chuckled. "I'll see what I can do, Xaphan."

For a moment, Leon went silent and trained his magic senses upon the Iron Needle. It was an artifact of unfathomable power, but in truth, that wasn't particularly obvious. It had been more obvious before he'd claimed it, but now that it was here, resting in his soul realm, submitting to his will and his power, the thing seemed quiet and docile. Leon could feel it emitting power and feeding his soul realm, but there was barely even a hint of that power escaping the Iron Needle on inspection.

"Curious..." he murmured.

"Indeed they are," the Thunderbird said, drawing his attention. "Universe Fragments, I mean. Most laws of magic determine how magic interacts and is used by humans and those of human intelligence. Universe Fragments are not conscious, they are not sapient, but the amount of power they contain can often seem to exceed, bend, or even outright ignore or make up laws of magic that only apply to them. It's the biggest reason why they're called 'Universe Fragments'."

Leon frowned lightly as he regarded the Iron Needle before him. He didn't directly address what the Thunderbird just said, but it did bring a question to the fore of his mind.

"Ancestor, could I ask you a personal question?"

"Ask whatever you wish, though I'll not answer if I don't wish to."

"Fair enough. Could you... do you remember what the Iron Needle... *how* the Iron Needle tested you? It seems a little strange that such an artifact, lacking in sapience as you claim, could bring such... could test someone as it did."

"What was your test, Leon?" the Thunderbird asked, a soft concern coloring her tone.

Leon's frown deepened, and he told the Thunderbird of how the Iron Needle tested him, of the visions it showed him of Tusk and the power he had over the beast, and of the Great Black Dragon and his staunch refusal to acknowledge him.

"Oh, my boy," the Thunderbird said as she crossed over to Leon's side of the table and took him into a motherly embrace. Leon was taller and larger than she was in human form, but that hardly mattered, as he melted into her arms as if she truly were his mother, and he a small child who'd just told her of a nightmare. "I think I'll take this as an encouraging sign," she said as Xaphan snickered lightly from where he stood.

"I'd take it... as grave insult!" Xaphan sputtered between bouts of laughter.

The Thunderbird glared in his direction, and with a single expression of power, the demon went flying back hundreds of feet, sailing clear over the palisade demarcating the end of Leon's Mind Palace and the beginning of the rest of his soul realm.

"Now, let's get a few things straight," the Thunderbird said as she loosened her hold on Leon just enough to turn his face towards her and make eye contact, "the Iron Needle isn't sapient, though it has a will of its own. It can be a bit hard to understand given just important our personalities and self-awareness are to beings like us. That means a great many things, but the most relevant right now is that the Iron Needle doesn't 'test' us in a direct way. It isn't a mythical god, throwing us into some ironic torture to see how we react, it's a Universe Fragment that only submits to those it chooses to."

"I'm not sure I'm entirely following..." Leon said.

"Then let me make it clear: those visions both were and weren't the Iron Needle's test. It *was* in the sense that the Iron Needle caused these visions, but it *wasn't* in the sense that the visions themselves were pulled from your own head. They weren't put there by the Iron Needle, they were already there in your mind, just waiting for something like the Iron Needle to pull them out. The Iron Needle didn't read your mind and throw you against some vision of its own making; instead, it sought to test you by forcing you to conjure your own nightmare and contending against it. The Iron Needle wasn't trying to test you or teach you or anything else by giving you those visions, it was throwing you against the fears conjured by your mind and seeing if you would still rise to claim its power."

"So... huh... I think I see what you're saying..."

"I'm a little put out that I wasn't there," the Thunderbird said in a mock-admonishing tone, "but I'll take it as a compliment that you trust me and are secure in our relationship. If I had to guess—and even as old as I am, the mysteries of the human mind can still prove themselves beyond me—I'd say that you were struggling with your approach to this expedition and that you were wracked with some sense of inadequacy brought on by the Great Black Dragon's stubborn refusal to acknowledge you, even though you've claimed his power. Even though it's been long enough that he can't have missed that fact."

Leon scowled and pulled back from the Thunderbird a bit, but he didn't argue her points. He was still kicking himself for his lack of civility when it came to Tusk, assuming he could just break into its home and loot the Iron Needle like some barbarian after a shiny trinket, and the Great Black Dragon's attitude still irked him to no end, though he wouldn't go so far as to say he was feeling any sense of inadequacy...

*'Why should I care about that bastard, obsessing as he is over some ill-defined measure of worth? What I have from him I've had to take for myself, thanks to his attempts to keep me from the power in my own damn blood!'*

Leon felt himself getting heated, so he forced himself to relax and breathe. When he focused on the Thunderbird again, he found her watching him with a knowing look on her face.

With a groan of frustration that wouldn't have been out of place coming from a teenager, Leon pulled away from her and scowled. When he turned back to her, instead of speaking further on what she'd said, he asked, "How were you tested, then?"

"In much the same way you were," she answered, not a shred of concern to be found. "The Iron Needle induced an empty nightmare, and it was my mind that filled it. Such terrors as dying young, before I could have a chance to have children, and a deep feeling of weakness and intense dysmorphia from turning into and out of human form—I still wasn't fully in control of it, and I could go to sleep in my proper form, and aware in human form, or vice-versa in those days. I have long since gotten over these things, but at the time, they were responsible for a large amount of stress, weighing quite heavily upon my mind."

Leon nodded, relating to at least her concerns over her family and legacy, even if her body dysmorphia was something he could only understand on an intellectual level, having only ever transformed involuntarily once before and having little memory of it.

But he wanted children, that much he knew. Elise wanted them, too, and Maia's ravenous desires went without saying. Valeria, he was a little less sure about, but he thought she did as well. Finding the right time, when he wouldn't have to worry about them overmuch, and when he wouldn't have to leave them behind when he left Aeterna, was his primary concern.

*'Or maybe I'm just delaying it,'* Leon thought with some amount of fear. While having kids was something he wanted to eventually get around to, the prospect of actually *raising* young ones that would call him father was rather terrifying.

"I'm happy to hear, Leon, that your visions were at least a little higher in caliber than mine," the Thunderbird said. When Leon gave her a questioning look, she smiled and continued with a didactic tone, "My visions pertained almost entirely to me. How my fears related to me. My own legacy. They were the primal fears of an animal, before I'd learned how to comport myself in civilization. I've since learned that there are higher things to strive for, greater ideals than simple reproduction and my own perception of self. That you're occupied with these things enough for them to be brought out by the Iron Needle's power, at least in part, is encouraging. You may not consider yourself ready to take on the mantle of the Clan's legacy, but that you reflect upon your mistakes is a credit to you."

Leon grimaced and averted his gaze. "I think you're overthinking it, honestly. A little guilt shouldn't be taken so seriously. And your concerns were hardly only selfish. It is the first and most important thing that any sovereign can do, isn't it? To ensure that power is transferred peacefully and smoothly upon their death or retirement or whatever. Your thoughts of children who would inherit your powers were your biggest responsibility as a godlike figure, and as one of the most powerful beings in the history of our universe. And I think it would be confusing as any hell for anyone's body to revolt against them like yours was. I know Red mentioned feeling something similar, how confused and frightened she was in her transformations, and how she'd rejected it at first. And that's not even getting into those that may accept their new power to transform into a human, but fail to properly integrate into human society.

"Better that your concerns were of children and your own body, rather than something direr or more malevolent."

"Flatterer," the Thunderbird said, though she preened before him as he spoke.

"I but return honeyed words," Leon replied with an ironic smile, puffing out his chest dramatically and holding up his arm in a parody of the military salutes he'd seen used by those in the Ilian army.

"Bah, how about we stop stroking each other's ego, then, and get down to business?" the Thunderbird growled, though the smile she wore didn't dim even a little. "It's going to take some time for you to learn to properly wield the Iron Needle, so we ought to get started right now."

"I certainly think I'll need the help," Leon said. "After taking it, it flooded me with so much power that I almost felt I would explode."

"It *is* a Universe Fragment—an artifact with such power that it was considered on par with a sizable fraction of the universe itself. Of course, it's going to be far more power than a single ninth-tier mage can possibly hope to wield. It takes a god to wield such a thing properly, which is why we must hurry to get you to that level."

"I noticed earlier that it seemed to return to your old sword. Does it remember where it used to sit?"

"I'm sure it does, and as it bows to my bloodline, it doesn't surprise me at all that my old friend wants to go home." The Thunderbird's attention had now fully returned to the Iron Needle, and Leon noticed the family sword flying over, almost on its own accord. However, when the Thunderbird held out a hand on its appearance, he knew that that wasn't the case.

The sword, made from the Thunderbird's blood, rocketed into her hand and seemed to almost quiver in joy, a reaction that Leon didn't think he could ever remember it giving upon being grasped by him. For just a moment, he felt jealousy flaring up within him, but it was easily tamped down. The sword was, after all, the Thunderbird's more than his, even if he was quite attached to it.

"You want to go back in, don't you?" the Thunderbird practically cooed as she held out the weapon's handle, and the Iron Needle sparked with red, purple, and blue lightning, and shook like it could barely stop itself from flying at the sword. "It pleases me to know that you remember me so fondly, but now isn't the time." The Thunderbird sounded quite disappointed, and Leon was a little shocked to see the Iron Needle settle down in response.

"For something that supposedly isn't sapient, it's not doing a good job of convincing me it isn't," Leon whispered.

"Such is the way of Universe Fragments," the Thunderbird replied. "They're intelligent, but not sapient—not in the way you and I are."

Leon shrugged and turned his attention back to the matter at hand. "So, how do I wield this thing without killing myself from magic overload?"

"That's the thing: you don't," the Thunderbird cheekily replied. "At least, not yet. Not soon. It's better if you don't even touch the Iron Needle any more than you have to before you've achieved Apotheosis."

"That's... discouraging," Leon responded dejectedly.

"Indeed, but remember that I'm only talking about *touching* it. About *wielding* it. This is a *Universe Fragment*, not a sharp piece of metal you stick into something to make it explode in lightning. There's a reason I embedded it into my sword rather than wielding it raw and unfettered. Its power needs to be contained and channeled, tamed and brought to heel."

"Then why not put it back into the sword? If that's already its container..."

"Because you're *ninth-tier*, boy. You're too smart to keep rephrasing this question: don't even think about trying to use it in battle unless you're post-Apotheosis, or your situation has deteriorated past the point of salvation. Improperly wielded, this thing could destroy this entire plane. If you wanted to, you could probably even amplify it enough to destroy the entire Divine Graveyard. But restricting its power to something that you can *use* without destroying everything that you know and love is another matter.

"So, Leon, what do you think you need to do?"

Leon went quiet for a moment as he surveyed the Iron Needle and then glanced at the sword of his Clan, the sword forged from Adamant created with the Thunderbird's own blood, the sword wielded by Jason Keraunos and, as far as he knew, every Thunder King and Raime Archduke that reigned in the Bull Kingdom.

The sword that had responded to the Thunderbird so much more joyously than it ever had for him. It had come when he'd lost it, sure, but if he were to try that now when the Thunderbird had it in her hand, he already knew which one the weapon would side with. Hells, he remembered when the Thunderbird first told him of Adamant and filled him in on the history of the blade, and had ordered him to attack her with it: the blade had simply refused to even come close to touching her flesh. The Adamant blade made of her blood couldn't be used to harm her, as it was, in effect, an extension of her own body, and responded to her will.

Since he bore the Thunderbird's power, that made it almost like an extension of his body, too, but not quite to the same degree. At this realization, his heart plummeted into his feet. He was quite attached to the sword, having used it for more than half his life at this point, and having seen his father wield it for all his remaining years. It was his family's ancestral weapon, even if it was but a simple steel blade and unadorned handle—at first glance, little more than a well-made, but unremarkable longsword that any blacksmith with skill could churn out half-asleep.

"I... need a sword of my own," Leon whispered, hating every syllable that he uttered. To give up the weapon of his Clan, even for something all his own was... disquieting.

"Yes, you do," the Thunderbird said. "There are many other ways you can use the Iron Needle, but if you ever want to use it in battle, then you have to make your own weapon. And before that can happen, you need to learn how to make Adamant. *Proper* Adamant, not that imitation stuff that you made your armor out of.

"Now, your skills in blacksmithing are undoubtedly greater than mine already, but I can still teach you this. Leon, it's time for you to learn how to sky forge Adamant, and finally your own weapon. And with it in hand, you'll be able to use the Iron Needle in battle, if you have need for such power."

## **Chapter 822: The New Workshop**

Leon's family, retinue, and much of his household were there to greet him and Anzu upon their return to the villa. Elise, Maia, and Valeria all gave them both plenty of attention, and Alix and Alcander all but demanded a celebratory party for their success. However, Leon wasn't that keen on holding the party, especially since the Lord Protector and the Grand Druid were still staying in his home. Fortunately, they were out on some kind of official business in Occulara, leaving Leon and Anzu to return in relative peace, but Leon fully expected they'd be paying him a visit before the day was up.

For the time being, though, Leon and Anzu contented themselves with some home-cooked food and some time spent with everyone else. During the mid-afternoon meal, they regaled everyone with their tales of the Northern Vales, with Anzu especially taking pride in describing his triumphs over hordes of ice wraiths, producing the ice wraith cores he'd managed to seize over the past couple months.

Leon, however, was a little more taciturn. He had no real qualms about telling his people what had happened, but there was one person made conspicuous by his absence—after all, even his less socially-adept retainers had come to greet him, such as Tikos, Helen, Maia, and Red, but of everyone else, Nestor was the only one who didn't show up.

Leon wasn't quite sure what to make of that since Nestor was just as invested in his rebuilding of the Clan as he was. Retrieving the Iron Needle was something of paramount importance, so Leon figured

Nestor would've been at the front—or as close to it as Leon's ladies would allow—of the line to hear how Leon had fared.

As it was, while Anzu went off to sleep in his own bed following the meal, Leon made his way down to his workshop, accompanied by Elise, Maia, and Valeria. The rest of his people all scattered to see to their own business, though not before getting some tentative agreement from Leon to consider the potential of maybe, *possibly*, weighing the merits of contemplating some kind of party to celebrate his return.

It would have to be small, Leon figured, if he decided upon it. *'Can't have the Empires knowing what it is I now have. Probably wouldn't survive that particular storm of greed...'*

As he and Anzu had flown in, Leon had noticed quite a few changes to his workshop. Most of the building, once made entirely of beautiful, polished white stone, was now coated in some kind of glossy black stone not unlike what the Iron Needle had created in its crater from the constant lightning it emitted. Even the roof tiles had been swapped out for what looked like polished obsidian.

Other than that, Leon could sense a profound change in the way that magic flowed around his villa. One of the first enchantments he'd made sure to set up in the place upon moving in so many years ago sucked in magic power from the environment to make more heavily saturate his villa in it. As a result, the air in his estate was generally about three or four times as dense with magic power as the environment around it.

Given the sheer amount of power present in the environment around the great central sea and the size of Leon's estate, this wasn't particularly noticeable, and thankfully not illegal, but since Leon had been eighth-tier at the time, and most of his people had been stronger than fourth-tier, such an enchantment wasn't particularly important to their magical journeys.

What it did, however, was heavily subsidize the magic power cost that the rest of his enchantment scheme demanded, lightening the power load on the huge crystal that Leon used to power his villa's wards. He guessed that this one enchantment likely bought him thirty or forty percent of his estate's power requirements just by itself.

Now, however, it seemed like Nestor had reinforced that particular enchantment, raising the amount powered. By how much, Leon wasn't sure, especially since he was certain that Nestor would've added quite a few other enchantments that would drink power like a man dying of dehydration finally finding water.

It was telling, though, that Leon wasn't able to sense too much of Nestor's alterations. They were subtle and hidden—even moreso than Leon's enchantments had been before. That in mind, though, the black stone that his workshop had been coated with was hardly subtle.

"What is all this?" Leon asked Valeria as their group approached.

"He wouldn't tell me," Valeria growled, anger momentarily crossing her otherwise stoic face. "I've been trying to keep up with the changes he's been making, but..." Her success, or lack thereof, was evident enough in her frustration. Fortunately, Elise had something to add.

“Nestor’s been requesting quite a bit of material in excess of what he asked for before,” she explained. “The stone he used for the workshop was quite expensive, but not... *excessively* so. Some of the rest of the raw materials he requested were, while not *expensive*, still quite bulky, and those labor golems have been hard at work making noise at all hours for weeks, now.”

“We haven’t been allowed inside in a few weeks,” Valeria said venomously as they reached the workshop’s front door.

“He’s been denying you access?” Leon asked, surprised.

“He’s... been insistent that we stay out of his hair,” Valeria clarified. “Not exactly ‘banned’ from the workshop, but *discouraged* from coming inside. We decided to wait for you before trying to force our way in and seeing what was what.”

[I was looking forward to doing just that,] Maia drily stated. [I will miss having the excuse to remind that man that he’s dead. I shall have to find something else to torture him with.]

“Were you really torturing him like that?” Leon asked.

Maia shrugged, but Leon caught the ghost of a smile playing at her lips.

“Thanks, everyone,” he said. “I’ll try and reign him in, then. I’m not thrilled about the aesthetic changes, but if I know him, then there’s a go—there’s *likely* a good reason for what he’s been doing.”

“Crack his skull for me, if you would,” Valeria said as she smiled at him.

“And for me,” Elise said as she kissed him on the cheek.

Maia didn’t say anything, but Leon could feel her agreement with the sentiment as she imitated Elise. With that, Elise took the other two ladies’ arms and steered them back toward the main villa, though not before throwing Leon one last intense look that promised great things would come later, if he wasn’t too preoccupied with Nestor.

Leon smiled back, letting his hunger for his lovers show itself on his face for just long enough for all three to smile back in anticipation, and with varying levels of embarrassment.

“By the way!” Elise called back over her shoulder. “He has his cat!”

Leon’s eyebrows shot up, and he quickly entered the workshop. Fortunately, the security wards he’d crafted were still there, unmodified, so he had no trouble entering even though it was locked. Immediately, he realized that his workshop had been completely changed.

The most obvious change was that almost all of his old tools were gone, replaced with shiny new ones that looked sleeker, sturdier, and shinier. Most of all, they took up less space, which was good because there was now less space to go around, what with the massive number of new *things* that had completely taken over one-quarter of his workshop. As far as he could tell, they were more advanced tools for golem assembly, though since there weren’t any frames under construction, it was hard for him to tell for sure. Next to these tools, desks, and stations were the two labor golems that he’d left with Nestor, neither looking active.



As far as he could tell, his blacksmithing apparatus was still intact, as was his enchanting kit, but he'd have to reacquaint himself with all the new tools. They certainly looked good, all shiny and polished and clean, but appearances could be deceiving, and by Nestor's admission, he didn't know that much about blacksmithing, so Leon wasn't sure how good the new tools that were here now would fare.

In another corner, Leon noticed a large animal cage, a roughly-used scratching post almost twice as tall as he was, several large stuffed and rope toys, and a big cat about the size and shape of a tiger, but with claws as black as night and a coat the color of bright tropical wood, striped heavily with oranges and reds.

Most eye-catching of all, however, was a rune made of light hovering in the very center of the workshop, pulsing with collected power, the power it had gathered being channeled into the workshop's enchantments with every pulse. Leon recognized it as the same rune that Nestor had used to steal all of the power in his soul realm during his brief attempt to possess his body.

"What have you *done* to this place?" Leon called out, his outrage only about half-serious.

Nestor poked his head out from behind a shelf stacked with paper and ink, his golem frame looking different compared to when Leon had seen it last—the man had obviously done more than just upgrade the workshop but had apparently taken to upgrading his chassis as well.

First of all, his featureless head was gone, replaced with one that had actual eyes: a pair of sapphires burning blue with arcane light set into the face of his metallic head. The rest of his frame had been completely plated in armor, leaving the rest of its internal components unable to be inspected, though it was about half a foot taller than before, so Leon knew something was up.

"Leon!" Nestor called out. "Welcome back! Did you get the Iron Needle?"

"Yes, but first, what have you *done* to my workshop?" Leon repeated. "My home, my quiet place, you've changed everything!"

"As I said I would," Nestor dismissively replied as he strode out fully from behind the shelf. "I told you that this place needed a complete renovation, and renovate is what I did. You'll find that everything has seen an upgrade from the garbage that you left here, and I'm not even done yet!"

"What's this?" Leon demanded, pointing to the hovering light rune.

"*That's* powering the enchantments in the workshop," Nestor responded, his tone a little condescending as if he thought it beneath him to answer that particular question, or he thought it obvious.

"I leave for just a couple months and find that you've been playing around with ancient runes? Dead man, you have to know how that looks..."

"How does that look?" Nestor asked, his tone challenging Leon to do something about his changes.

Leon just smiled. "A bold move, then. I wouldn't have left you here if I didn't trust you. The fact that you're still here proves me right. But instinctive outrage and condemnation of any and all change aside, I'm going to need a tour. What *have* you done to my workshop?" Leon's final question was much softer than his previous ones, and though Nestor was only made of steel, his posture still relaxed as if he were human, and he pulled Leon into a quick and rather awkward hug.

“Good to see you back, Leon,” Nestor said with some warmth. That warmth was immediately lost when he rigidly added, “The Clan is resting upon your shoulders, and your shoulders alone. I could die and nothing would change. Everyone else here could die, and nothing could change. But you are the last hope of our Clan, and I would hope that you do your duty in the coming years.”

“What are you getting at, dead man?”

“I’m saying have kids. It’s time. And did you get the Iron Needle, or did you return home with your tail tucked between your legs?”

“I’m glad I didn’t miss you,” Leon sarcastically replied. “I will have kids on my own time, thank you very much.”

“Ensuring the continuing of the dynasty is of paramount importance,” Nestor replied, though he didn’t look like he was going to press the issue. “Regardless, let me show you around.”

Leon, still frowning, followed Nestor to a large desk set up near the back of the room.

“This is hardly a substitute for the kind of tools I would’ve had access to, but I think you’ll find these are far superior at measuring and inscribing enchantments than what you’ve been using so far.” Nestor scoffed and added, “You’ve been drawing your enchantments by hand, using *hand tools* for far too long. It’s time to start adding some actual sophistication to your work!”

As Nestor went through each and every one of the tools that he’d added to Leon’s workshop, Leon couldn’t help but stare in wonder at each one they passed. Generally speaking, almost all enchantment work done on Aeterna could only really be done by hand. There were some attempts made to create finer and more precise tools, but they were, more often than not, too fragile to use for higher-tier mages, who needed to use their enhanced strength and speed to make most enchantments within any kind of acceptable timeframe.

But what Nestor had built for Leon were instruments like light projectors that he could use to make incredibly precise measurements, mark off areas that needed certain runic glyphs, and even project perfect grids onto spell paper. Also added were a number of metallic arms and inscribing tools that Leon could utilize through a control console, ensuring that work could be machine-precise, cutting down on physical effort and the number of mistakes he might make. There were even settings Nestor added for the various inscribing tools to automatically write down runes where Leon needed them to be.

What truly caught Leon’s eye, however, was a mirror that Nestor enchanted that could turn into something like a light screen, its surface turning from a reflective surface into one that was opaque black. Then, Leon could use an accompanying tool to automatically inscribe various enchantments onto its surface, allowing him to visualize enchantments without going through the more labor-intensive sketching phase first. It was as simple as selecting the proper rune on the mirror’s control console, using the tool to mark where it needed to be, and it would appear on the mirror’s surface. Then, if any lines needed to be drawn, the mirror could also create them mathematically perfect.

Leon started to practically salivate, the urge to start playing with his new toys already so strong that he’d almost lost sight of the more important things that needed to be addressed.

After showing him around the enchantment area, Nestor walked him over to the blacksmithing area of the workshop. Since Nestor had little knowledge of the art of smithing, most of Leon's tools hadn't been meaningfully changed. However, he did at least refine Leon's furnace and crucibles to be much smaller than they used to be, without losing any functionality.

The second-to-last section of the workshop was the new golem assembler. There weren't any magical machines there that would allow Nestor to mass-produce golems, but he did have all the tools that he needed to build any golems he wanted by hand.

The last and final section of the workshop was the smallest, consisting of only a single large station. It was a large golden tube stretching from the floor to just a few inches shy of the workshop's ceiling. Its diameter was just slightly smaller than Leon's shoulder-width, and all along the tube in various places were glass panels, showing intricate metalwork and complex enchantments running up and down the tube just below the golden surface. In the very center of the tube was a glass panel that had nothing behind it, only an empty container of decent size.

"This is where the Iron Needle can be safely stored and studied," Nestor explained. "Even something as powerful as a Universe Fragment, so long as it's not being consciously used by the one to whom it has submitted itself to destroy the container, won't break through. So complete will its magical isolation be that even if I hadn't completely restructured this entire workshop, those tenth-tier mages who seem to think they live here and constantly sniff about this place won't be able to sense it."

Leon's eyes narrowed. "We'll get back to this and the changes you've made to my workshop in a moment, but the Lord Protector and the Grand Druid have been 'sniffing around' this building?"

"Not in person," Nestor answered, "but the wards pick up their magic senses probing the workshop at least once per day. Them, along with a couple other magical signatures, too."

"How many, precisely?"

"Two."

Leon frowned. "Tenth-tier as well?"

Nestor's golem body nodded.

"Probably the Keeper and Sunlit Emperors, then," Leon speculated, but a moment later he thought of Tusk. "They're not the only tenth-tier beings on this plane, but I think they're a safe assumption."

"What's without doubt, is that you and I are under close scrutiny," Nestor said.

"We knew that already," Leon responded. "If they're not making a big deal out of the workshop's changes, then we won't either. I'm the Chief of Magical Research and Development, we can explain anything away. And they don't need to know."

Despite this, Leon still scowled, not wanting any of the Empires poking their noses into his business, especially not when his business was so sensitive as to include Nestor, golems, the Iron Needle, and, per the Thunderbird's tutoring in the few days it took Leon and Anzu to come back south from the Crater Tribe, sky forging Adamant.

“Let’s get the Iron Needle into the containment unit, then,” Leon said, and Nestor dutifully opened the glass panel. Leon then conjured the Iron Needle and placed it in the empty chamber, after which Nestor not only closed the glass panel but activated a hidden enchantment that caused the panel to completely disappear, making it seem like it wasn’t there at all and keeping the Iron Needle hidden from view. He then showed Leon how to activate and dispel the illusion and how to open the containment unit.

“Now, this thing has to do more than just contain the Iron Needle, right?” Leon asked.

Nestor nodded again. “Within it are almost all the sensors that we might need to study the Iron Needle’s lightning. Well, to a certain extent, the sensors aren’t as sensitive as they could be if I had the resources I had back in our Clan’s glory days at hand, but I’ve done what I could.”

“It’s appreciated, Nestor,” Leon said with genuine warmth. He clapped Nestor on the shoulder and asked, “So, what did you do to the outside of my workshop? That’s, I’m sure, what’s gotten everyone’s attention and why they’re so keen on watching this place and probing its defenses...”

“Right,” Nestor replied.

In short, he explained that he’d fortified the workshop so completely that not even a tenth-tier mage would be able to force their way in. Leon was able to follow most of what Nestor explained, but some of it went over his head a bit. The bottom line, however, was that his workshop was now practically a fortress, and there wouldn’t be any way for anyone to enter it without his express approval—at least

## **Chapter 823: Imperial Appetites**

Adamant. The very word, after his conversation with Nestor, had Leon practically rubbing his hands in greed. The metal was mana-infused steel, in its simplest form at least, and that meant that any power that could flow through one’s blood could also flow through Adamant just as well. It was stronger than enchanted steel and could channel the wielder’s power better as well.

But for the one whose blood it had been forged from, Adamant was unparalleled. Leon’s power would flow through any weapon he made of true Adamant and would respond to him as if it were an extension of his own body. If it were old enough, as with his family’s blade, it might even form some kind of will, some measure of sentience that would keep the weapon with his line and out of the hands of others.

Of course, until he was capable of forging the stuff properly, all he could do was rub his hands together and dream of all the things that might be possible with it. The pseudo-Adamant that his armor was made of wasn’t the real thing, and while it was strong, it wasn’t as strong as it could be, nor would it ever develop any kind of will of its own.

After getting the tour of his new workshop, Leon had sat down with Nestor and had a long chat with him and the Thunderbird, even taking the chance of bringing Nestor back into his soul realm so that they could speak without going through him—letting him out again after the conversation was over, for obvious reasons. It was clear enough that, on his own, Leon wasn’t yet capable of producing Adamant in the way that the Thunderbird knew of, and Nestor couldn’t help with that in any real way.

Sky forging was the way that true Adamant was forged, as far as the Thunderbird knew. Post-Apotheosis mages from other Elemental Kingdoms in the Nexus knew of other ways of creating Adamant, but those

were not known to either her or Nestor. And to properly sky forge, Leon needed to be at least post-Apotheosis, and Leon wasn't even close to brushing against that boundary yet.

However, Leon had the Iron Needle, and he had thunder wood, two sources of near-limitless lightning magic. If used right, Leon could supplement his own power with that of the Iron Needle at least, and possibly succeed at creating true Adamant, and from that, create a new sword of his own.

Though he was excited about the possibilities such a forging technique presented, Leon was still incredibly conflicted about forging a new weapon for himself. His family's sword meant more to him than he could describe in words, and replacing it, even with a weapon of his own making—a weapon made from his blood no less—wasn't an easy prospect to face.

As much as he wanted to try sky forging, Leon guessed that he might be putting it off for a little while, until he could work up the nerve to replace his current weapon.

Still, he could hardly contain his excitement as he made his way back to his villa, leaving Nestor to run a battery of tests on the Iron Needle—nothing too invasive, as Leon was sure the Universe Fragment wouldn't take kindly to being subjected to every experiment that Nestor could put it through, but enough to at least try and tease out a few reproducible reactions.

Leon would've been in there with him, learning how to better control the Iron Needle and seeing what he might learn from the object that essentially had complete mastery over lightning magic, but he had other duties to see to—first and foremost, spending time with his family, friends, and Heaven's Eye. He'd been gone almost two months, and he needed to take care of his own business before he could lose himself in his research and development.

So, he first went and found Elise and Maia and spent a couple hours with them. Then, he called his retinue together and, with Valeria at his side, held a short training session meant more to spend time with his retinue than to actually train.

Then, it was off to Heaven's Eye, where he formally relieved Talal of command over his branch of the guild. He spent the next few hours being briefed on all the fascinating and compelling research that had been done in his absence, along with being notified of a few bureaucratic, logistical, and personal issues his project leads had.

Fortunately, Talal was there to help with the organization and paperwork, but Leon still had to make peace between a couple of project leads who'd nearly come to blows over resource allocation while he'd been gone. One of them—the more belligerent one, Leon noted—had been reassigned from nature magic research just a few years before, and had been having attitude problems ever since.

Leon supposed it made some sense, as the project he'd been reassigned to was Tikos' comm lotuses. His skillset wasn't geared toward understanding the lotuses, though as project lead he was more there to ensure that the actual researchers stayed funded and on task. Leon guessed he was still resentful of his transfer, even if it was to a higher position.

So, as 'punishment' for starting a conflict between the comm lotus team and the MALL team, who the comm lotus team lead had accused of embezzling some of the vast resources Leon had been pouring into the project—which Leon knew for a fact was untrue— Leon had him reassigned to something more in line with his skillset: leading the team that would research growing silkgrass outside of the Northern

Vales. It would be a smaller team and one that he could move to a more remote lab out in the countryside where he wouldn't be a problem for anyone else in Occulara.

Finally, he needed to see to the resource problems that were plaguing his ark research team, which had started presenting themselves even before he'd left. Fortunately, their primary problems were with magic power storage, with much of their budget going to large gems that could store the vast amounts of magic power that would be needed to power an ark, as well as to whatever quantities of Titanstone they could get their hands on. With the Iron Needle, Leon knew that he could solve at least the power issues, assuming he could master the Needle—the fulgurite that he'd seen in the Needle's chamber had been more than powerful enough that he felt he could use it in place of other gems for power storage, which would mean breakthroughs in more than just his ark research projects.

He just had to figure it out within the next half year or so, or else he'd have to start making budget cuts to keep at least some of his researchers and engineers working.

With that done and all the other reports he needed in hand, Leon returned to his villa. Night had fallen by then, and he was both unsurprised and somewhat unenthusiastic about finding that both the Lord Protector and the Grand Druid were there, too, apparently waiting for him.

They accosted him almost as soon as he walked into the villa, and before Leon had even taken off his boots, the Lord Protector rushed over to Leon and pulled him into a tight embrace that almost lifted Leon off his feet.

"Welcome back to civilization, Leon!" Anastasios boomed as he squeezed Leon so tightly that Leon thought he heard his ribs creak in protest.

"Don't squeeze too hard," the Grand Druid playfully rebuked, "my dear Cassandra can't marry a corpse..."

Anastasios laughed and let go, and Leon took a moment to regain his composure. Ignoring the Grand Druid's comment, he said, "Glad to see you two here. How about we take this out of my atrium and go somewhere a little more comfortable?"

A minute later, they were in one of Leon's more private sitting rooms, Leon in an armchair across from the two of them sitting quite intimately close to each other on a sofa.

"How was your journey north, Leon?" Anastasios asked. "You never did tell us what it was for, you know..."

Leon smiled and said not a word.

"That's fine, though," the Grand Druid said after a moment. "You claimed private business, so we won't pry."

"... Much," Anastasios responded, but the Grand Druid poked him in the ribs, drawing a cry of surprise from the older man.

"How were things back here?" Leon asked, not interested in just watching the two of them flirt in front of him. "Productive?"

"Yes!" the Grand Druid exclaimed. "I spoke at length with your tree sprite friend. That one's so knowledgeable about nature magic, I feel like we could speak for days and never get tired!"

Leon continued to smile diplomatically, but his eyes slid over to Anastasios.

"Your... *other* than human retainers are quite interesting, themselves," the Lord Protector added. "Your wyvern and river nymph weren't talkative, but I got a few words in. I'd still love to speak with your demon, though; you left before we got a chance to share words."

"Right," Leon responded. "I'll get that set up right away. I think he'll have to meet with one of my researchers soon, we can set something up in a few days."

Anastasios nodded. "Honestly, Leon, the amount of magic that can be learned from nonhumans is staggering, you're quite lucky not only to have a demon, but *three*—"

"*Four*," the Grand Druid corrected, "don't forget about that griffin of his..."

"Right, *four*, *four* nonhuman retainers. And all powerful enough to assume at least mostly-human form, too. Leon, would you allow not just me, but some of my Empire's mages to come here on occasion to seek insight from your retainers?"

"I'm not running a school or some philosophical monastery," Leon replied, a little more edge to his tone than he'd consciously intended. "I value my privacy, you two know that. And I'm grateful for all that you do for me with regards to the Keeper and the... less than friendly people to me and mine that are in your Empires, but..."

"I wouldn't send a constant stream of people," Anastasios assured him. "But the opportunity to speak with nonhumans about the magic that they were born with is a tremendous opportunity. It might not translate to direct power, but the light it could shine into my own people's magical journeys could be invaluable. It might even advance our understanding of the magical elements by significant degrees!"

Leon slowly nodded. Thanks to the Thunderbird's power, he had some affinity with water magic, and he'd practiced it on occasion with Maia. He'd discussed the element not only with her, but with the Thunderbird herself, Valeria, and several other strong water mages in Heaven's Eye. But of all of them, he felt like Maia had been the most helpful when it came to understanding and applying water magic, even above the Thunderbird, though she couldn't always describe it in human terms.

But he also knew that most of his nonhuman retainers weren't particularly social. It would take some doing to get them to agree to speak with a bunch of Imperial pilgrims hoping for a kernel of knowledge or wisdom from the powerful beings living under his roof.

"I'll speak with them," Leon said after some thought. "I promise no more than that. But I will emphasize that while my services are guaranteed—to a reasonable extent—thanks to your support, my people are under no obligation to agree. My responsibilities and agreements are not theirs."

"You are their Lord," Anastasios protested, though his tone and aura both remained light. "If you were to order them to—"

"We will await word on their decision," the Grand Druid interrupted, a look of admonishment sent Anastasios' way. The Lord Protector simply smiled and nodded.

“So we will. I hope that we can all come to equitable arrangements, then. Please be assured that any of our mages that come here for words would come with adequate compensation. Guaranteed by the two of us, of course.”

“Rates will depend on them, and only if they agree,” Leon said, exasperation finding its way into his voice.

Thankfully, the Lord Protector dropped the matter there, and the Grand Druid pivoted.

“That’s all we ask, Leon. Now, are you going to be busy in the next few weeks?”

“I’ve just returned home and have a lot of work to catch up on,” Leon explained, his thoughts turning not only to the reports he had in his soul realm—several of which he was quite interested in reading—but also to the Iron Needle. “My plate’s going to be exceptionally full in the near future. Is there something in your Empire that demands my attention?”

“More like *someone*,” the Grand Druid with a knowing smile.

That smile had Leon thinking of blond hair, red eyes, and a confident smile. It also had him thinking of arrogance, overconfidence, and the crestfallen attitude of one who’d had to be carried off the battlefield despite her considerable power and prestigious title. He was able to maintain his stoic demeanor, but the Grand Druid stared at him as if she knew exactly whose face had flashed through his mind.

“It’s not my granddaughter,” she said, and Leon couldn’t help but feel some disappointment, though he kept it out of his expression. “I was just hoping you could attend a celebration we’re having in Evergold in three weeks. We’re celebrating the turn of the century, and such celebrations are always extravagant affairs. Many people of high station will be there, and I was hoping you would honor our celebration with your presence, and with that of your lovely family.”

“We’ll see,” Leon stated noncommittally. He figured Elise would love to attend, Valeria would be a little more ambivalent, and Maia would only go if both he and Elise agreed.

*‘Would rather say ‘no’, to be honest,’* Leon grumbled internally but knew that an invitation from the Grand Druid wasn’t so easily dismissed.

“Of course, dear,” the Grand Druid replied, infuriating Leon slightly with her attitude. “While you’re there, there is a matter I was hoping you could help my Empire with. More than that, I’m not at liberty to say right now.”

Leon cocked an eyebrow, noting that even Anastasios seemed curious about what the Grand Druid was saying. “My villa is quite secure, it’s fine to speak your mind,” Leon said.

“Indeed it *is* secure,” the Grand Druid said. “And on that note, we ought to discuss the changes that have been made here in the past few weeks. We’ve noticed a strange golem wandering your halls, not speaking with anyone, but making adjustments to your security wards and supervising the renovation of one of your estate’s outer buildings. I would *love* to know what’s going on with all of that...”



She gave Leon a penetrating stare, though her smile remained unwavering. Anastasios, meanwhile, took a moment to tear his gaze away from her and redirect it in Leon's direction, a rather expectant look on his face.

"Is this some legacy of your Clan that you've taken possession of?" he asked. "I ought to offer my congratulations on finding such a treasure. You have aided us both greatly in unlocking arks, golems, and more besides, but I can't help but marvel at such a thing that can upgrade even your formidable defenses..."

Leon's smile thinned, but he didn't rise to any unspoken questions. "I'm a lucky man," he said. "I'm grateful for what I have, and proud of what I've accomplished. Unfortunately, not all of the boons that I've been blessed with can be shared, and this golem is one of them. Its presence here at my villa is nonnegotiable, though I might be able to share a few of its upgrades with you... *if I'm able.*" He stared back at them both, daring them to press the issue. He could tell they were interested in whatever Nestor had done to his wards—Leon was already suspecting that there were ancient runes now incorporated into its ward scheme—but in this case, he wasn't intending to give them anything if they were too arrogant.

Of course, he was more than willing to ask Nestor to kick them just enough information to get them to back off, but the truly valuable stuff was not going to be shared—especially anything that might compromise his defenses.

"Your generosity is truly legendary," the Lord Protector said without a hint of sarcasm. "I hope you're able to extract at least a little bit of information from that golem. Safety measures ought to be shared with us all, don't you think? That we might all live in peace?"

"I love peace," Leon replied with a muted glare. "I wish for nothing but peace. Those who bring war and death to my door are as unwelcome here as they might be at your palaces. I understand that you both love peace as much as I do, and wouldn't want to see any such conflict break out that might threaten it. I'm sure I'll be able to find something to help us all in this noblest of endeavors."

"That's all we ask," the Grand Druid said. "Peace is all of our aims—and its preservation—and we all know that its cost is shared by all who benefit from it. It makes me happy that we're all on the same page."

Leon nodded, exchanging only a few more pleasantries with the Lord Protector and the Grand Druid before they both left him alone in the sitting room. And as soon as they were gone, he let out the ugly expression that he'd been repressing throughout the last half of the meeting. They treated him quite well, on a personal level. The Grand Druid was like a doting grandmother and the Lord Protector like a cool uncle.

But they weren't either of those things, and their relationship, while it could be friendly, was still entirely transactional. As friendly as they could seem, they weren't friends.

He couldn't wait until he'd gained enough power to get them off his back as soon as possible, though he wondered if he could even get to that point. As they'd indicated before, his rapid rise in power had more people nervous than just the Keeper, and with the Iron Needle in hand, his rise would only accelerate.

He was starting to think that he might have to start thinking about actively reaching out to the Sky Devils, for just waiting around for them to contact him was taking longer than he'd like, and if he had to stand against the Empires, he'd need their support.

Assuming they were willing and able to give it...

#### Chapter 824: Dead Arks

"It's good that you're back, Leon," the Director said as Leon joined him and Penelope in his office.

"It's good to be back," Leon replied with a professional smile plastered across his face. He wasn't particularly happy to be in the Director's office, but the man had reached out personally for a meeting. Leon had only been back in Occulara for a day and wanted to focus on his projects, but when the Director himself reaches out, he had to respond positively.

"Leon," Penelope whispered in greeting.

Leon gave her a more genuine smile and head nod. "So," he said, "how have things been in my absence?"

"Fine," the Director replied, his aged features utterly impassive. "Not great, but fine."

"The war in the south hasn't gone anywhere," Penelope added, to Leon's gratitude. Whenever they'd had a meeting like this, Leon had always been more concerned about the Sky Devils than just about anything else, so it didn't surprise him at all that she picked up on what he was more specifically asking about.

"The Imperials," the Director said, his emotions still subdued, but letting just enough spite into his voice for Leon to pick up on it, "are still keeping the Sky Devils contained within the Sword. The shipyards have managed to recoup most of their losses five years ago, but now the Sky Devils are dug into the Sword, and dislodging them has proven a task beyond even Imperial power."

Leon smiled. The situation wasn't ideal, but as far as things went, it wasn't bad, either. Sure, fewer Sky Devils meant a smaller potential force he might be able to recruit, but since they weren't yet in his corner, nothing could be counted on.

Still, the fact that the Imperials were making so little headway against the Sky Devils was a bit surprising.

"Do we know why the Sky Devils are giving them so much trouble?" Leon asked. "I mean, I'm sure the tactical and strategic situations are terrible, but I would've figured all four Empires with their focus—"

"Hardly all four Empires," the Director interjected. "The only one that has committed a substantial force has been the Sunlit Empire, and even then, they've been conservative with their troop deployments. Only assaults with overwhelming force have been approved so far, and even then, they've not made much progress. The Sunlit Emperor himself hasn't yet personally involved himself in the war, either, further restricting their ability to act."

Leon lightly scowled. There were battles that, in his opinion, the Sunlit Emperor could've tipped in Imperial favor if he'd only been there. It wasn't like the Sky Devils had anything or anyone that could single-handedly stop him, though they could with the proper application of combined arms. But their

problem was that if the Sunlit Empire were to manage to tie up those other resources or launch a large enough attack, they'd have no answer for the Emperor himself.

So, and not for the first time, Leon wondered just what the Sunlit Emperor was up to that was so important that the war in the south was taking up his time.

"He's still preoccupied with whatever 'personal project' he's been working on, I suppose?" he asked.

"As far as we can tell," Penelope replied. "And so far, we've been unable to figure out just what exactly he's trying to do... which is disturbing. I wouldn't have thought the Imperials could hide anything from us so completely, and yet here we are."

"Case in point," the Director said, "Leon, the Grand Druid made mention of a celebration in Evergold in the near future when she last visited your villa, did she not?"

"Yes," Leon said, cocking his eyebrow as he did. He didn't think the Director was trying to actively spy on him, so he wondered just how he knew that, though he left the question remain unasked.

Fortunately, the Director seemed in a mood to explain. "I thought so," he said with a sagely nod of his head. "Evergold recently uncovered something close to the border with Ilion. Something that took our people a long time to identify given just how secret they were keeping the site." The Director nodded to Penelope, who took over the explanation.

"They found an ark, Leon," she bluntly stated.

Leon blinked in surprise, both at the value of such a thing, and also that it was apparently such a secret. Since entering into the bargain with the Grand Druid and Lord Protector for his help in activating some of his Clan's old legacies in return for protection and support against anyone like the Keeper, he'd helped both Empires to reactivate a couple arks.

'Though those were a bit on the small, old, and decrepit side,' he silently noted.

"What more do we know about it?" he asked.

"It's big and powerful," Penelope said. "Likely heavily armed, though our contacts haven't been able to confirm this. We believe it's probably a war ark that went down during the chaos following your Clan's fall from grace."

Leon lightly scowled.

"They'll want you to try and activate it," the Director growled. "It must be said that a find of this magnitude is unprecedented. War arks are nothing new, relatively speaking, but one hasn't been found intact in more than ten thousand years. Those war arks that have been found haven't been operable, and only serve as inspiration and research material."

"Well..." Penelope murmured as she sent a pointed glance the Director's way.

Leon, picking up on the obvious look, asked, "You have war arks of my Clan?"

The Director didn't immediately answer, but when he did, he stated, "I'm still nervous about showing you the arks we have. So long as this war in the south goes on, there will be no small amount of scrutiny

paid to you, Leon. But with this new situation in the north, it seems we have little choice. Before you go to the Sacred Golden Empire, I would show you what we have, Leon. You should be prepared to inspect whatever it is that Evergold has found."

"... And because they're arks of my Clan," Leon said. "You weren't going to forget that part, were you? Many would confirm my claim to those arks, remember..."

The Director gave him a withering glare but didn't rise to his challenge, despite Leon's provocative smile.

"We'd like to bring you to our arks now," Penelope quickly said, all but throwing herself between Leon and her father. "Let's not get too carried away before then."

Leon's smile softened, and he said to the Director. "Just a little upset that it's taken this long to see those arks. Was just making a joke."

The Director grunted, then turned toward one of his office's walls and magically interacted with it. An otherwise imperceptible door slid open, and without another word, the Director strolled right into it.

"The arks are this way," Penelope said. "Or at least, our ride to the arks is this way."

"We're going just like that?" Leon exclaimed as he fell in beside her. "I would've preferred to do this tomorrow or something. Would've come more prepared..."

'Like with Nestor...' he thought. If it were analyzing any enchantments or pieces of magical engineering his Clan left behind, the dead man had much greater skill than Leon thought he did. He was excited as hell to see these arks, but without Nestor, he worried his own skills wouldn't be adequate to know what he was looking at.

"Better to do this quickly," Penelope explained. "People know that you were here, even if these meetings aren't supposed to be public knowledge. If you left, only to return soon after—breaking with our established patterns—only for all of us to then disappear for a long while, then that might attract a few buzzards, flying too far above us to do anything about."

Leon nodded in understanding. "How long will this take, then?"

"That'll be up to you, I think, but we probably shouldn't go beyond just a few hours. We have enough eyes trying to track us."

Leon nodded again, agreeing with her at least in principle.

Together, they followed the Director through several well-appointed private hallways, and eventually to the Director's personal hangar. Once inside, Leon gawked a bit at the sleek, surprisingly small ark waiting for them before boarding. He watched as closely as he could as the enchantments within it fired up and the magic engines propelled them, invisibly, out of the hanger and out into the skies above Occulara.

So intent was he on inspecting the interior of the ark that he barely even noticed they'd reached their destination until the ark touched down and was lowered down into the massive underground arkyard that housed all of the arks that the Director was concealing from the world.

"Finally back with us, are you?" Penelope quipped as Leon returned to reality.

“Was it that obvious?” Leon asked.

“Your eyes were practically hanging out of their sockets the entire way here,” she replied.

Leon smirked and shrugged, but as soon as the ark’s doors opened and he saw what was waiting for them, his expression immediately twisted into one of abject awe.

The arktop they’d landed on was at one end of a massive chamber, and several buildings stood at the other. There were three more arktops on each side of the chamber in between Leon’s group and the buildings, each with an ark resting upon it. These arks were all bigger than the Director’s, and each one was seemingly bigger than the last.

The crown jewel amongst this collection, however, was the largest of the arks, a true behemoth of a thing that looked large enough to demand a permanent crew of thousands. Its arktop by itself was almost larger than the other six combined. It was at least two thousand feet long and shaped like a narrow arrowhead. However, the front tip of the ark was curved downward, and with its enormous landing gear, the entire ark had a rather avian appearance that appealed to the vanity within Leon that he typically tried to ignore.

Leon stared at each of these arks, but his eyes almost always return to the big one. Even with its rather subdued aesthetics, it was still the most stylish of all the arks, all of which seemed to eschew aesthetics in their entirety in favor, Leon hoped, of a complete focus on functionality.

“This is...” he whispered, unable to finish the utterance.

“I had the same reaction when I first saw all of this,” Penelope observed with amusement. “Take your time, Leon, but the faster we get this quick inspection over with, the better.”

“Right, right,” Leon responded as he forced himself out of this reverie. “Let’s go see what we can see. How much of these arks has Heaven’s Eye been able to access?”

“As you may be able to see,” the Director intoned, “we don’t have that many people working here. Even for arks as large as these are, we can’t risk having a large staff and having someone leak their locations. Every person we hire to work here is one more possible point of failure, another potential link for the Empires to discover. And should they discover this place, then they’ll try and seize it. This many ancient arks in our hands present a massive problem for Imperial power, not a single one would allow us to keep it.”

“Then they won’t find out about it,” Leon declared.

“Let’s hope you’re right. But the faster we get these arks operational, the better.”

“Then let’s get back to my question: how many systems of these arks have you managed to turn on? I get that you’re short-staffed, but you had the aid of vampires and more than enough years to get somewhere...”

“For the most part, we haven’t gotten far,” the Director explained as they stepped down from the arktop they’d landed on and began walking toward the first of the ancient arks. “We’ve managed to access most areas within each ark, but other than their life-support systems and a few other noncritical systems, we haven’t been able to get far. These things are secured with powerful blood magic, and even

though it isn't much, we only managed to get as far as we did thanks to the expertise in blood magic that the vampires gave us."

Leon frowned but refrained from saying anything, even though he had a lot he could say about it. He'd just be rehashing old arguments at this point, and with so many of the high-level vampires on the plane dead, there wasn't much point to it.

"So we're just going to hope that my blood will be enough to get them up and running? A lot of trust you seem to have in my Clan's engineering skills."

"The arks are fully functional," the Director countered. "Or at least, such is our best guess judging by what we've found inside. They're well-preserved machines, and if it wasn't apparent, your Clan knew how to build things to last when such robustness was needed. These were military vehicles, so such robustness was needed."

"Then let's see what we can see..." Leon whispered and approached the first of the arks. It was the smallest, but even that was only relatively; it was still massive, being larger than any contemporary ark he'd seen active on Aeterna so far. It didn't have any obvious weapon emplacements, but that didn't mean much as far as he was concerned.

It was, as most arks were, shaped roughly like an arrowhead, though a bit flatter and broader than most he'd seen. The primary entrance was up a long ramp near the prow, and Leon practically skipped right on up. There were a few Heaven's Eye guards nearby, but he paid them no mind. What was more interesting to him were the thick security doors at the top of the ramp made of highly enchanted steel. Even though the ark was apparently not active and more than eighty-thousand years old, there was still a startling amount of magic power running through the doors. He was a ninth-tier mage, and he didn't think he'd be able to force his way through if he tried.

Fortunately, as soon as he stopped to investigate, an arkyard worker came running forward saying, "I've got the do—"

Before he could finish his statement, a rune made of light flashed over the doors for a moment, Leon felt the slight charge in the air of lightning magic, and then the doors simply swung open, revealing the long corridor behind it. At the same time, the ark seemed to almost come alive as magic power suddenly started flowing through it at much greater volume, and the ark's internal lights powered on.

"Looks like it recognized you," Penelope whispered as she stopped right next to Leon.

"How far have you explored inside?" Leon asked, focused entirely on the task at hand.

"Not far," the Director replied as he waved off the yard worker. "All of the control rooms for the most critical rooms remained shut tightly, no matter how hard we tried to access them."

"Then let me try," Leon said as he strode inside. "Just lead me anywhere you haven't been."

Following the Director's directions, Leon waltzed down the halls, glee filling his heart as doors opened for him to reveal what seemed like barracks, gathering halls, engineering compartments, and several dozen other rooms whose purpose he could only guess at. But finally, they reached the first room that the Director steered them towards.

The door was sealed by a particularly large bulkhead and led into a secured lock chamber. To the right was what was clearly a guard station, while at the other end of the chamber was another thick bulkhead that only opened when the first closed behind them.

The other side was almost underwhelming given this level of security, consisting of a fairly cramped room of only a dozen or so control consoles. The very center of the room had a large circular table with a glass surface that glowed as Leon approached. Above the table's glass appeared a light projection of the entire ark with several areas on the wings highlighted. After taking a look at the other consoles as they lit up, Leon guessed what they were looking at.

"This... is a weapon's station. I think most of the ark's weapons were controlled here. The big ones, at least."

"Then, we'd best not touch anything carelessly," Penelope whispered.

"Especially without knowing what we're doing," Leon replied with some dismay. The opportunity to inspect genuine weapons from his Clan during their heyday was a dream come true, yet he didn't have the time.

Together with Penelope and the Director, he continued to explore the ark, eventually finding the main control room. It was located in the very center of the ark, as far as he could tell, and seemed almost a throne room, if any throne room could be considered such when it was so bereft of decoration.

The room was rectangular, with one large seat for, Leon presumed, the ark's commander, in the back. More than two dozen more consoles were arranged around it, and each console had at least three seats around it. There were no windows, and the walls were simple steel plates, lacking any and all ornamentation. It was a spartan chamber, and one that Leon was rather surprised by, given his Clan's more ostentation tastes, in his experience.

'Though, this is just the smallest of the arks,' he noted.

"This is..." the Director whispered as he took a few steps past Leon to take in the control room, all of its control consoles online and ready, "... incredible..."

Leon agreed though he was loath to admit it aloud. It was going to take a lot of inspection just to figure out what consoles did what and what information they shared, let alone how to operate this smallest ark, but with Leon's help, Heaven's Eye could get started as soon as possible. What was more important was making sure that Leon himself didn't have to be present at all times while this testing took place.

So, after taking in the sights a bit more, Leon, Penelope, and the Director continued their exploration of the ark, finding many more compartments of interest, though little of it was immediately identifiable to Leon. He thought they found some armories, though most were empty save for a few swords and shields. More interesting, though more opaque to him, were the engineering compartments, as the magic engines and all the other machinery that allowed the ark to function were as much mechanical as they were magical, and even the magical parts were so advanced that he could barely understand what he was looking at.

It seemed Nestor was right when he said that ark enchantments were far beyond him, as much as it pained him to admit. For now, though, Leon contented himself with this quick inspection, and soon he

and his companions were back at the foot of the ramp. The ark powered down as soon as he left, unfortunately, which meant that they'd need to figure something out which didn't involve him coming back every time they wanted to turn on the lights.

But before they could do that, they had five more arks to explore...

## Chapter 825: Storm Herald

It took several hours for Leon, Penelope, and the Director to explore most of the remaining arks. For the most part, they simply explored, looking for anything of much value. However, it seemed that either everything of even middling value had been taken, the arks were simply spartan from their construction, or both, for not even basic furniture could be found that wasn't nailed to the floor within them.

Much of the interior spaces that had required Leon's presence to open were complex magical machines that Leon could hardly parse even with close examination. He was an enchanter and a blacksmith, not a magic engineer. He was worried that even Nestor would only know what the machines were, and not how they worked.

That being said, he was sure that the biggest machines near the back of the arks were the engines and power supply, and the smaller constructs along the outer parts of the hull were weapon systems that were too heavily integrated into the arks to have been easily looted—though why they hadn't been subsequently scrapped, he didn't know, though he supposed that question could apply to the arks as a whole, too. He was a little disappointed that he hadn't yet found anything that resembled golems or a golem assembler like what Nestor had built in his workshop, but he supposed such things would've been a little more portable, or at least not been on those arks.

As it was, Leon found himself a little frustrated setting eyes on what were undoubtedly miracles of magic, but not having the skill or experience to recognize or truly appreciate them.

By the time they only had the largest and most ornate of the half dozen arks to inspect, Leon was quietly convinced that at least the first five had been military arks, given their size, armament, and lack of decoration. He kept nearly all of his suspicions and realizations to himself, though, not wanting to declare what they were to Penelope and the Director only for Nestor to completely contradict him later when Leon told the dead man of what had happened today.

So, Leon put those suspicions away for the moment and concentrated on the vaguely avian ark in front of him. The other arks had silhouettes dominated by harsh, straight lines, and a brutal simplicity to their designs that reinforced Leon's assumption that they were military arks, but this one had a much more elegant design, with a silhouette resembling a diving eagle with its landing supports like outstretched talons. Along with the fact that this ark was so much bigger than the others, it was as obvious as it could be that this ark was for someone important. Leon even suspected it was the personal ark of one of his Clan members rather than one of the warriors in the Clan's army or one of their vassals.

As with the other arks, the avian ark had a large ramp leading up into it, but instead of being near the prow as the others were, this one was closer to its center. Leon led the way right up, not hesitating at all even his curiosity built up all kinds of wondrous things that the ark might be full of.

'And not a single one will be in there, most likely,' he cynically thought as he stopped in the shallow chamber at the top of the ramp, thick doors with a bright runic circle glowing at about chest height. It



wasn't a large runic circle being just big enough for Leon to fit his entire hand, but it was eye-catching, and more importantly, Leon recognized it as being nearly identical to the ones that had locked his family's archives below Teira.

"Did you ever get this door open?" Leon asked.

"We've managed to subvert the enchantment on the door a few times," the Director admitted. "We've not gotten much further than some of the adjacent chambers, however. This is the most protected ark we have, and even the interior enchantments are powerful to this day."

Leon was caught between wanting to smile and frown, his lips twisting for a moment before he schooled his expression. It was just another piece of evidence that this ark was for someone important if it was even more heavily protected than the potential military arks.

Leon swiftly reached out and tapped the magic circle, causing it to flash with golden light and shock his finger with a bolt of lightning. He waited for half a second, and then the door swung open so easily and so silently that Leon would've hardly considered them sealed almost continuously for eighty-thousand years.

What greeted him on the other side was an ornate atrium, the floors polished marble, the ceiling enchanted to look like the sky at midday. The walls had the appearance of polished gold, though Leon could just barely see faint engravings upon the surface that he recognized as complex light enchantments.

Sure enough, after a moment, these many thousands of runes glowed for a split second, and then the walls were covered with perfectly rendered murals in a style that he remembered from the few Clan facilities he'd seen over his life. Avian figures surrounded by clouds and lightning, humanoid figures and other animals close to the floor bowing before the Thunderbird's power and majesty. He inspected each mural, but none had any new information.

Still, he was gratified to see the familiar décor, and even moreso to hear the Director murmur, "This never happened before..."

"The murals?" Leon asked.

The Director nodded.

Leon grinned and strode further into the atrium.

It was an empty room, though there were a few fixtures on the floor that Leon guessed might've been for furniture or possibly defensive emplacements. 'A checkpoint, maybe?' he guessed. 'Would make sense for such an important ark to have live security at its doors. Wonder where it all went, or who took all of it. And what was here that was worth taking.'

With those questions unanswered, Leon walked right up to the door on the far side of the chamber, which opened of its own accord. What greeted him on the other side was a palatial entrance chamber with doors around its perimeter, the same polished marble beneath his feet, the same golden walls to his right and left, and the same enchanted ceiling above. The center of the chamber was separated from the rest by a square peristyle of columns, but again, everything else in the chamber had been taken, leaving it bereft of any kind of furniture. Close to the door he'd just walked through were several boxes

and bits of gear that the Director identified as being some gear left behind by those who'd managed to get this far before.

"We've only managed to get to this chamber, and that one," the Director said, pointing to one of the three doors on the right side of the chamber. "Nothing through there but another large, empty chamber, unfortunately."

"Strange," Leon said. "There has to be a magic lift or something around here, I can't imagine too many important rooms were on the lowest floor..."

"If any Thunderbird architecture I know of can be applied," Penelope said as she pointed to the doors at the back of the chamber, "then it's one of those."

"Your guess is as good as mine," Leon said, noting that all of the doors were largely identical, with not even the murals to their sides telling him what was behind them. He wondered if there were people stationed in this chamber before the fall of his Clan specifically to help people find their way around, or if anyone who was of sufficient rank or clearance to get in already knew their way around. At the very least, if what the last few arks had shown him applied to this one as well, then he already knew the most likely places where he might find interesting things: the very center of the ark, the compartments in the back, and possibly those around the outer hull.

With nothing else to go on, Leon started walking across the chamber to the back, but he'd barely taken three steps before he felt a sharp shift in the magic in the air. He froze and summoned his magic, just in case, and the Director and Penelope mirrored his actions. But just a moment later, light gathered in front of Leon, taking the shape of a ball of light similar to how Apati had presented himself after being installed in the research facility's primary control consoles.

Leon frowned at the reminder and his guard raised further.

"He-Hello," the ball of light said, its voice sounding tinny, strained, and utterly emotionless. Its stutter, too, seemed unnatural, almost as if it were correcting an error by repeating itself instead of stumbling over the word. After a couple silent seconds, the ball of light continued, "Wel-Welcome, Prince. Please Pre-Present ID."

Leon frowned even further, and when he glanced back at the Director, the older man shrugged, just as confused as he was. He turned back to the ball of light and inspected it closely, finding not a trace of killing intent, or even an aura, proving it was just a projection of light.

'Really wish Nestor were here,' Leon thought, the thought almost causing him to gag.

"What... are you?" he asked, though he had an idea already—golems were animated and powered by wisps, autonomous, sentient balls of magic power created by a post-Apotheosis mage. From what he knew of the more advanced enchantments of his Clan, many of the bigger enchantments were controlled by wisps, effectively automating them. An ark like this one Leon imagined would have quite a few wisps within it, though any surviving for so long was a surprise.

"Wel-Wel-Welcome, Prince-nce. Please Pre-Present I-ID."

With a shrug of his own, Leon retrieved the platinum card from his soul realm and presented it to the floating ball of light. He felt the magic power emanating from the light ball coalesce around the card for a moment, then dissipate.

“Wel-Welcome, Prince Demetrios,” the ball of light repeated. “All ark sys-systems a-a-a-a—” The light ball continued like this for several seconds, completely unable to finish its sentence. Leon wasn’t sure what to do, though he was certain it was broken in some way. Eventually, the ball went silent.

“Is... everything all right?” Penelope asked.

“Answer: significant damage sustained; please con-con-contact maintenance,” the ball of light replied.

“Take us to the central control room,” Leon commanded. “I’d like to get a better sense of this damage, myself.”

“As y-you comm-comm-command, Your High-Highness,” the wisps replied. It then vanished, though one of the doors in the back of the atrium slid open, revealing a magic lift right where Penelope had guessed one would be.

Leon hurried in, closely followed by his two companions.

“That thing is strange,” Penelope stated as the doors slid closed behind them.

“It can probably still hear us,” Leon replied with a cheeky smile.

Penelope blinked as a look of contrition passed over her face for a moment.

“It probably didn’t take any offense,” Leon whispered. “I don’t think these things are sapient.” The magic lift rose quickly, but Leon still had time to give Penelope a quick rundown of just what wisps were, the Director already knowing and filling in a few blanks that Leon glossed over.

When the doors opened next, the ball of light was back, hovering in the center of another large atrium that had Leon wondering if this was a military ark with all of its heavily-decorated and open interior spaces.

“Th-This way,” the wisp sputtered, and another door to the right opened.

Leon’s group followed the wisp’s direction through golden passageways lit by the enchanted ceiling bathing the halls in ‘natural’ light. Eventually, they found themselves in another large open space with columns ringing off a central area. These columns were enchanted to look like trees poking up into the ceiling’s illusion and spreading their leaves above the golden walls, glowing with their murals.

Around the perimeter of this open space were only three more doors, not including the one Leon’s group entered from, while the ground was pockmarked with dozens of small slots that Leon imagined once held furniture supports. All of that furniture was now gone, of course, leaving the entire chamber empty.

“What was this space?” Leon asked the wisp.

“Answer: Sec-Sec-Secre-Secretary workstations,” the wisp replied. “Bridge j-ju-just through here.” The door on the other side of the chamber slid open, revealing an even larger chamber decorated more lavishly than Leon had seen in any of these arks, yet.

The walls were gold and covered in projected light murals, but that much Leon had expected. The enchanted ceiling was a little different, though, showing the night sky with three bright moons casting the entire control room in silver light.

The commander’s seat was elevated as if on a hill and looked like it had been carved from black crystal that had golden lightning bolts raging beneath its surface. The other control stations were arranged on terraces beneath the throne and numbered more than a hundred. Clearly, this control room was meant to have a staff of at least three or four hundred.

“That’s a lot of consoles,” Penelope observed.

“If this ark is as important as it seems,” the Director said, “then it’s likely some kind of command vessel, responsible not just for raining hellfire down upon its foes, but also to communicate and coordinate all others in its fleet. That would mean many communications officers and sensor operators. I doubt the commander would have much cause to deal with those not on the ‘hill’, and probably not even most of those on the lower terraces.”

Leon found himself agreeing with the Director, and he began walking slowly toward the black crystal throne. It was a massive thing, and positively radiated power—and for good reason, as it was surrounded by six consoles of its own. As Leon approached, he managed to identify two of them as some kind of projectors, but the purposes of the other four he couldn’t yet fathom.

The wisp met him next to the throne, and Leon asked, “Who was this ark’s last commander?” He wanted to know which of his Clan members commanded this vessel, if only so that he could ask Nestor about them when he returned home.

“Answer: His Tempestuous Majesty, the Almighty, the Undefeated Jason Keraunos, High Elder of the Thunderbird Clan and Storm King by right of blood and power,” the wisp fluently replied, not a stutter or audio malfunction to be heard, though Leon tuned it out as soon as it said Jason’s name. He simply stared at the wisp for a moment before his eyes glazed over and he began staring around him in newfound wonder.

“This...” he murmured, “this is the last Storm King’s personal ark?”

As he said that, Penelope and the Director stared at him, similar looks of surprise and awe flickering over their faces with varying strength. The Director mastered his expression quickly, but Penelope needed a few more seconds.

“The conquest of Aeterna was launched from here,” Leon whispered. “It was from here that my ancestor commanded our Clan’s armies and vassals on their conquest...”

His eyes turned back to the crystal throne, and after only a moment of hesitation, all but threw himself into it.

The throne reacted immediately, flashing with lightning and rumbling with thunder, but the golden bolts beneath its surface intensified, turned silver-blue, and then calmed down.

By what he felt when he sat down, Leon got the impression that had he not the Thunderbird's power within him, the throne would've blasted him into ash.

"... Watch what you touch," Leon said to the other two.

"Yes..." the Director replied, evidently having sensed what Leon had, as well. Penelope slowly nodded her agreement.

"Good," Leon said. "Now, let's see what we have here..." He turned his attention to the consoles next to the throne, quickly confirming that the two he'd already identified as projectors were what they seemed to be, though no matter what he tried, they wouldn't project anything.

"What's wrong with these?" Leon asked the wisp.

"Answer: damage to c-comm-commu-communications arrays have left this ark un-una-unable to initiate communications-tions-tions."

"To 'initiate'?" the Director noted. "Can communications still be received?"

"Answer: Affir-Affir-Affirmative," the wisp confirmed.

"I don't think there'll be many people trying to call us," Leon murmured. "What about these other consoles? What were their functions?"

"Answer: top-level systems monitoring-ing," the wisp explained. "Ark sy-systems c-c-c-c-c-c-c—" Leon's eyebrows rose as the wisp continued for another moment before its attempt to speak degenerated into a high-pitched whine that swiftly felt like someone was jamming needles into his ears. Fortunately, it didn't last long as the wisp suddenly winked out after another second or so like a magic lamp someone had turned off.

"Ach, that was unpleasant," Penelope said, having covered her ears with her hands.

"This ark is in dire need of repair," the Director added.

"Let's hope we can find someone capable of making those repairs," Leon said as he managed to get one of the other consoles started up. However, hundreds of runes swept over the console's smooth, glassy surface, and Leon had no idea what any of them did. He could parse them for what they were on the surface—a wind rune here, two lightning runes there, runic lines and modifier runes between them—but he knew that unless he knew what he was doing, then he could do more harm than good by trying to fiddle around with broken magic he didn't fully understand.

With some reluctance, he stood up and said, "It's a little disappointing, but I think I need to leave and come back with some help."

"What kind of help?" the Director asked, a slight smile tugging at his lips as his eyes narrowed.

"Knowledgeable, competent help," Leon replied. "First, though, I'm thinking I'd like to try and find some of this ark's other important compartments. Get a feel for where everything is, you know?"

"I have a concern," the Director said, causing a flash of anger to burn through Leon like a lightning bolt, though he forced himself to remain calm.

“What is it?” he asked.

“As far as anyone monitoring us knows, we’re still in my office in the Hexagon. We’ve been gone for quite a while. If we return, only for you to retrieve someone—especially if that someone has been rather unsubtly working on your estate upgrading your workshop—and come right back to my office, followed by us apparently not coming out again for hours, then there will be suspicions.”

Leon scowled, but he agreed.

“We’ve made progress today,” the Director said. “The other arks have been opened, and our engineers can start pouring over them and doing what needs to be done to get them back in working order. If we’re lucky, they’ll be operable in a decade or two. The same goes for this ark, as well. And there’ll be plenty of opportunities to return later when we won’t raise any suspicions. What say you to that, Leon?”

Leon’s scowl remained, but he whispered, “I suppose I can’t find faults in your logic. I’m not looking forward to having to go to Evergold to deal with their ark situation, though, not without getting a better look at what’s here.”

“It must be done,” the Director said, with Penelope nodding in agreement. “Unfortunately, we’ve likely already spent far too much time in here and must return posthaste. The powers-that-be won’t be so uncouth as to ask you where you’ve been, Leon, but if you disappear like this again in the near future, then questions will be asked of you. Better to return here in a few months, after the Lord Protector and the Grand Druid stop gracing us with their presence.”

Leon sighed, but he made no arguments. Together, the three of them made their way out of the avian ark, though Leon’s heart was already slamming against his ribs with excitement at getting back home to consult with Nestor. Magical engineer he was not, but the scale of magic and engineering on display here had him just about over the moon, and he wanted to know just what else might be in store for him within these arks, and what else might be in the Evergolden ark, as well.

## Chapter 826: Imperial Burdens

“Storm Herald,” Nestor said. “That was the name of my father’s personal ark.”

The man’s voice, spoken with mechanical resonance from his golem body, was colored in deep sadness and nostalgia, and more than a few traces of anger. His sorrowful recollections helped Leon set aside his immediate disdain for the name of the ark. That his Clan had to name everything ‘Storm whatever’, in his mind, reflected both an unfortunate fixation and a lack of creativity.

“Back in its day,” Nestor continued, drawing Leon’s attention back to their conversation, “it was the most powerful ark in all our fleets. When the Storm Herald arrived, victory would always be assured.”

“It’s surprisingly intact,” Leon replied as he stared at the light projection Nestor had made with ancient runes before them, comparing what Nestor was showing him with what he’d seen just a few hours before.

When Leon had returned home and met with the man to speak about the arks in Heaven’s Eye’s possession, Nestor had immediately set about identifying which ones—or at least which classes of arks that the Director had squirreled away. Light projections of all of the more standard ark configurations used by the Thunderbird Clan in its heyday were there with the projection of the Storm Herald, some

even coming close to matching Jason Keraunos' ark in size. Those in the Director's possession were in the light to medium range of ark hulls, and according to Nestor's recollections, none were particularly well-armed compared to the larger hulks that his Clan had built. Light scouts and transports were what the Director had, it seemed, and while certainly armed better than Imperial arks, they weren't even close to the most powerful arks that his Clan used to have.

Leon continued, "It's still damaged, of course, but the superstructure is still intact, as are many of its magic systems. It seems it's just its major systems that need serious attention. Honestly, though, I would've expected significantly more damage after the fall of our Clan, or at least for the Storm King's personal ark to have been taken by whichever power in the aftermath of Jason Keraunos' death was closest."

"Yes," Nestor responded. "Such would be the obvious decision to make by any rational being. But it seems the situation prevented that, and I believe I know why. You see, Leon, the damage you and the ark's surviving wisp have reported have more in line with intentional sabotage than with battle damage."

"Someone sabotaged the Storm King's personal ark?" Leon asked, his tone disbelieving. But after a moment's thought, he thought he saw what Nestor was getting at. "Or are you saying that it was more asset denial? They couldn't destroy it or use it, or possibly thought they could come back to reclaim it, but they couldn't risk it falling into the hands of Aeterna's natives. As clearly happened..."

"Yes," Nestor repeated. "Storm Herald didn't participate in the assault on the Grave Warden, that much is clear. If it had, it would've been destroyed, in all likelihood. But our arks had other jobs, such as securing the Void around the plane, and Storm Herald would've had to be in a position to coordinate our fleets."

"Why not use the most powerful ark we had to attack the Grave Warden, then? You had to have known that he was dangerous and that you'd need all the help you could get..."

Nestor sighed. "The thinking—at least, when I was around, keep in mind that I mostly tended to my own projects rather than deal with my father's objectives—was that we had to secure our position from other potential Anakes or Elemental Kings who might've noticed our actions during the Nexus' last Reconstitution. The rumors of a Universe Fragment that brought us here were not solely heard by us, and any other powerful faction could've tried to follow in our wake and take advantage of the fact that we, while powerful, were far away from our bases of power. The Grave Warden wasn't considered as great a threat as he turned out to be, so our arks were used to secure the vast, empty space around this plane to ensure that we weren't taken by surprise."

Leon felt the urge to disparage that decision, but he held his tongue. It was easy enough for him to see the right decision with the benefit of hindsight, knowing that the Grave Warden was stronger than Jason Keraunos and all the other elders of the Clan.

More than that, though, he didn't yet know the dangers that other Elemental Kings posed. He knew that they were magnitudes more powerful than he was, but political and military situations were always delicate and pulled in dozens of different directions by as many different priorities. An invasion the size of which his Clan launched into Aeterna was immense enough that its failure essentially doomed the entire Clan to a slow death.

He supposed the decision on ark placement made sense for the information and priorities they had at the time. Prudent. Cautious. But both attitudes aimed in the wrong direction.

“And that’s it, isn’t it?” Leon said after pondering these things for several seconds. “Jason Keraunos and the most elite and highly-ranked of our Clan were killed by the Grave Warden. Our armies killed each other as our vassals fought to escape. Enough of our people were roped into the conflict that many of our arks fell in battle or into the hands of Aeterna’s natives, or were otherwise abandoned—while those that could be scuttled, were.”

“That’s as plausible a summation of our time on this plane as any I could come up with, having not seen it with my own eyes,” Nestor remarked.

Leon nodded. “Well, then Storm Herald is a priority, for sure. The sooner we can get it back up in working order, the better.”

“Of course we will!” Nestor emphatically growled. “It’ll be easier said than done, but that ark should be reclaimed at all costs. Depending on the damage, we’ll need a host of rare materials that we’re unlikely to find on this plane. Titanstone, to be sure, along with possibly Lumenite and Aurichalcum. Hopefully not the latter two, as they are magical alloys rather than a refined material, and undoubtedly impossible to acquire on this barren, backwater plane.”

Leon nodded again. “We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it, then. What about these other arks? What can you tell me about them?”

“I was no military man, Leon, so my knowledge of the specific workings of each class of ark won’t be accurate,” Nestor warned. “That being said, I am a genius, so getting them in working order shouldn’t be too hard—and we should get them in working order! The idea that these savages have the audacity to claim my father’s own ark...” Nestor’s voice trailed off a bit, anger seeping into his otherwise fairly calm demeanor. But after a moment, Nestor continued, speaking more calmly. “I can get those arks back in working order fairly quickly. Assuming I have competent staff working under me, and that the arks have only been mothballed and not irreparably sabotaged.”

“Seems like you’re already working on that,” Leon said with a nod toward Nestor’s golem works. The dead man had already mostly disassembled one of the labor golems, using the many arms of his assembly system to keep it upright, all while he was doing something to its internal workings that Leon couldn’t identify.

“Substandard modals,” Nestor said with a huff. “Much in need of an upgrade. Once I’m done with them, they’ll be more than capable of performing the laborious tasks I’ll require of them.”

“What sort of ‘laborious tasks’ will be having them perform?” Leon asked.

“The low sort that leaves one’s hands dirty,” Nestor said. “Labor. That’s what I’ll have them do.”

“And if I have any labor that needs doing?” Leon asked.

“Two will not be enough. You’ll have to either find me more or achieve Apotheosis. Or find a new supply of wisps that I can use to power and animate additional frames.”



Leon smirked a bit, his thoughts turning to the stone giants. Though they were known as stone giants, their true forms were sapient wisps descended from golems Nestor had left in their home crater. They took their massive, rough forms from rocks hewn from the mountains they resided in, and for all Leon knew, they only did so out of necessity rather than a specific desire for bodies of stone. Though, after eighty-thousand years, they may have grown attached to such forms.

‘Then again, Nestor quite literally created them, so whatever form he choose for them to inhabit might be enough for them...’

Given Nestor’s attitude towards them, Leon refrained from bringing them up for the time being.

“I’ll see what I can do,” he simply stated. “Now, I have to head to the Sacred Golden Empire in a couple weeks. How about you set your work aside and accompany me there? I’d rather not have to endure walking through another ark with no one with me who knows enough about them to talk shop with.”

“You’ll surely have other arksmiths with you when you begin your explorations, won’t you?” Nestor asked.

“Maybe. I don’t know what they have. If all they found was the equivalent of a pleasure yacht, then... well, I suppose I’d have some with me just in case were I in the Grand Druid’s shoes. But if what they found is bigger and with more powerful weaponry, then it would stand to reason that they’d have it under tight lock and key, only allowing certain people access to it, just in case.”

“Leon. Idiot. Child. Fool. Some of those ‘certain people’ will surely be, or have been, arksmiths. I’m not a betting man, but I would still put money on them having already done as thorough of an investigation as they could before asking you for any assistance.”

Leon clicked his tongue, though he clamped down on his irritation. “You’re right. And when you’re right, you’re right. Still, even though you claim to not know much about arks, you’re still a self-described ‘genius’. Surely you’d have some insight to share with me if we were to explore an ark big enough for the Grand Druid herself to ask me to come and see it?”

Nestor groaned—Leon found it a surprisingly pleasant sound given the way his metallic form caused it to rumble and resonate.

“Your toys aren’t going anywhere,” Leon reassured him. “Unless your security enhancements are insufficient?”

Nestor glanced at him in what Leon assumed was supposed to be a glare, but his face plate, which lacked all but the vaguest suggestion of human features, was static. As much as he tried, Nestor would be making no expressions, positive or negative, until he swapped out his steel skull for something superior.

“Let’s talk about the Empires, then, if I’m to visit,” Nestor said.

“Let’s not say ‘visit’,” Leon immediately interjected. “More like, ‘seeing from within my soul realm’. Of if I’m feeling generous and you haven’t insulted me recently, maybe I’ll have you follow me as a ‘personal secretary golem’. I can force you to pay attention to inane garbage and take notes.”

“Your cruelty knows no bounds,” Nestor spat, his tone sincere though Leon’s had been tinged with teasing provocation. “Any more indignities you have in mind to heap upon my humble person?”

“If you were truly humble, then maybe not,” Leon smirkingly replied. “As it is, I’ll have to think about it. For now, what were you getting at before my cruelty distracted you so?”

Nestor grumbled something under his breath before asking, “This thing you have with the Empires. It can’t last. What’s more, you’re planning on eventually heading south, are you not? Will you be gone for a couple months? Planning on returning to the remains of our Clan every so often? You’ll never win over such proud people by doing such a thing...”

“No, I suppose not. What are you saying?”

“You’ll be gone for years. Even if you bring all of us along with you, are you planning on torching everything before you go? You’ll have to leave some things behind, such as our workshop, or your apple orchard. Or, you’ll have to leave some of us behind to watch over the estate. And without you, everyone left behind would be at Imperial mercy. A terrible thing to be on the receiving end of, from my experience.”

“Have much experience in receiving Imperial ‘mercy’, do you?”

“More like handing it out rather than receiving it, boy.”

Leon shrugged with more nonchalance than he felt. “Well, you bring up a good point. I’ve been thinking that I’d have to do something about the Empires as of late. Their demands have been growing ever more... tiresome. And if what Anastasios has said is any indication, the factions that are demanding they do something to me—and us—grow stronger with every spark of power that I gain. It’s hard to imagine just how they’d react if I were to actually reach tenth-tier, let alone attempt Apotheosis...

“Regardless, Nestor, I’ll need to have the Sky Devils at my back. Or at least, I’d rather have them there when the time comes, because I don’t trust anyone in the Empires, no matter how friendly they’ve been, to be there when shit starts to fly. I have an alliance with the Director, and I don’t even trust him to have my back in such a case.”

“A problem that you need to address, especially since my person is on the line,” Nestor grumbled.

Leon smiled and hummed in acknowledgment. “I suppose what I need is a higher patron, then, don’t I?”

“There are few ‘higher’ patrons than the Empires,” Nestor said in a leading tone that had Leon guessing he already knew where he was going to take this.

“Indeed, but Tusk and the Sky Devils prove that they exist. And who is higher on this plane than the one that watches over it? Who stays on guard to ensure that the Primal beings interred here never wake?”

“A job he seems to be rather terrible at,” Nestor remarked.

“No Primal being has escaped in however-many-millions-of-years it’s been since that primordial war,” Leon pointed out. “I’d say he was doing a fine job until Jormun came around. And... he seems to have taken a liking to me. He told me that he kept the Empires from making a move on me before I came south.”

“As I recall, he also demanded you perform for him a service as recompense.”

“And that’s why I was still debating the point with myself. I don’t just want to swap out the Empires for someone identical. I need cover until I can stand on my own two feet. And I don’t think the Grave Warden will be as demanding as the Lord Protector or Grand Druid have been. He’ll certainly be a damn sight better than Keeper, I’d wager.”

“I would still argue against it. This is the man who almost single-handedly destroyed our Clan! What he wants from you can’t be good!”

Leon lightly cringed, remembering that while Jason Keraunos and his other children were little more than ideas to him, concepts as real as a drawing, little more than murals on a wall somewhere, to Nestor, they were not just real people, they had been his family. While the dead man had never gone into much detail regarding his personal history, Leon couldn’t imagine it had been all that pleasant. Still, the way that he’d spoken of his sister, Penthesilea, had given Leon the impression that Nestor had been fond of her, at least, if not with the rest of his blood relatives. And of Demetrios, the man who’d founded House Raime, Nestor had said just about nothing.

“What would you have me do about him, Nestor?” Leon quietly asked. “Our Clan invaded his plane, and he did nothing. We established an Empire for ourselves here, and he did nothing. It was only when Jason Keraunos attacked his tower that he finally struck back.”

“And that strike destroyed us utterly,” Nestor bitterly pointed out. “Millions of years of history and legacy were laid low that day. Our Clan may not have died then, but it was struck a mortal wound.”

“But it’s not yet dead,” Leon whispered, silencing Nestor, who looked away as if lost in thought. “The Clan isn’t yet dead. We’re not yet dead, no matter how much I call you ‘dead man’. Nestor, it’s been so long, how responsible do you still hold the Grave Warden for his role in our Clan’s downfall? How much blame is to be afforded him, when we were the aggressors?”

“It was his hand that struck the blow. Had he simply given us what we were here for, none of this would’ve ever been necessary. Our Clan would still be in its rightful place in the universe.”

“Or maybe we would be in the exact same place, only laid low by something else. You have to see by now that we were woefully unprepared for the Divine Graveyard? What if we succeeded in taking whatever Universe Fragment that the Grave Warden has, and all the sealed Primal Gods were released? Could we have survived that? Or if we went to the next plane in the planar cluster, seeking that Grave Warden’s Universe Fragment, and that Grave Warden turned out to be significantly less passive.”

“You argue ‘what ifs’ when you want to hide beneath the skirts of the man who killed my father, sister, and brothers!”

Leon sighed. “I’d rather not hide under anyone’s skirts, but what other choice do we have? Remain an indentured servant of the Empires? Suffer their pointed barbs until they decide that I’ve gained power enough and finally act against me? Will the Grave Warden kill me? Is he a safer bet? I can’t know, all I know is that he definitely wants me to do something, and that he claims to have run some interference for me.

“And if—when—I were to join the Sky Devils, all I’ve built here would be effectively forfeit. So what am I to do, Nestor, but try and make peace with the man who broke our Clan, in the hope of securing our Clan’s future? What should I be valuing more, our past or our future?”

“You ask that as if our future is already in the Grave Warden’s hands. You have other options, up to and including doing what many of our vassals did: leave, and destroy everything that could be used against us when you do.”

“Getting away from the Empires would be damned difficult to do. And would involve losing the apple orchard since getting usable seeds for new trees is, in Tikos’ words, ‘problematic’. It would involve losing Heaven’s Eye, losing my home, losing this workshop.”

“Heaven’s Eye has arks. We need only repair them and we can be on our way.”

“And if we, as you pointed out just a moment ago, need Lumenite or Aurichalcum? And the Titanstone we’ll undoubtedly need?”

Leon and Nestor sighed in unison, and Leon leaned back in his chair as a wave of exhaustion hit him.

“Nothing’s been decided yet, Nestor. We still have time to figure things out. Maybe the Empires will back off. I doubt it, but maybe. I’m not thrilled at the idea of what the Grave Warden wants me to do, either. Just... let’s see what the Sacred Golden Empire has in store for us, why don’t we? We can talk about this later.”

Nestor growled but offered no more argument. So, Leon gave the projected arks one last look before taking his leave. At the very least, he needed the rest of his family’s opinion on anything before offering him—and them by extension—to the Grave Warden in the vague hope of finding someone who could get them the autonomy that Leon craved.

## **Chapter 827: Intimate Desires**

“... and it’s becoming clearer and clearer that we can’t continue on like this for too much longer,” Leon finished as he stared at his family around him, his golden eyes narrowed with intense seriousness. “The more power we accumulate, the less Heaven’s Eye can keep us covered and the more nervous those with Anastasios and the Grand Druid will grow.”

“I’m surprised,” Elise commented. “I thought we wouldn’t be having this conversation quite so soon. I would’ve thought we’d have more time to get our affairs in order.”

“We’ve gained power remarkably quickly, thanks to the Hesperidic Apples,” Leon said. “I suppose it isn’t the worst problem to have: people getting nervous at just how fast you’re growing. But it’s still a problem that we now have to deal with, and our quasi-resident tenth-tier mages are getting more demanding and less... accommodating. They’ve already levied subtle threats at me in private, though they’ve made it clear that they’re happy with the status quo. If that status quo changes, however, I’m not sure how accommodating they’ll be any more.”

Elise sighed, while Valeria scowled for just a moment before regaining her usual stoic expression. Maia, however, wore her anger more openly, while Anzu hardly flinched, seeming to stare at Leon with the expectation that he would already have an answer.

"What options do we have?" Valeria asked. "Fight our way out? Sneak away? Run to the Sky Devils?"

"None are particularly attractive options," Elise said. "Heaven's Eye is still good cover, Leon. No one can move against us without treating with the Director and all our economic might. If you remain peaceful and cooperative, then how can anyone justify moving against us when the cost would be so high?"

Leon shrugged. "Lost of reasons. Heaven's Eye might not want to side with me, at least in their minds—and, I'll admit, I don't trust the Director to choose me over the Empires, too. The guild's finances are too tied up in Imperial territory to just... cut."

"The Director moved against the Sentinels for us," Elise countered. "Admittedly, we didn't have much business there, but the precedent *was* set. Aren't you overthinking this, husband?"

Leon sighed and said, "Maybe. Maybe I just need a bit more perspective. Maybe I just don't like being threatened."

[It was the arrogant ones that told you of their people getting nervous, wasn't it?] Maia suddenly asked. Leon could feel her anger through their connection, and it took some willpower not to let it feed his own at the situation they found themselves in.

"It was," he confirmed, his eyes narrowing as he thought he landed upon what she was getting at.

[Can we believe them?] she asked.

"A reasonable point," Valeria added. "They're possibly trying to pressure you to give more than you have been with news of people in their Empires getting antsy."

"A more believable scenario than such august beings as the Lord Protector and the Grand Druid being unable to properly control their sycophants," Elise pointed out. "Have you asked the Director, Penelope, or Narses about this yet, Leon?"

"No. Aside from Nestor, the four of you are the first I'm speaking to."

"Oh? How did that bastard ghost respond?" Valeria spat.

"I... may have floated the idea of going to the Grave Warden for support. Given that the Grave Warden's responsible for our Clan's current predicament—not that I blame him too much, though—Nestor didn't... take my thoughts well. The rest of our discussion wasn't particularly productive."

"I should think not," Elise said.

[We're not going to *that* one,] Maia added, drawing a questioning look from Leon. With a haughty look, she continued, [He wants us for some task, as you've said. He can do it himself. What service could we do that he can't? And more, we owe him nothing.]

"I agree," Valeria whispered. "We don't need another patron. Not yet, anyway. Let's get a better idea of where we stand, and then we can start making alliances."

"Speak with the Director, Leon," Elise urged. "He'll know what's been said in the halls of power in Ilion and Evergold better than anyone else, and he'll be more trustworthy than the Lord Protector or the Grand Druid."

Elise then got a sly look in her eye.

“And, if even the Director can’t do anything, you *can* always marry Cassandra... That’s what the Grand Druid wants most of all, isn’t it? And aligning ourselves more with her would go a long way towards buying her continued support...”

Leon just gave her a withering stare, but she endured it with such poise and grace that he could tell his tacit reply was ineffectual. He momentarily looked to Anzu, but his griffin-in-human-form just smiled at him and said, “I’m with you, big brother! No matter what!”

Leon smiled and clapped Anzu on the shoulder. “All right. When I head to Headquarters tomorrow, I’ll stop in at the Hexagon and have a few words with the Director. We’ll see if I’ve been too hasty...”

Elise smiled and hugged him, while Valeria lightly smiled, and Maia radiated approval through their connection.

—

Leon spent his night as he usually did: in his workshop. His ladies were now strong enough to not need sleep either, so while they all still got plenty of bedroom time, hours were freed up for them all, which went a long way toward relieving some of Leon’s lingering guilt for not spending quite enough time with them. Since they were all awake pretty much all the time, there wasn’t any pressure to catch someone before bed.

Likewise, almost all of Leon’s retainers, save pretty much for Helen, didn’t need sleep, either. So, they frequently had long training sessions that stretched well into the night. But after that, everyone would always separate for their individual training—Helen would usually continue her work, Anna would train her war beasts, and Leon had sent his retainers from the Bull Kingdom off to run some of the results of his research teams’ efforts through field tests.

Of all of them, only Red continued to regularly sleep, as she would frequently return to wyvern form and curl up on the roof of Leon’s villa, which he’d had to reinforce after she started doing that. Anna’s own wyverns weren’t too happy with her presence, but after some early ugliness, Red seemed content enough to ignore them, even if they were a little nervous with her around.

But Leon’s favorite place was in his workshop, and he had plenty of work to do. However, his mind was more concerned with the sword he had to make to aid his attempts to control the Iron Needle than any of his other myriad projects, many of which were also being worked on by his research teams. He hadn’t gotten too far in the sword’s design since he had barely begun to learn how to sky forge from the Thunderbird, but he was still sketching out designs for the weapon and working out its precise measurements.

As he was working, Nestor was taking a break from his golem modifications—and steadily ignoring Leon—by cooing over his new pet. Leon was happy enough to immerse himself in his work, but he soon found himself interrupted when Valeria waltzed in.

“Hey,” she said as she slid her arms around his neck from behind. He’d been so focused on his sketches that he hadn’t heard her enter the room and damn near leaped out of his chair.

"Ah!" he whispered as he realized whose arms were around him. In but a moment, he relaxed into her embrace. "Hey," he repeated back.

Valeria leaned against him for a moment before asking, "Something for Sid?"

"No," he replied. "Something for me."

"For you?" she asked in confusion. "I didn't think you needed a sword..."

"I don't. Kind of. I need one made from my blood to use with the Iron Needle."

Leon could almost hear Valeria frown. "Why?"

Leon sighed. "I needed some way to better control the Iron Needle."

"And you went with a sword?" she asked as her head turned slightly in the direction of the gold tube.

"Why not just practice with it? Or study it?"

"That's... those are valid, I will admit. I just need something to *help*, and my Ancestor did so by creating an Adamant sword."

"And you want to make one of your own?" Valeria asked. When Leon nodded, she added, "And the sword she made isn't good enough?"

"Her sword is perfect in every way," Leon bitterly replied. "*Almost* every way, actually. It responds to me as a bearer of her power. I don't think anyone could even wield it, let alone harm me with it, but in the end, it's *her* sword, made from *her* blood. It responds to *her* will."

"Didn't your more recent Ancestors use that sword to control the Iron Needle too?"

"Yes, but they were all Storm Kings. Their power compared to mine was the whole storm next to a drop of rain. The Iron Needle responds to me, has submitted to me, but for me to use its power without killing myself is another thing entirely. Even studying it safely is problematic given the practically unlimited power it contains. I need something to channel it through, something more durable than my own skin and bones. Adamant is the answer. If I encase the Iron Needle in Adamant, then its power will be that much easier to use and control."

"I'll have to take your word for it," Valeria whispered. "You just need a sword of your own, then? Because you're only ninth-tier?"

Leon nodded again.

Valeria's lips turned upward in a smile. "If you figure out this 'sky forging', would you...?"

"Make something for you?"

It was Valeria's turn to nod.

"You'll have to be involved in its forging," Leon said as he turned to face her. She had to loosen her hold of him to allow it, but allow it she did. "Creating such a weapon, made from your blood, isn't something that can be done by someone else. I can guide you through it, but it'll be your project."

Valeria smiled a little bitterly. “Later, then.” Her smile then turned a little more mischievous. “What are you going to do with your family’s sword when all this is done?”

“Looking to use it for yourself?” Leon asked with a chuckle. Valeria shrugged, her smile not wavering at all. “You need the Thunderbird’s blood to use it, I’m afraid. But... passing it on to someone else isn’t a bad idea...”

Leon lowered his gaze to her stomach and reached out, grabbing her waist. Then, he moved his right hand in, lightly stroking her abdomen. Looking up, he gave her a meaningful look.

For a moment, she looked a bit confused, but then her smile vanished, replaced with a look of abject astonishment.

“You’re not serious?” she exclaimed, pulling back slightly.

“Not particularly, no,” Leon replied, his expression turning more serious. “However, I can’t help but... keep my legacy in mind. I’m all the remains of my Clan—as so *many* people are quick to point out...” He cast a look in Nestor’s direction, who he was about ninety percent sure was listening in. “I’m not ready for *that* step, but...”

Valeria relaxed and leaned back into him, gently pressing his head into her well-endowed chest as she pushed the rest of him back enough to take a seat on one of his thighs. Leon saw no reason to fight back.

“I love you,” she said. “Are we ready for this?”

“No,” Leon said, his voice muffled by shirt and chest. “But we will be, one day. Just as, one day, I’ll have to set my Ancestor’s sword aside for one of my own. If I want to wield the Iron Needle before achieving Apotheosis, that is. And I do.”

“But... children...” Valeria whispered apprehensively.

After a brief moment of silence, Leon hesitantly asked, “Do you... not want any?”

Valeria let him pull back a bit so they could make eye contact. When his golden eyes met hers, sparkling like perfectly cut sapphires in the light of his workshop, they both smiled, their whole worlds shrinking down to the two of them for just a moment. In that moment, Valeria took one of Leon’s hands—the one that he had placed against her abdomen just a couple seconds before—and brought it right back.

“This,” she whispered, “is yours. Any and all children that come from me will be yours.”

Leon smiled, though his lips weren’t the only thing rising in response. “I... can’t exactly promise the same, but you, Elise...” he shot Nestor a quick look before leaning in to whisper even softer to Valeria, “... Naiad... You three are the only ones for me.”

Valeria smiled back, warmth and affection shining from her expression like light from the sun. “And Cassandra, I think.”

Leon’s smile froze, and after a moment, faded slightly. “I keep getting that. Mostly from the Grand Druid, but—”



"It's because it's clear you like her," Valeria playfully shot back. "I like her too. Not like *that*, but... I like her. She could fit in well here. *Could*."

"Elise would be happy about it," Leon murmured.

"She would be," Valeria agreed.

"Naiad?"

"Her, too, I think. Maybe not vocally, but if Cassandra were willing to... *participate* in... *group activities*, I think our local river nymph would be up for one more. Maybe even without that incentive..."

Leon smiled, a little red coming to his cheeks. "And... you? Would one more be something you're interested in? I seem to recall you having some strong opinions regarding that particular Princess."

"They haven't changed much," she admitted. "But I want you to be happy."

"And I want *you* to be happy. Would you be happier having to share me with even just one more woman?"

Valeria jovially scoffed. "Depends on the woman. 'No', would be my answer for most. It takes a special kind of bitch to make me make an exception."

Leon blinked rapidly, unable to fully believe his ears. "I'll, uh... keep that in mind, I suppose. You three are already more than enough for any one man, and that's before taking you as a group..."

"You haven't *taken* us as a group, yet, though," Valeria teased.

"You know what I mean," Leon riposted, eliciting a rare giggle from his silver-haired lover. "I just... I love all of you, and I don't want to introduce anything... potentially unstable to what we have. I'm happy with the three of you, I don't need any more. Maybe I like Cassandra, but that doesn't matter. She's beautiful and attractive in more ways than just the physical. But that doesn't matter. I already have you three."

Valeria shrugged, then stood up. For a moment, she stood above Leon rather imperiously, him seated in his chair with his eyes level with her collar. Then, she leaned down, lightly brushing her lips against his. When he began to respond, she laid a hand on his shoulder, then moved her lips to his ear.

She whispered so softly that even with his power, Leon had to strain a bit to hear her.

"I don't want just anyone coming into our home and your bed. I want *no one* but me, Elise, or Naiad in your bed... with *one* exception..." She pulled back to look him directly in the eye. "I wouldn't mind seeing you nail that bitch to the mattress, without a hammer. Or nails. Maybe I'd even help."

She shot him such a sultry look that he completely failed to respond, his brain locking up with the visions she'd just put in his head and with the shock of *Valeria* of all people saying these things.

She didn't wait for him to recover from that mental shock, simply shooting him a smile that told him she knew exactly what she'd said and that promised quite a bit more besides, and then turned around and sashayed out of the workshop, leaving him alone to contemplate her words.

"Is it over?" Nestor quipped. "I hope so, that was painful to listen to."

[Indeed,] Xaphan crackled, throwing further fuel onto the fires of Leon's embarrassment.

[Just take them all,] the Thunderbird added, proving to Leon that his embarrassment could, in fact, grow even more. [You are my blood. Take many mates, make many children. Such is how a powerful mage ought to be. My Clan must spread from bounteous loins, gracing hundreds of women with seed!]

Leon groaned and did his best to tune her out and made a valiant effort to get back to work over the next few minutes, but especially with the Thunderbird ranting about wanting more descendants and demanding, seemingly without even taking a breath, that he get on with making babies with every available woman in his immediate orbit—and as many as he could that were further afield—he couldn't concentrate. All he could think about now was Valeria. A quick pulse of his magic senses showed that she was in her room already, lying back on her bed.

Her eyes turned in his direction; his wards let his magic senses through, but his magic wasn't undetectable. She smiled, and most of her clothes vanished into her soul realm, leaving her lying back with only her socks and underwear to cover herself with, though covering herself seemed the last thing on her mind as she put herself on display just for him.

He didn't even hesitate to rocket to his feet and move as quickly as he could without abandoning all decorum toward his workshop's door.

"Leaving so soon?" Nestor asked. "I still have words for you."

Leon stopped a moment. His eyes didn't waver from Valeria. She couldn't see him, his wards only allowing his magic senses through, but she knew he could see her.

"What words?" he growled.

"Words for you, about the Grave Warden," Nestor said in response, advancing menacingly upon Leon.

"We're not allying with him," Leon said. Monotonously, he stated further, "Not until we've explored *all* other avenues. Apologies for floating that idea without thought. Please continue studying the Iron Needle. Goodbye."

He didn't even wait for Nestor's response, the dead man seemingly freezing in place in what Leon thought was shock, and swiftly left. He admitted that he *was* thoughtless and careless for bringing up the Grave Warden with Nestor, especially right after discussing Jason Keraunos' ark with the man and picking at some old wounds, and while he wasn't taking the possibility off the table completely, he at least wasn't going to just jump into it now.

He could apologize later, though. While her words about Cassandra had been enticing, all Leon could think about now was Valeria, and the things he could do with her on that bed.

## **Chapter 828: Imperial Manipulations**

"Leon," the Director stated, his tone neutral, but coming with the subtlest undercurrent of surprise as Leon walked into his office. The elder man was sitting behind his desk, but as Leon entered, he sat for only a moment longer before he slowly got to his feet and walked around his desk. "What's going on?"

Leon recognized a slight tinge of concern in the Director's voice at this point, so he held up his hand in a conciliatory gesture and hurriedly said, "Nothing immediate, but... of some concern nonetheless."

"I hope it doesn't have anything to do with what we discussed yesterday," the Director replied.

"No," Leon said. "Actually, it's a problem that has come up a few times before, but I never thought it important enough to bring up. That's changed."

"Please, fill me in."

Leon nodded and quickly told the Director of the Lord Protector and Grand Druid's increasingly frequent 'warnings' about elements in their respective Empires growing more and more nervous about Leon's rising power.

The Director didn't verbally respond immediately. His expression, while still fairly clinical, had shifted to something just a little more thoughtful.

"Have you heard anything about this?" Leon asked.

"Nothing immediately springs to mind," the Director answered. "Though, the inner workings of the Empires can be opaque, even to us in Heaven's Eye. We are not all-knowing, though we likely know far more about the Empires than they'd like. If what these two told you is true, and let's just assume for the moment that it is, then there are only a handful of people who might have these opinions that we won't have heard about. High ministers privy to the most sensitive of meetings, men and women accustomed to speaking privately and not sharing secrets for any reason whatsoever."

"Can we move against them?"

The Director gave Leon a look of displeased surprise. "No. These people are too highly placed for us to move against publicly—"

"Not what I meant. Was too brief, I guess. I mean, if they're actually worried about me—and *us*, by extension—then if they were to make their... *lack of trust*, shall we say, more keenly felt, then what might our options be to protect ourselves?"

"You ask as if you have a preference for a particular course of action?"

"*Action* is my preference." Leon smiled and let his prodigious killing intent spill out just a little bit. "My patience for these games is limited. I've already considered... *other*, less-than-attractive options, but since we're in a partnership, I wanted to know what options we might have that wouldn't involve me looking for someone more powerful than the Empires, or launching an all-out attack on an Imperial Palace or something."

"Try not to do that latter one, it would be terrible for business."

"I'll keep your preference in mind."

"I'm sure you will. Violence isn't a tool that Heaven's Eye frequently employs outside of peacekeeping operations in Occulara. We pay others to do that for us. And no one we could possibly pay, aside from certain groups that I would not have us associate with—*anymore*, at any rate—might be more willing to dirty their hands in some back-alley skullduggery, but at the level we're speaking of, it would make an assault on the villa of the Chief of Security of Heaven's Eye by some desperate vampires look like a sane idea in comparison."

Leon did his best to hide his disappointment, but he couldn't help but smile self-deprecatingly. "Thought that might be the case. Still... *don't like it*, but not surprised. But, to go back to what you said earlier, there are only a few people to who this information might apply, and it's possible that it was a lie in the first place?"

The Director was silent for a long moment, his eyes narrowing slightly the only outward sign that he was thinking particularly intensely about the problem.

"The way I see it, Leon," he eventually said, "there are a couple of options here. The least likely, in my opinion, is that the Lord Protector and the Grand Druid were telling the truth. Or the whole truth, at any rate. They are akin to gods in their Empires. If they vouched for you, then few would have the audacity to advise against their set course of action."

"Few, but not none."

"Not none. But let me ask you, Leon: what would you do in these ministers' positions? Someone potentially dangerous has entered your territory. They haven't shown themselves to be hostile yet, but you know of them. What do you do?"

"Frustratingly vague answer with many possible answers depending on context," Leon grumbled. "I suppose I might want to keep an eye on them. Maybe task some subordinates with devising a contingency plan for if this dangerous person chooses hostility."

"Heh. You landed on the answer I wanted."

"I aim to please."

"So, contingencies. If people were complaining to either the Grand Druid or the Lord Protector, then we might expect them to be preparing some kind of contingencies against you, would we not?"

"A reasonable expectation, I think."

"Depends on the contingency. But so far, Heaven's Eye hasn't picked up on anything that might suggest any contingencies have been put into place. They're keeping an eye on you, of course, but as far as we can tell, there are no special task forces devoted to remaining on standby in case you show yourself a conqueror, as your ancestors were. There have been no allocations of vast resources, secret or otherwise that Heaven's Eye can detect that might suggest they're preparing to deal with you in a more permanent manner—and given how integrated we are with the plane's logistics, we *would* detect just about anything."

"Would we be able to separate any potential task force with those 'just' keeping an eye on me?"

"The people we put on this are competent, serious, and they take their jobs seriously."

"Guess I'll take your word for it, then."

"So, if there *are* people complaining behind the scenes, then nothing practical is being done to move against you—or us. Which means the Lord Protector and the Grand Druid are merely using those complaints to apply pressure."

Leon grimaced, but his lack of surprise was, in itself, no longer surprising. “What do you think is more likely, then?” he asked.

“That the Lord Protector and the Grand Druid simply lied to you in order to put more pressure on you to do what they want while you’re still weak enough to be manipulated like this.”

“If that’s the case, then what should I do? Turn them down when they ask me to fulfill the terms of our agreement to keep the Keeper off of us? I don’t think that would go over well.”

“Certainly not, and I would not suggest such a thing. But we need to at least discuss what we ought to do, which will inform any responses we might be more capable of giving later on.”

Leon smiled. He and the Director were both ninth-tier mages. Mages of such power were common enough in the Empires that they weren’t a military threat to the Imperial order, and they had no real answer for the Empires’ tenth-tier mages. That would change entirely if both he and the Director managed to reach the tenth-tier, however. Suddenly, Heaven’s Eye would be able to match an Empire and even exceed any one of them in certain respects. Beyond that, they had both Jason Keraunos’ personal ark and Nestor.

To put it simply, while their options to move against the Empires were much more limited now, they wouldn’t always be so.

*‘Of course, the Empires would be fools not to plan for such a change in the status quo,’* Leon contemplated, though given what the Director had just said, it seemed that whatever their plans were for dealing with an ascendant Heaven’s Eye hadn’t been meaningfully changed by his presence within the guild.

“If anything’s most likely, I would think they’re just trying to squeeze you for anything they can get before you leave, as you’ve so often made clear is your intention.”

Leon hummed

## Chapter 829: Flight to Evergold

Though he had not been in a while, Leon’s appreciation for the aesthetics of the Sacred Golden Empire hadn’t dimmed at all. Their cities, and especially their capital of Evergold, lay sprawling out beneath the bast limbs of their titanic palace-trees, though not so much that the sky was not visible. Natural lines that accentuated this chosen aesthetic abounded even in the city’s layout, though not so much that it prevented air from circulating throughout the streets.

From the air, it all looked even more spectacular. The massive palace-tree in the center of Evergold stood thousands of feet tall and was surrounded by a tall grove of trees forming the Imperial Palace. So tall was this tree and its grove that even flying in the Grand Druid’s personal ark at fifteen hundred feet, they were still flying quite clearly beneath the leafy canopy.

The couple weeks between Leon’s return to Occulara and the Grand Druid’s ‘religious ceremony’ that she’d invited Leon to had come and gone, and to attend this ceremony—and take a look at the ark Evergold had found—the Grand Druid herself had given Leon and his chosen retainers a ride.

Along with him and the Grand Druid, Leon traveled with Valeria, Maia, Gaius, Anna, and Helen. More nerve-racking than all of them combined, however, was Nestor, whom Leon explained away as a 'personal project' accompanying him for field testing. Fortunately, the dead man had made not a sound, playing the part of a non-sentient golem marvelously. The rest of his people were all busy with either personal business, or Heaven's Eye business that he'd assigned them.

Were it not for some projects that Leon had involved him in developing some prototypes ahead of schedule, Gaius, too, would've been indisposed. As it was, Leon had not only brought the other man along to help him test these prototypes but also to get him out and about, for it was no secret amongst the retinue that Gaius had been antsy for a long time.

But Leon's concerns for his retinue didn't end at Gaius; giving Helen and Anna some time back in their homeland seemed just the thing for the girls who'd just so recently seen—or rather, caused—the death of their parents' murderer. Ever since the raid that saw Casimir dead, both girls had been rather distant, though Helen at least seemed more taken with her work than anything. Anna, on the other hand, seemed far more affected and far more in need of some time away from Occulara.

As it was, in the past two weeks, Red had had to step in twice to help keep corral Nidar and Astar, Anna's two young wyverns, from rampaging through the estate. With her onyx bracelet, Anna had had to be quite distracted to lose control of her war beasts to such a degree, and Leon had been forced to get Eirene to keep them under far greater lock and key, lest they get loose and cause even more trouble.

Unfortunately, even as Anna's girlfriend, Eirene hadn't been as helpful in getting Anna out of her funk as Leon had hoped, though she'd at least confirmed that Leon wasn't just imagining that things were significantly off about her.

So, Leon had ordered Anna and Helen to both come along despite neither of them having much to do on their little sojourn to the Sacred Golden Empire.

"How do you find my city?" the Grand Druid asked as Leon 'stared' out of the ark using his magic senses. There were no windows on the thing, but the enchantments allowed magic senses originating from within to reach out of the ark.

Leon, having lost himself in thoughts of his retinue for a moment, had to take a moment to process the Grand Druid's question, which he masked as thinking hard and pondering his words.

"It's quite beautiful," he said with sincerity. "As with most things in your Empire, Evergold is a feast for the senses. I grew up in a forest, and I feel almost like I'm coming home when I visit your Empire."

The Grand Druid smiled widely as Leon moved past the opening generic platitude and offered his more personal opinion.

"That," she said, "can be as true as you want it to be, you know..."

Leon simply nodded. He'd given her the same answer so many times that he didn't think it necessary to keep repeating himself, though he caught Valeria giving him a subtle look out of the corner of his eye and nearly lost his composure. While his silver-haired lover had quite passionately reiterated that she wasn't particularly attracted to women the past several times they'd slept together, she hadn't been shy about what she wouldn't mind doing to Cassandra if given the chance, many of which involved lots of

chains, whips, and oil—in what order, Leon knew. Neither did he know just how much of it was serious and how much was just sex talk while Valeria demonstrated for him.

Leon found it hard to keep the scenes she'd filled his head with in those intimate moments from rushing forth again, and from the way she subtly smirked, they were on her mind, too. Either that or she was silently teasing him about his own feelings—which he hadn't quite worked out for himself—for the blond Princess.

Keeping his face impassive, Leon turned his questioning towards a topic that the Grand Druid had steadfastly refused to discuss until they were back in Evergold.

"So, this ark you've apparently found—"

"Nothing apparent about it, Leon, we have what I said we have; I've seen it myself."

"Right. I was hoping you could tell me a bit more about it. I can hardly be expected to do what you obviously want me to do unless I know more, can I?"

As he spoke, Leon glanced over the Grand Druid's shoulder to where Nestor stood in the back of the opulent ark. The Grand Druid had a hefty retinue of her own, many of whom were not only in the large ark with them, but sat between where Leon and the Grand Druid sat and where Nestor stood. Despite this, Leon had no doubt that Nestor could hear every word they were saying, and the slight shifting in his posture as his head turned in their direction only confirmed that he was right.

"That eager to see it, are you?" the Grand Druid asked with a wide grin. She played with her long gray hair for a moment before turning to look over her shoulder. Leon's concern grew when she made a gesture and all sound from the rest of the ark's passengers ceased. They clearly hadn't stopped making noise, but the Grand Druid had obviously activated some enchantment that Leon couldn't detect that blocked that sound from reaching them.

"There," she said, "I trust everyone here with my life, but it's better not to trust them with my Empire's secrets, wouldn't you agree?"

Leon grinned back, though his lips were closed. When he stole another glance at Nestor, he saw the golem the dead man still stared at him in a clear signal that he could still hear them despite the Grand Druid's enchantment, and Leon's smile grew significantly more genuine.

"A fine policy," Leon replied.

"Before we begin, Leon," the Grand Druid began, setting off alarms in Leon's head immediately, "could you tell me a little more about that golem you brought with you?"

"Haven't I already—"

"Yes, yes, your 'personal project'. Did you build it yourself? I wasn't aware you were in golemcraft. Or did you find it somewhere?"

"Little of column A, little of column B. I'm still working out just what the golem can do, but I've found it to be quite the capable assistant for certain tasks."

"What sort of tasks?"

“Administrative. It’s a fantastic scribe, it can carry quite a bit of weight, and represents a portable source of magic power. Other than that, well, it’s hard to say. I’m still finding out myself just what the golem is capable of.”

“Interesting. It has a wholly unique design compared to the golems you’ve activated for my Empire...”

“That’s... well, it’s a little shameless, but since it’s from my Clan, I suppose few have more right than me... but when it first came into my possession, it was in quite the sad state. Further modifications were necessary to get it up to even acceptable standards, leading to the differences in appearance. Some liberties were taken with its design, yes, but it’s certainly better than it was when I first laid eyes on it.”

“You’ll have to fill me in on the particulars someday,” the Grand Druid replied with a wink and a smile that she somehow made look both natural and quite greedy at the same time.

“Maybe. But you still haven’t told me of your ark. I don’t even know how big it’s supposed to be, let alone what kind of state it’s in.”

“Yes... Let’s start with that, then. We found it buried deep beneath a hill about twenty miles north of Evergold’s outer suburbs. A small earthquake opened a rift at the base of a great tree, and upon exploring it to judge how feasible it would be to close, some explorers found a section of the ark’s outer hull embedded in the tree’s root system.

“The tree itself is quite large—it is an unmodified exemplar of the species our palace-trees were first created from—and its root system is extensive. Despite this, only a small section of the ark had been entangled, for the thing is enormous. Our explorers have found it to be about eighteen hundred feet long but buried completely under more than a hundred feet of rock and soil. The ark may have even been longer at one point, with its nose crumpled inward after hitting bedrock.”

Leon’s eyes grew wider with every word the Grand Druid said, and he couldn’t help but constantly flit between greed and a desire to destroy this thing before the Evergolden people could get their hands on it. By Nestor’s breakdown after his return from the Director’s personal ark stash, he knew that the only class of ark that was anywhere close to Storm Herald’s two thousand feet were the Clan’s supercarriers, the most valuable military arks that his Clan had ever managed to produce. Larger arks existed, Nestor had assured Leon, but they were few and far between, and never mass-produced.

Individually, the supercarriers weren’t well-armed, but they could carry more than a hundred smaller arks, some as large as a hundred feet long. They were practically small mobile cities unto themselves and represented the backbone of any planar invasion that the Thunderbird Clan ever launched. They were logistical hubs and both attack and defense platforms. In his Clan’s prime, they held large complements of powerful mages, and while their weapon systems weren’t comparable to more dedicated attack arks, they were still powerful enough that a single supercarrier, by Leon’s estimation and if Nestor wasn’t exaggerating by too wide a margin, would be enough to destroy all four Empires if its commander so pleased.

Leon couldn’t say whether or not this was a supercarrier just yet, but if it was, he was struck with the thought that he simply couldn’t let the Sacred Golden Empire have something that powerful. It would upset the balance of power too much, it would be too much relative power for...



... Although the longer he thought about it, he supposed the situation wasn't quite as dire as he might've thought. The vast majority of what his Clan had built had long since decayed to dust over eighty-thousand years. It was only those things that were particularly well-enchanted and well-fortified that had survived such an abyss of time. It made a degree of sense that a military ark would last a long time as well, but eighty-thousand years beneath the earth, having crashed hard enough to crumple its foredecks...

'There likely isn't even much left on it apart from a damage superstructure,' Leon mused.

"Quite a lot to think about, isn't it?" the Grand Druid said teasingly as her words pulled Leon back to reality.

"Quite," he agreed. "There are certain things that are easy to keep in mind about my Clan. That they built quite spectacularly isn't anything remotely surprising. But the idea that they built something so large that could fly through the air under its own power—not only that, but to traverse the Void itself—boggles the mind. The sheer amount of magical engineering and enchanting and so many other disciplines that would be required to build such a thing is..."

"Quite," the Grand Druid repeated. "Puts everything into perspective, doesn't it? How small we are here on this plane? There are an uncountable number of other planes out there, and the Nexus, of course, and at any point, someone could decide that they're next. They're the ones who might try to conquer Aeterna again, they're the ones who will put my people and all the rest of this world to the sword. And what could we possibly do to stop them? We have a few tenth-tier mages, yes, but what can we hope to use to resist such potential threats?"

Leon frowned lightly. "I think the construction of such a large ark would be..."

"Impossible," the Grand Druid definitively finished. "I'm under no illusion about that. To build anything that could possibly match the works of your Clan would be so far beyond even the power of my Empire that it's laughable to consider. But we can build arks that fly through the air. Entering the Void is even theoretically possible, though we're bound by treaty not to try."

Leon cocked an eyebrow. He'd never heard of such a treaty preventing entering the Void.

"But I believe that we need means to defend ourselves," the Grand Druid continued. "Even if all we learn are how to improve the arks we're currently able to build, then we need to learn them. We can't be babes in a basket, just sitting here in the universe ready for anyone to just come back and pick up as they please."

"I... understand, though I have to ask, why not try and enter the Void now? What treaty prevents this?"

The Grand Druid huffed and dismissively waved her hand. "An old treaty, though one we've all kept in mind. The Void is a dangerous place, and it represents powers that we don't want to provoke. Having arks up in the Void could be seen as a threat unto itself, not only to any potential extraplanar entities out there but also to our neighbors. For to control the air is to control the land, and to control the Void is to control the air."

"I... suppose I can follow that line of thinking."

"Yet you don't sound like you approve."

"I'm not one that likes limitations, even if I wouldn't normally push against my limits without some reason to do so. If someone tells me I can't go somewhere, even if I had no desire to in the first place, I suddenly want to go there, just to see what they're trying to hide. And maybe a little out of spite."

"Just a little?" the Grand Druid asked with a knowing wink.

Leon shrugged with a wry smile. "Back to this ark, though. It's quite a large thing. Is it even still functional?"

"It had some power when we unearthed it, though it's obviously quite heavily damaged and degraded. All of the doors are still locked, but the hull has been rent open in a few places, allowing access to some of the outer decks. All of the internal doors are locked shut, too, so getting further in to access any critical systems has been impossible."

"Can't even cut your way through?"

"We've tried, to no avail. The internal bulkheads are thick and strong, and while there are, as you can see, still some power problems, they don't extend to the internal security enchantments."

"Anything you've seen that might be worth worrying about? Internal security golems and the like? You remember what Cassandra and I encountered in the Prota Forest, right?"

"No such security has been found, manually controlled or not."

"No sign of any intelligent life within the ark, either?" Leon asked, thinking of the surviving wisp that had once been in charge of operating at least some of Storm Herald's systems.

"None. Well, some evidence of animal activity having entered the ark at some point, using the open decks as nests and the like, but no intelligent signs of life."

Leon frowned. "Well, that may still present some kind of problem. Power attracts power, as they say. I'm sure there's some kind of dangerous monster or ancient evil operating in there somewhere. Better to assume that and be pleasantly surprised than be taken off-guard, no?"

"A wise philosophy. I believe it's one that has served Cassandra well in her adventures in these past few years," the Grand Druid said with a leading look in her eye.

Leon's smile thinned slightly, not entirely appreciating the change in topic. "How is she, by the way? Last I heard, she was in the east investigating some ancient ruins she found in the Beloran or somewhere like that?"

The Grand Druid glanced at the wall, clearly seeing outside of it with her magic senses, and she grinned. The ark had come to a slow stop, which Leon had barely even realized with their conversation. Now, the ark was slowly descending through the branches of the central palace-tree toward a large arktop that, despite its size, still seemed quite private with few people gathered for the Grand Druid's return.

Leading the group was a young woman dressed in a gold tunic and light brown pants, a cloth-of-gold cloak over her shoulders, her blond hair shoulder-length on the sides and long enough everywhere else to be pulled back into a long braid that made it halfway down her back, her ruby eyes glittering with anticipation.

And at her side was Sunlight, displayed as prominently as her smile, which grew almost predatory as Leon's magic senses washed over her.

As the ark finally touched down on the arypad and the doors almost immediately slid open, the Grand Druid shot Leon a smirk and said, "Perhaps you ought to ask her yourself..."

### **Chapter 830 - Violent Flirting**

Though he was surprised by the Princess' presence, Leon wore a pleasant smile as he followed the Grand Druid out of the ark.

The Grand Druid rushed about as fast as decorum would allow to her granddaughter, pulling Cassandra into a tight hug, and whispered into her ear, "It's been too long, dear girl. How has my little explorer been?"

"Not so little anymore, Grandmother," Cassandra said as she extricated herself from the tenth-tier mage's grasp. She was much the same as when Leon had last seen her, with her ruby eyes shining brilliantly and her golden hair glittering in the light of the afternoon sun. Her aura seemed a little stronger, as much an indicator of diligent training as her toned figure, though she was still 'only' eighth-tier.

Leon could hardly fault her on that last point, though, as he'd ascended with the aid of a good handful of Hesperidic Apples. As far as 'natural' progression went, he couldn't have been surprised if she'd outpaced him a bit since he was distracted by many other duties and projects.

As Leon's retainers filed out of the ark behind him, Cassandra turned her eyes back in his direction. They locked gazes, and Leon found himself pulled into something of a staring contest. She stood firm as he advanced, each step feeling like an entire minute as they waged their subtle war of wills, neither of them shying away.

Leon stopped before her, neither of them having so much as blinked from the moment of making eye contact. "Your Imperial Highness," Leon said with great formality, "a great pleasure to see you again, and so hale and hearty."

"Leon Raime," Cassandra replied smilingly, almost as if Leon's name was his title—something which he found he appreciated quite a bit. "It's only been five years, but it seems you couldn't wait and just had to reach the ninth-tier before me, huh?" Her eyes narrowed slightly, promising impending challenge, but their gazes were finally interrupted when Valeria arrived at Leon's shoulder. Her bright sapphire eyes locked onto Cassandra, the two of them now of the same tier, and both Cassandra and Leon turned to her.

"Princess," Valeria whispered, though she somehow stuffed an entire paragraph into the one utterance. She demanded Cassandra's attention and promised a contest of might when she received it. Cassandra appeared to accept Valeria's challenge, all communicated through a subtle smile and nod of her head.

The rapidly-growing tension was only severed when the Grand Druid exclaimed, "It seems like you three have quite a lot to catch up on! Cassandra dear, please show our guests where they'll be staying! And if you want to get started on making some babies a little early, I wouldn't mind!"

Cassandra's eyes went wide as she spun around to face her grandmother. Leon was a touch amused to see Cassandra's cheeks go so red so swiftly and barely heard her somewhat stuttered and indignant response, though he certainly caught the quick look at him Cassandra stole partway through her denials.

Leon was brought out of the moment when Nestor bumped into him from behind, with all of Leon's accompanying retainers behind the ghost-golem. Nestor seemed to glare down at Leon, and Leon imagined the man telling him to cut it off and move on.

So, he didn't fight too hard when Cassandra turned back to face them, her cheeks now a few shades more colorful than they were a moment ago, and said, "Please follow me. As it is the will of my grandmother, I will show you all to your quarters."

Without another word, she turned on her heel and began stomping off, to the obvious amusement of the Grand Druid, who together with her followers, went off in a different direction.

"Bitch," Valeria whispered beside Leon just loud enough that Leon knew Cassandra could hear, and when he looked at Valeria in surprise, he found his silver-haired lover grinning rather madly. He looked back to the Princess just in time to see the blond girl glancing over her shoulder with a violent snarl.

"Leon..." Gaius whispered from behind him, "could we maybe save all the flirting for later? We do have some business to attend to..."

Leon smiled apologetically back at his retainers and led the way in Cassandra's wake.

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"... and this is where you and your family will be staying," Cassandra said as she led the way into a magnificent suite set aside for Leon, Maia, and Valeria. "It's a little big, but we were expecting you to bring Lady Elise and that griffin of yours, too."

"Unfortunately, they were a bit indisposed with some personal business," Leon replied as he walked into the suite behind Cassandra, admiring the place.

It was the very picture of rustic opulence, with all the furniture being made of the finest polished wood, and all the decorations that covered the walls being the standard Evergolden affair—no depictions of humans or animals, but lots of flowing, natural lines resembling floral and vine patterns. Instead of being lit by magic lanterns, the suite had small branches of the palace-tree sticking out into it, their glowing golden leaves providing more than enough light, but even more than that were the light projections that simulated large floor-to-ceiling windows on the far side of the main room that projected much of the outside into the room without having the structural weakness of an actual window.

In this vein, the suite amounted to a dozen rooms, including a large bedroom with five huge beds, a private conference room—or as private as it could be in the center of the Sacred Golden Empire's Imperial Palace—and even a small training and meditation room. The central room from which all the others branched off was large and had its own dining space large enough for more than two dozen around a massive oak table.

"You're invited to dine with the Imperial Family," Cassandra said mechanically, as if bored out of her skull, "we'll send some servants to inform you of the time. If you wish to eat here, or not at all, that's fine, too."

"Invitation is gladly received," Leon said as he took a few more steps into the suite to allow Valeria, Maia, and Nestor to enter after him. The others in his retinue had been shown to their suites just down the hall, and Leon noted that enough had been set aside for all of his retainers, including Red, Tikos, and Anshu if they'd accompanied him. As it was, they weren't taking up too many, especially with Helen and Anna rooming together. For his part, as Nestor was just a 'mindless golem' as far as either he or Leon were going to say in Evergold, he was being 'stored' in Leon's suite.

"I'm more interested in other things," Valeria said as she stalked up behind Cassandra, stopping just behind her and certainly well within the Princess' personal bubble. "It's been five years, Princess. I would love to see if you've improved with the blade or not."

Cassandra turned and took not a single step back, leaning against Valeria and grinning as she made full use of her inch-or-two of height on Valeria to stare down at the silver-haired woman. "I've not been slacking, though perhaps you have. You're looking a little thicker around the waist, Val, have you been stuffing your throat with too many... pies?" As she paused, she took a fleeting glance at Leon as her smile widened slightly.

Valeria's killing intent spiked for a moment, though Leon knew Cassandra had only said that to provoke that very reaction—he was intimately familiar with Valeria's figure, and he considered her nothing but at the peak of physical fitness, due in no small part to both her power and her diligence in martial training. She rarely made a big deal out of it, but Leon knew she was quietly proud of her figure.

"It seems all you've sharpened is your tongue," Valeria responded through clenched teeth. "What a shame. I was hoping you might actually provide a challenge, but I'll be left unsatisfied at this rate."

Cassandra glared back at Valeria, her ruby eyes wide with what appeared to be anger.

Leon noted that Maia and Nestor were both staring at the two arguing ladies with complete and utter disinterest, almost annoyance at the disturbance. While he didn't exactly share the sentiment, he felt like their trash talk was going on a little too long.

"I saw a training room back there. Why don't we go break it in?" he suggested.

"Heh. The only thing being broken will be this bitch once we're done," Cassandra growled as she turned and stalked toward the training room.

Valeria grinned and was just about to follow when Leon caught her shoulder.

"Let's not kill each other," he stated, his jaw so tense it was almost locked shut. "A dead Princess or a dead Val would be... inconvenient." He relaxed and smiled. "But don't lose."

Valeria quietly laughed, gave him a glowing look, and then put her battle face back on. Together, the two of them walked to the training room.

Maia and Nestor, on the other hand, seemed about as interested in the impending fight as they were in watching paint dry.

As they entered, Cassandra was already standing in the center of the empty room, a training sword in hand. With a challenging smile, she used her sword to point at a glaive hanging on the wall with dozens of other training weapons. Valeria, not averting her gaze at all from the Princess, picked up the weapon

as Leon made himself comfortable off to the side. As far as he could tell, the training room was well-enchanted, but given how wild both ladies' auras were, he wasn't quite sure how well it might stand up to a full-on fight between them, as he was worried might break out.

But, to his immense relief, as they began their opening moves, they did without the use of elemental magic. Instead, as Valeria assumed a neutral stance before the Princess, Cassandra lunged forward in an overhead slice that, while vicious and powerful, wasn't backed up by so much as a single speck of light magic. As Valeria blocked, Leon could feel the impact through the floor even from where he was watching, but Valeria didn't call upon so much as a single snowflake.

Still, they were eighth-tier mages, and in the space of a single second, they exchanged three blows, each one ringing out like a massive bell and lightly shaking the training room. Valeria took a more defensive approach. She wasn't shying away at all from the Princess, that much Leon could plainly see having sparred with her countless times in the past couple decades, but she was more puzzling out any improvements or changes Cassandra had made to her fighting style in the past few years.

To Leon's eyes, not much had changed. Cassandra was wild and aggressive, focused more on making an opening to exploit than waiting for one. She rained blows on the comparatively more passive Valeria, each one stronger than the last. But, he noticed, her expression was one of chaotic joy rather than growing frustration.

For a moment, when Valeria made her move, he thought the expression might change. But as Valeria spun out of the way of a horizontal slice instead of blocking it and swept her glaive's blade out at Cassandra's exposed leg, the Princess laughed and stepped back just in time.

"Yes!" she shouted as she pivoted into a withering counterattack that had Valeria going back on the defensive for a few more exchanges.

"A good try, but still short!" Valeria mocked as she deflected a blow and suddenly charged forward, slamming her shoulder into Cassandra's sternum. With the strength in her blow, Cassandra was thrown to the other side of the training room gasping for breath. Valeria wasn't one to squander such opportunities and charged again, this time taking the offensive and swiping and lunging with her glaive to keep Cassandra on the back foot.

Cassandra was now out of her element. Her defense was good, Leon could see that much, but it was mechanical and rote rather than intuitive and natural. She was technically skilled in her style, but her movements were too regular and lacked fluidity, showing a lack of comfort with fighting defensively.

Soon enough, Valeria had managed to land a blow to Cassandra's sword arm, causing the Princess to drop her sword. However, just as Valeria seemed to be victorious, Cassandra attempted to seize back the initiative by throwing herself forward and trying to grapple Valeria with her non-stunned arm. Valeria was taken off-guard, and Cassandra slipped right past Valeria's glaive and slammed into her.

Both women hit the floor, neither with weapons in hand. However, Cassandra still had a stunned arm, and Valeria only needed a moment to adapt. In one heartbeat, she'd overpowered Cassandra, knocking the Princess onto her stomach beside her. In the next heartbeat, Valeria had Cassandra in a tight chokehold, and only then did Cassandra finally cease her resistance and relax. A quick tap on Valeria's

arm had her releasing the hold and rolling off Cassandra—to Leon’s quiet displeasure, having rather enjoyed the sight.

“Figures...” Cassandra murmured as she breathed deeply with her airway no longer obstructed—Leon didn’t think she needed to breathe, but even at ninth-tier he still found it comfortable to do so.

“Figures I’d still need... to close a skill gap. You’re a damn monster, Val.”

Valeria smirked. “You’re a hardy bitch, yourself. Your Imperial Highness.”

Cassandra briefly snarled. “We’re in private, fuck the style.”

“Tongue’s getting rough, too, not just sharp,” Valeria quipped. “Too much time around saltier types? Is it common for archaeologists to curse?”

“Fuck ‘common’,” Cassandra responded as she pushed herself back to her feet, Valeria only a moment behind her. She extended a hand, and Valeria took it. “That was a good fucking fight, Val.”

Valeria’s smirk deepened and her eyes flitted in Leon’s direction. “You’re speaking like we’re already done.”

“Oh, we’re not. My blood’s hot and that wasn’t nearly satisfying enough. But that was still a good fight. Now, how about we try getting another in here?” Cassandra then did as Valeria and looked at Leon, who stood leaning against the wall with his arms folded across his chest, a challenging smile of his own spreading across his face. “Leon! My grandmother won’t shut up about your swordsmanship! It’s been too long since I’ve seen it for myself, so why don’t you give me a demonstration?”

“I hope the Grand Druid has been saying good things,” Leon said as he took a longsword he’d spied earlier on the wall. “I’d hate to disappoint.”

“You were satisfactory enough last time,” Cassandra nonchalantly stated. “I see no reason to think that’s changed.” By this point, she was flexing her stunned arm and swinging her sword around again, clearly showing that she was back to full capacity.

Leon took an aggressive posture about twenty feet opposite Cassandra, though it was a bit lazy as they hadn’t quite started their bout. “I’m looking forward to testing my o—”

Before he could finish his statement, Valeria’s glaive appeared as if from nowhere, swinging downwards toward his head. Still, Leon raised his blade and easily deflected it, the strike not having been that unexpected.

“Oh!” Leon gasped in exaggerated surprise. “I have been betrayed!”

Before he could press against Valeria, Cassandra darted in with a laugh and a deadly lunge that Leon twisted away from.

Fighting defensively wasn’t Leon’s strong point either, but he had so much experience fighting Valeria, among many others, that he was able to make it work. He dodged and weaved around both ladies, each of them covering the other’s blind spots and holes in their stances as they attacked him, ensuring that he had no opportunity to strike back. It was hard, both ladies were skilled, but Leon was still a tier stronger, and with them both coming at him as they were, he saw no reason not to use his own advantages.

For the most part, he'd dodged rather than blocking or deflecting, and when he suddenly stopped to block Cassandra, her eyes widened in what he thought was surprise. He took her hit like a brick wall and pushed against her in her brief moment of shock. He could tell that she hadn't had much experience in actual fighting since the expedition to the Prota Forest as he didn't think a more seasoned fighter would've been knocked down.

But knocked down she was, and it wasn't too hard for him to rake his blade across her ribs.

Unfortunately for him, as surprised as Cassandra was, Valeria most certainly wasn't. As much as Leon was experienced in fighting Valeria, she was equally experienced in fighting him, and Leon suffered a blow to the shoulder for taking Cassandra out of the fight. It stung and his left arm went numb, but Leon didn't let that slow him down at all. With only Valeria standing against him, he went back on the offensive. His eyes locked on her, and as usually happened, his focus narrowed until it was filled only by her. Her eyes narrowed, telling him that she was doing the same.

They blurred, their limbs becoming little more than color and motion, exchanging dozens of blows in half as many seconds, the clanging of their weapons the only sound to be heard in the training chamber.

The spar ended when Leon managed to snag a couple of Valeria's fingers with his blade, causing her to drop her weapon. He pushed forward, feeling having already returned to his off-hand, sweeping her up and pulling her into a tight bear hug. His own weapon clattered to the ground as he held her a foot off the ground, their foreheads pressed against each other's, their eyes locked.

"Gotcha," Leon whispered.

"This time," Valeria responded, her statement followed up with a quick kiss.

Leon took a deep breath and let her down, only then turning to face Cassandra. The Princess looked at them with a complex look on her face, but before Leon could try to analyze it, it was gone, replaced with one of inflated disinterest and annoyance.

"About time. I thought for a moment I was going to have to give you two the room."

"You could've joined us," Valeria responded with a smug smile.

"I thought you were going to," Leon honestly added. "I know it was a hard hit, but you had to have recovered quickly."

Cassandra frowned slightly. "We're to 'train how we fight', and all that, right? I'm still working on my powers of resurrection, and you hit me with a killing blow. I wouldn't come back from that in a real fight, so why do so in a spar?"

"To win?" Valeria replied, only half-seriously.

The Princess chuckled. "Maybe next time. For now, I need to get going. I had other duties to see to today other than showing you around. But... I wouldn't mind doing this again. Sparring with you two hasn't yet failed to entertain, at least."

She smiled challengingly at the two of them and Leon and Valeria, standing shoulder to shoulder opposite the Princess, said, "I'm always up for a good fight."



“Bring it, bitch.”

Cassandra chuckled again, but just as she was about to respond, someone burst through the door: an armored woman dressed like Evergold’s Imperial Guard.

“How dare you!” she roared, her eighth-tier aura flaring as she laid a hand on the hilt of the sword at her armored waist, her eyes glaring at Valeria. “To say such—”

“Aikaterine!” Cassandra shouted, silencing the guard. “Quiet.”

The guard, looking suitably chastened, went silent and backed away, her aura calming and her hands moving to fold in front of her rather than resting on her weapon.

“Apologies,” Cassandra said to Valeria. “Evgenia’s on leave, and Aikaterine’s new.”

Valeria just smiled and shrugged.

“Make sure you come to dinner tonight,” Cassandra said. “I’d like to catch up with you two in more ways than just crossing blades.”

“We’ll be there,” Leon said, not even needing to see Valeria to feel her agreement.

“In that case, I’ll leave you to it. See you then.”

Cassandra practically marched out of the training room and their suite, Aikaterine walking rather sheepishly behind her.

Leon and Valeria, meanwhile, glanced at each other, each able to see that their blood was still pumping. They gripped their training weapons a little tighter and decided to go for another round.