

Storm King 831

Chapter 831 - No More

Leon sighed as he left the small group of messengers in his suite's main room. They'd just arrived to escort him and his retainers down to dinner with the Grand Druid, Sacred Golden Empress, Princess Cassandra, and the Princess's elder sister, who Leon had last heard had been serving as a druid, or both a religious figure and governor, of the most important northern province in the Sacred Golden Empire. It seemed she was back in Evergold, though why, Leon wasn't sure, and he couldn't help but wonder if it was because of the ark discovered near Evergold.

These wonderings ceased as he walked into Maia's room. Nestor was squirreled away in the suite's conference room doing whatever it was he did—likely drawing up more designs or editing finished designs for golems—and Valeria was with Maia as far as he knew.

As he walked in, he was confronted by the sight of two of the most beautiful women he'd ever seen in varying states of undress. Maia was almost completely naked, dressed only in plain golden bracelets and a thick golden necklace. Valeria, on the other hand, was almost completely dressed save for her footwear and sitting on the bed while Maia stared at herself in a full-length mirror.

That Maia was effectively naked drew Leon's attention first, for obvious reasons, but his surprise was saved for Valeria, who, in contrast to her usual attitude, had chosen an actual dress to wear to dinner. Furthering Leon's surprise was that it was cut in a fairly Evergolden style, with a plunging neckline, long slits along her legs almost up to her hips, and no back. The dress itself was otherwise decorated fairly simply, being several complementing shades of blue with a few silver trimmings. Adding to the effect were a few pieces of silver jewelry that Leon knew he'd never seen Valeria wear before.

Leon almost froze at the sight, his instincts the only thing allowing him to stay mobile enough to close the door behind him.

"I think he likes it," Valeria said, a wide smile on her face as she sent a smug smile Maia's way.

Maia audibly scoffed, a scowl quickly etching itself deeper and deeper into her features.

"You look fantastic," Leon said to Valeria. Turning to Maia, he quickly added, "While you also look incredible the way you are, I hope you're not planning on attending a meeting like this?"

"I'd rather not go at all," she said aloud, the sound of her voice resounding like the most pleasant music in Leon's ears despite the venom she spat them with.

Still, their meaning wasn't lost on him, and he said, "You don't have to, you can stay here if you like."

Her scowl lessened slightly, but she responded, "No, I'll go. It's... expected of me, isn't it?"

Leon's smile twitched downward for a moment. "Been speaking much to Elise? She making progress in integrating you with the upper echelons of human society?"

Maia sighed, and in a flash of light, was clothed in a manner much akin to Valeria. However, where Valeria's dress was blue, Maia's was sea green and trimmed in gold, matching her necklace and bracelets.

"To be your mate requires me to keep these things in mind," Maia mechanically stated, as if reciting something she didn't fully endorse.

"The only things you need to keep in mind are... well, I can't think of any," Leon playfully replied as he took her in his arms and spent a moment admiring her. "All you have to be is Maia, I won't love you any less for that."

Maia shuddered as Leon spoke her name and, with her bronze cheeks a little redder than they were a moment before, said, "It's fine. People have been staring at me ever since I left my grotto and joined you, expecting things of me. I will give them nothing, but I will not let them think for a moment that I'm unworthy of being with you."

"If anyone thinks that, they can eat lightning," Leon said as he emanated a spike of killing intent.

Maia just smiled and sent feelings of love and understanding through their connection, and Leon knew that she was set on making an appearance, as much as she wasn't enthusiastic about it. And since she was appearing, then she was going to put in more effort than she was otherwise inclined to at least look like she belonged in such august company, even if Leon didn't care if she wore a cloth sack or a ten-million-silver dress.

But with that mental message, Leon gave Maia a quick kiss and turned his attention to Valeria, who was also clearly wearing a different style than usual. Unlike Maia, however, who was more comfortable wearing nothing but her skin more often than not, Valeria had a simple and functional sense of style, preferring plain tunics and long, tight pants that were easy to move in. To see her in a dress, especially one so revealing, was rare.

"You look great," he said, not hiding it at all as his eyes wandered up and down her body. Elise might've preened with such attention, but Valeria just smiled at him and shifted slightly to put herself just a little more on display.

"Wanted to look my best. We're practically marching to war, aren't we?"

"War would involve more armor and just a little less frustration. But if we are going to war, then no one's told me; who are we to fight, then?"

Valeria chuckled. "Cassandra."

With that one name, much of Leon's cheer evaporated. Valeria certainly noticed if her sudden look of confusion and then apology was anything to go by.

"Is everything all right, Leon?" she asked, and Leon felt a pulse of concern from Maia.

"With you two here, how can anything not be all right?" he quipped. But after a moment of staring at Val, he added, "It's just... All right, look. I like Cassandra. I like Cassandra. I'm not going to dispute that. But I made the choice not to pursue her, and for a number of reasons that I don't feel like going into now, as I'm sure those bootlickers outside are still waiting to take us down to wherever."

Leon sighed and sat down on the bed next to Valeria, who scooted a little bit closer.

"I'm... growing less happy with people constantly throwing both my attraction to her and my decision not to go after her back in my face."

"I wasn't—" Valeria began, but Leon held up his hand and she cut herself off.

"It's not your fault. We all have our own wants and desires. But I'm not looking for a massive harem. I don't want to have a hundred wives and a thousand concubines—or more, as seems to be almost expected for men of great stature in the Nexus, if Nestor can be taken at his word. I just want the women I love with me, and that amounts to you two and Elise. You three make me happy. That's enough.

"But... it seems that everyone but me wants me to go after Cassandra. And even that's not true, since I won't deny that a part of me wants to go after her, too. The greedy part, the part that wants a hundred wives and a thousand concubines, even though I know that that won't make me happy, and likely won't make anyone else happy, either."

"I think if you try for a harem that large, Elise might just come at you with a gelding knife," Valeria said, her voice quivering despite it being a joke.

Leon smiled. "She's made it clear enough that she wants me to go after Cassandra, and though she's also told me before that she doesn't want me going around fucking everyone that I can get my cock into, if she's on the side of having me go after Cassandra, then what about the future? While there's a greedy part of me that might want a large harem, there's no Ancestors-damned way I'm doing it. Three's enough. Four's pushing it."

With some concerned hesitance, Valeria, clearly measuring her words carefully, said, "You... don't have to start anything with Cassandra..."

Leon shrugged. "Maybe I don't. Maybe I will. Maybe I do and she cuts me down. Maybe, maybe, maybe, maybe." He turned to seriously regard Valeria. "I'm going to tell you this..." He glanced then at Maia. "And I'm going to tell you this. And I'll tell Elise this once we get back home after this religious festival they want us to attend and we get done checking out this ark of theirs.

"Whether or not Cassandra and I start a romantic relationship, there will be no more after her. None. I don't care about the political benefits. I don't care about potential power. There will be no more. Cassandra would be it, should it come to pass. And should it not, then my 'harem' will grow no more. Do either of you find this disagreeable?"

"No," Maia said without hesitation. "Fewer mates to compete with."

Valeria took a second to take one of Leon's hands, but her answer came with the same level of certainty as Maia's had. "I want you to be happy. I want to be happy, too. And I don't want you to have a hundred wives. I wouldn't be happy if you did, and if you don't think you'd be happy if you did either, then don't have a hundred wives."

Leon chuckled. "You're all right with a thousand concubines then? I'll keep that in mind..."

Valeria playfully slapped his arm while Maia practically growled.

"I don't want you to have any more women," she clarified. After a moment, she decided that wasn't enough and added, "Or any other lovers, for that matter."

Leon gave her an amused look.

“Just being thorough,” she said, laughing. “Who knows where we’ll be in ten thousand years? But, to stay on track, I’m making one exception for Cassandra. One. And I’m only speaking for myself.” Her eyes landed on Maia, and the river nymph just glared back at her.

With a frown, Maia said, “The arrogant Princess is fine. As for others...”

Her glare turned to Leon and without warning, she lightly grabbed Leon between the legs. Her touch was gentle, yet firm, but Leon still had to fight the urge to catapult upward and defend his most sensitive bits.

[Mine,] the river nymph whispered mentally. [Not theirs. Mine. Elise’s. Val’s. Maybe Cassandra’s. No one else’s.]

Leon grinned as she removed her hand. “Glad we’re all on the same page, then. So long as Elise meets us here, too.”

“She will,” Valeria said as she stood up. “She doesn’t push that hard for you to expand your pool of available women, does she?”

Leon lightly grimaced. “No, not really.”

“Then it won’t be a problem.”

Leon heard some shuffling outside of the bedroom door and was made very aware of just how long he and his ladies had been in the room, leaving their escorts waiting on them to head to the Imperial dinner.

‘I guess we’ll be fashionably late,’ Leon thought as he rose and let his ladies take one of his arms each. ‘At least we got all of that clarified. I guess I just... have to decide on what to do about that damn Princess, don’t I?’

Leon, his ladies, and his retainers arrived in the dining hall where their Imperial hosts were already waiting—or at least, Cassandra was, the Empress and the Grand Druid were nowhere to be seen. There were about a hundred other people in the hall, as well, but Leon didn’t think his people were too late given the lack of any substantial food on the many long tables around.

In truth, calling this space a ‘hall’ wasn’t precisely accurate. They were up in the cavernous gap amongst the branches of the main palace-tree, in something that was more pavilion than hall. The paving beneath their feet wasn’t made of elegantly carved stone, but rather seemed to be natural stones painstakingly assembled like puzzle pieces, and mortared together with concrete or some similar substance. Still, the effect of such irregular stones forming the floor was surprisingly pleasant, Leon found.

Meanwhile, the walls of the ‘hall’ were formed by enchanted hedges, and the decorative columns were actually branches of the palace-tree sticking out of the ‘ground’ in regular intervals like tree trunks unto themselves. The leaves that sprouted from these branches formed the ceiling of the ‘hall’.

As soon as they arrived, Leon’s retainers were directed to one of the tables close to, but not directly adjacent to the one where Cassandra now sat. Leon, Maia, and Valeria, meanwhile, were all ushered up

to sit at that long table at the place of highest honor in the hall. Cassandra was nibbling on some finger food, seemingly completely alone at her table. Leon could see her guards not doing a good job of concealing themselves amongst all the other guards around the hall's perimeter, and none of the other invitees were approaching her, though given how little she seemed to notice Leon's arrival, he had to wonder if he was just missing something that they'd all noticed or were otherwise aware of.

After a moment, he decided to just break the ice first as Valeria and Maia certainly weren't going to be the ones to speak first—especially since Leon was sitting directly on Cassandra's left, and they were sitting on his left in turn.

"Apologies for not saying this when we met earlier, Your Imperial Highness," he said, quietly reveling in the way she finally looked at him with some disdain when he used her style, "but I have to offer my congratulations and joy at seeing you fully re-armed."

She turned to face him a little more, and her gaze turned a little more imperious. "It was nothing our healers couldn't see to." She flexed her right arm, the one she'd lost in the lab in the Prota Forest. "Good as new. It was still an uncomfortable few weeks before I could get it back, though."

Leon winced and his left arm began to throb. "Sorry it took so long."

Cassandra shrugged. "For the perspective it gave me, a few weeks wasn't that much to pay. The pain was a little easier to bear when my mother and grandmother finally allowed me to leave the borders of our Empire, though."

"Right, the Grand Druid's told me rather often that you've been running around all over the plane, finding and exploring all kinds of lost ruins. How's it be—"

As Leon was finishing his question, a man with an eighth-tier aura and an expensive suit of white and gold approached their table and interrupted, though he had eyes only for Cassandra. It seemed he'd only just arrived after Leon, he thought he would've seen the man otherwise as most of the guests in the hall were women, and those who weren't tended to be dressed a little more simply, implying lower standing.

"Your Imperial Highness!" he exclaimed. "What a radiant sight you are! Your power and vigor are an inspiration for the ages!"

"Stephanos," the Princess drily responded. "Bold as ever."

"Bah!" Stephanos loudly barked. "What is etiquette before the one who holds my heart!"

"Everything", some might say," the Princess growled. Stephanos waved his hand as if to literally brush away her concerns, but as he was about to say something else, Cassandra said in a tone that brooked no argument, "There'll be time enough later for us to talk. For now, I'm with some important guests and I would dearly like to catch up with them."

Stephanos appeared a little taken aback, and his eyes landed on Leon for what seemed like the first time since he'd come over. But his smile didn't waver for a single second, and he graciously bowed and said, "Of course, Your Imperial Highness! I shall not intrude any longer!" With that, he turned and left, though not before letting his eyes scan Leon once more.

It was faint enough that he thought he might be mistaken, but Leon thought that there was a trace of killing intent in the man's aura as he walked away.

'Damn it,' he thought.

Continuing like they hadn't been interrupted at all, however, he asked, "How's the archaeology been going? Find anything interesting?"

Cassandra immediately brightened up, the dark cloud that had settled over her expression upon Stephanos' interruption clearing up immediately. "Oh yes! A few traces of those who lived here before the Sky Devils descended! Nothing practical yet, but it's only a matter of time!"

Leon gave her a questioning look, his brow creasing slightly in confusion. "That's still interesting. I mean, I'm assuming 'nothing practical' means 'nothing magical', and it's hard to imagine anything nonmagical to have survived so much time..."

"It's possible under certain circumstances," the Princess replied. "In a lot of cases, other archaeologists have already done a lot of work for me, and I just had to continue following the clues they couldn't—usually due to financing difficulties. Starting with those most promising and working our way back. We've found what we guess are monuments and religious buildings, some even with completely unrecognizable script! In one case, we found buried more than a hundred feet under the earth and entombed in volcanic ash a city of decent size—big enough for twenty or thirty thousand people! The ash had kept everything so well preserved that the frescoes and graffiti on the walls were still vivid enough to be easily identified! We can't read any of the graffiti, but the fact that we've found anything so old at all is just... amazing!"

Leon smiled as he leaned back in his chair, the Princess going into greater detail about the kinds of sites she'd investigated and excavated, her joy and energy growing with every word. But it wasn't just her demeanor that he paid attention to, he started growing more concerned when she brought up seeing reptilian—and serpentine in particular—imagery present in many of these sites, but her stories were soon interrupted by the arrival of their hosts. The Empress, Grand Druid, and First Princess of the Sacred Golden Empire all arrived and kicked off all the pomp and ceremony of an Imperial feast, silencing Cassandra and leaving Leon to wonder how much the people Cassandra was finding records of had in common with those that had once lived in the Serpentine Isles...

Chapter 832 - Purpose of the Journey

Leon hesitated a moment before knocking on Helen and Anna's door. Neither had given much actual reason to worry, but it had been a while since Anna had killed Casimir, and Leon needed to make sure they were doing all right. Bringing them back to the land of their birth was a part of that.

For however much it was needed, it seemed to at least be put to use, as the former ambassador to the Ilion Empire—a family friend who'd privately investigated their parents' death and learned they were killed by a vampire, leading them to Casimir—had been present at the feast, as had a few others who had also risen in the years since who remembered their parents well.

Hesitating no longer, Leon knocked, and a moment later, Helen answered.

"Hey there boss," she said after a moment of surprise, though she seemed completely at ease.

"Mind if I come in?" he asked.

"Sure thing," she responded as she stepped back and let him in.

As Leon walked in, he gave their suite a quick once-over. As expected, though it was only a few doors down from his own, it was smaller, appearing to lack a conference room or a dedicated training room. As it was, it was still opulent and comfortable, but hardly a match for his suite.

"No training room?" Leon asked, looking for confirmation.

Helen cocked an eyebrow and gave him a half-smile. "No? Need a reason to know?"

"Can't even give us a few days off, oh taskmaster of ours?" Anna asked as she left a bedroom and joined them out in the main room.

"Just want to make sure my people are in fighting shape," Leon said with a smile and a shrug.

"If I'm fighting, then we're all already screwed," Helen whispered as she ran her fingers through her bright red hair. It had been green until not long before they accompanied the Grand Druid back to the Sacred Golden Empire.

"No reason not to be ready, at least," Leon argued. "Screwed or not, better to know how to fight than not, yes?"

Helen scowled, but Anna quickly said, "As you say, though few of us have the inclination for such violent pursuits."

"Knowing how to fight isn't violent, it's using your skills to visit violence upon others. Without pain, then training is like dancing. Just waving sharp bits of metal around instead of spinning around."

"I think you need to work on that argument, I'm not convinced."

Leon frowned at Anna, and after a moment, Helen asked, "Have anything for us, boss? I thought we were going to be kind of on our own for a few days until the Red Leaf ceremony."

"Aye, that was the plan. Don't know why I phrased it like that, still is the plan. I'm a little... I'm just... why don't we have a quick sit?"

With both Helen and Anna giving him strange looks, Leon led the way to the nearest sofas and took a seat with Helen and Anna doing likewise on the sofa opposite him.

And there they sat in silence for a painfully long time as Leon fought to get his thoughts in order. Eventually, under the pressure of their expectant gazes, he asked, "How are... how are you two doing?"

"Fine!" Anna immediately responded, sounding almost offended at the question, but Helen took a much longer moment to answer. The now-redhead glanced at her sister, Anna's just-as-new platinum locks gleaming in the light of their room's glowing leaves.

"We're... fine," she eventually said.

"That pause wasn't encouraging," Leon pointed out. There was another silent pause, but this time it was more a result of Anna and Helen not speaking than Leon. So, after at least half a minute of awkward

waiting, Leon explained, “Look, I’m not trying to pry. If you two say that you’re all right, then you’re all right. But I want to make sure that my team is as healthy as they can be, mentally and physically. Hate my insistence on training all you want, but it’s better to be ready than not, no matter what.

“And make no mistake: we’re going to need to be ready.” He glanced meaningfully at Helen. “All of us. And I need my people in top shape. My enemies, especially those I haven’t even made yet, aren’t going to wait patiently for us to train if they can help it. It will be our own power and the alliances we can make that will keep us safe—hopefully the former, I say.

“Now, it’s been a fairly... interesting few months. Magical ascensions, a few key breakthroughs in research projects, valuable finds following long expeditions, and rightful vengeance taken.”

Leon paused, giving his meaningful looks to both ladies now that he was getting to the crux of his visit. From the way they both tensed up, he knew that they had no problem figuring out why he was here now.

“So, I’ll ask again: how are you two doing? It’s been a few months since Casimir’s death. You’re my people, I’m your commander, and I will worry about your well-being even if given no other reason. Your lives are my responsibility, and more than that, I like to think that we’re at least friends.”

“You’ve saved our lives before,” Helen said, speaking slowly and clearly thinking over her words fairly carefully before speaking. “We... I would also like to think that we’re friends.”

Leon smiled.

“Same here,” Anna whispered.

“Then I hope that if anything comes up, if you two ever need help of any kind...”

“We know this,” Helen responded. “But I have to ask again, have you noticed something that prompted this?”

“Well, you two have seemed a bit... distracted. That thing with Nidar and Astar trashing the stables was rather eye-opening, and I’ve noticed you, Helen, haven’t been quite as energetic about our work as you normally are. You two just seem like you have a lot on your minds... some more than others...”

Leon made eye contact with them both, but he saved his more serious stare for Anna, who at least looked suitably contrite.

“That was a mistake on my part,” Anna said. “I shouldn’t have lost control of my beasts like that...”

“No, especially not with that bracelet. I’m not even close to being a competent darkness mage, but with such a tool I’d imagine that it was quite the distraction that had your wyverns going insane in my stables. I can’t have something like that happen again. That sentiment is many times greater if they are ever to become proper war beasts.”

Anna sighed. “Were you not right, I’d honestly be pretty angry right now.”

Leon suppressed a scowl. “It was my stables that were almost demolished. I don’t see how I’d be wrong in this instance.”

Any trace of defiance in Anna's expression died in that moment.

It was Leon's turn to sigh, especially when Helen started looking nervous.

"I don't want to be the bad guy here," he calmly stated. "I just want us all to be in top shape. I want us all to be happy and healthy. And as your employer, as I said just a moment ago, you two are my responsibilities, for all the good and bad. When you two are injured, mentally or physically, it's my responsibility to make sure you heal. I hope it's not too arrogant to say that when you fail in your duties, that failure is on me as well. And any failure on either of your parts is especially egregious because I know that you're both far too competent to let such failures happen."

Both ladies smiled a little bit as he reached the end of his spiel, but they were still looking quite put out. Regardless, Leon knew that being a leader meant that he sometimes had to kick his people in the ass if they were off-track, he couldn't only be their friend and forgive their every mistake.

"We hear you," Helen murmured. "I've... I'll admit that I've been distracted."

"Same here," Anna muttered, her eyes unfocused and staring off into space.

Leon smiled sadly. "I came in here asking how you two were. I won't ask that again. I just want you both to remember that if you ever need to talk, I'm here to listen. And if you want to talk to someone else, then I will do everything I can to facilitate that."

"Thank you," Helen responded, Anna still barely able to look at Leon. "If it's all right, I think we'd rather talk about... this with some other people first."

"That's fine. I won't ask anything of the two of you, so use this time we're in Evergold to rest up and see to yourselves."

"Thank you," Helen replied, and Anna nodded as well.

With that, Leon stood up, said his goodbyes, and left his retainers on their own, feeling just a little unsatisfied. His more selfish thoughts were straying in Casimir's direction, but he supposed he had answer enough, anyway. The two clearly weren't happy. Their parents weren't coming back. The world was safer without Casimir, but they would never hear the sound of their parents' laughter again. They'd never be able to brag to their parents about their accomplishments. Even Leon, for all his family that had entered Death's Kingdom, had at least some hope of finding his mother.

Casimir was dead, and as far as Leon could tell, Anna and Helen felt nothing but pain.

There was a small part of Leon that thought the Red Leaf ceremony, the religious festival that the Grand Druid had initially used as the pretext for inviting him to the Sacred Golden Empire, was just an excuse for the people of Evergold to have a big old party. It was more festival than ceremony, though one that was at least kicked off by a lengthy ceremony.

All of the leaves of the palace-trees, in the course of a single evening, turned red and fell from their branches. As many leaves as possible were then gathered up and ritually crushed by the Empress, the Grand Druid, and both Princesses, along with a host of nature mages. The resulting dust was scattered about the city, thrown from the top branches of the palace-tree.

That was the signal for a city-wide festival, during which it seemed the only people not working in government who were forced to work and weren't either in food service or part of the many parades and other street entertainment were the nature mages, who had to see to the palace-trees and regrow all of their leaves before morning.

Leon was grateful to set all of his problems aside for the time being and wander the streets, accompanied only by Maia and Valeria—Nestor being left back in his guest suite and Gaius going off with Anna and Helen. He also noticed a number of Evergolden Imperial Guards in plain clothes following them, but he paid them no mind.

It was a fun night, even for him. Though he wasn't that keen on remaining in public for long, and Maia and Valeria generally weren't either, there were at least enough distractions and food to keep them moving onto the next street.

Still, all three returned to the central palace-tree not long after midnight and turned in, for the real meat of their visit to the Sacred Golden Empire was to come later the next day: the visit to the discovered ark.

To this ark, Leon was true to his word and didn't take Helen or Anna, leaving them behind in Evergold. Aside from his ladies, he took only Nestor and Gaius.

The ark was twenty miles north of Evergold entangled in the root of a massive tree, revealed by a rift opened by an earthquake. It was in a relatively rural area, making it more than clear that something was up given the entire area had been locked down and practically turned into a new military base. Dozens of buildings and temporary housing for hundreds of soldiers ensuring the surroundings remained as secure as such a find demanded.

As they entered the site, escorted by both the Grand Druid and Cassandra, Leon was unsurprised to find even more soldiers inhabiting underground facilities built into the walls of the rift, inflating the number of guards into the thousands.

For him, though, the real attention-grabbing stuff didn't come until they reached the deepest part of the rift, where a small concrete castle—and given its appearance, Leon couldn't think of it as anything less than a proper castle—had been erected. Once through the door, however, they went down a large magic lift into a truly massive underground chamber, easily comparable to any of the chambers in Tusk's territory. This one, however, was even more impressive given its obvious artificial nature.

On the floor of the cavern rested the dead supercarrier, the tree roots that had once entangled it removed. Only its top and sides had been fully excavated, as the Empire was still building the proper infrastructure to get it off the ground, but even as partially buried as it was, and as obviously damaged as it was, it was still a sight to see.

The supercarrier was, in a word, massive. Nearly as large as Jason Keraunos' ark, and larger by a wide margin than any other piece of military hardware built by the Empires in their long histories. Fully exploring the thing could take weeks, if not months.

Leon didn't think they'd even have days. The Grand Druid just wanted his assistance in getting the thing up and running, which largely meant that he just needed to open doors and try and get any functional systems to respond to their arksmiths and military engineers, and he wasn't so sure he could do that without plenty of time exploring.

He wasn't sure he wanted to turn such a valuable piece of his family's military legacy over to Evergold.

In their time alone, Leon had refrained from quizzing Nestor on his Clan's arks, despite having received a primer from the Grand Druid on the flight over. He knew that this was a supercarrier, one of the Thunderbird Clan's largest war arks, but he couldn't bring himself to ask the man-golem for any more information in their guest suite, or even to talk to him much at all except to bark orders.

They'd agreed beforehand that it was for the best, but as Leon stood before the small section of the ark that had been forced somewhat above the ground, he couldn't help but wish he'd been able to find some way to be confident any potential talk with Nestor couldn't be spied on. Not even the dead man could guarantee that, not without attention-grabbing preparation first.

"Has there been any change?" Leon asked as he stared at the monstrously-large ark in wonder.

"None," the lead Evergolden engineer, who'd accompanied him and all the rest upon their arrival, clarified. "So far, we've not yet managed to access any decks that have no physical damage allowing entry. All doors remain shut, no system remains operable."

"Well, let's see what we can do about that, shall we?"

From behind their group, a vaguely familiar voice quipped, "That's what we're here for, is it not?"

Leon glanced over his shoulder and saw that Stephanos, the man who'd so rudely approached Cassandra during the feast was standing there, surrounded by a number of rather civilian-looking men and women. He noted that all those in uniforms of the official Evergolden authorities were busy manning the various workstations and facilities built around the cavern to monitor and secure the supercarrier, but these particular folks had come out of a rather palatial-looking building built into the cavern wall.

"All the finest arksmiths in the Empire, come to analyze and take control of this utter marvel!" Stephanos continued, though Leon was rather displeased to see the man's eyes lock onto Cassandra as he finished.

"Leon Raime, this is Stephanos," the Grand Druid introduced. "He's one of my Empire's most reliable arksmiths..." She quickly introduced the other civilians with Stephanos, most of whom were themselves civilian arksmiths.

Leon, however, barely spared most of them so much as a glance. Only the eighth-tier Stephanos warranted his attention, especially since the man stared back at him with a look of such smug superiority that Leon felt a near-overwhelming urge to walk over and clock him in the jaw.

When the Grand Druid finished introducing everyone, Stephanos finally turned away from Leon and focused on Cassandra.

"Your Imperial Highness," he said, the other arksmiths behind him remaining quiet and seemingly following his lead, "it's such a pleasure to see you again in so short a time. My heart swells with gratitude just to be in your august presence!"

"Save it, Steph," Cassandra growled. "We're here on business."

“Of course, of course,” ‘Steph’ replied, to Leon’s irritation. He stared probingly at Leon, Maia, Valeria, Gaius, and Nestor, his gaze only becoming marginally less like a glare when he reached the last. “I’m just confused as to what this group could possibly contribute that the best and brightest of our Empire could not.”

“Continue to wonder,” the Grand Druid shot back. “We’re heading in. You will follow, but not join.”

“Yes, Your Divinity,” Stephanos instantly replied, though again, Leon felt a slight hint of killing intent from the man.

“Now,” the Grand Druid said to Leon, “shall we get closer?”

“Yes,” Leon replied, eager to get back to business. As much as Stephanos concerned him, he was far more eager to get to work unraveling the mysteries of the supercarrier.

Without any more ado, the Grand Druid and the lead engineer led their procession, along with several guards and other engineers—Stephanos and the other civilian arksmiths following at a respectful distance—down to a steel ramp leading up to the crack in the supercarrier’s hull that had allowed access in the first place.

From up close, it was clearly not damage sustained in the fall, if the intense burns and melted edges of the hole were any indications, though given the hull was fifteen feet of enchanted and alchemically-enhanced steel, the hole’s very existence was evidence enough that it had been created violently rather than suffered in the crash.

He didn’t stop to examine for too long before the Grand Druid led them all into the two-thousand-foot-long supercarrier, and they began their explorations.

Chapter 833 - Supercarrier I

The opening torn into the hull of the supercarrier was small relative to the size of the vessel, but quite large on a human scale. Leon and his party had no trouble getting through it, finding themselves in a fairly long, narrow hall on the other side. It was perhaps wide enough to allow three or four men to walk shoulder-to-shoulder, but triple the height of the average man. Given the ark had crashed and was currently embedded in the earth nose-first, Leon and the others almost had to resort to flight just to navigate the hallway.

Criss-crossing the interior was what seemed to be support beams, and all along the inner wall were savaged runic engravings.

Leon was immediately entranced by the runes, but the damage that the exterior of the ark had suffered was tiny compared to what had happened to the runes, most of which were completely unreadable now. What Leon found more important upon his investigation was that there was still a fairly substantial current of magic power running through the ark’s interior.

“This place still has power,” he said, his voice colored with wonder. He almost instinctively turned to Nestor to ask him about it, but as Cassandra, the Grand Druid, and the rest of their entourage followed his party into the ark, he held his tongue. They weren’t being accompanied by many, only a small handful of guards and engineers, but Leon still wasn’t risking anything with the Grand Druid being anywhere close to earshot.

Besides, he and Nestor had already worked out something of a strategy for their exploration. It was loose and situational, but they didn't need extensive plans to carry it out. It essentially amounted to seeing if it was possible to use anything they might find in the ark to separate their party from the Grand Druid and continue their explorations in peace.

Fortunately, Stephanos and the other civilian arksmith were remaining outside, at least for the moment.

"We believe this hallway to be a maintenance section," the lead engineer explained as she landed in the hall. "Some inspections have revealed the outer hull to not only be heavily enchanted, but we also believe it was engineered to have some ability to absorb shocks by flexing inward and then back out." As she spoke, she indicated the beams that Leon had taken to be meant for support. "Other than that, we've found a few other hatches that we think were designed to allow some kind of substance to fill this pocket between the inner and outer hull, but we've not been able to get the hatches open to confirm."

The lead engineer then gave the Grand Druid, and then Leon, a rather pointed look.

The Grand Druid smiled and said, "Then let's see what our 'specialist' can do to help. Leon, if you would, my boy, there's a door over there." With an elegant wave, the Grand Druid indicated one end of the hallway where a narrow door could just barely be seen amidst what to Leon looked like the hatches the lead engineer was talking about.

Without a word, Leon approached the door and examined it. It was built in a narrow trapezoidal shape, though he couldn't see any runic circles glowing on it which might open it. Without a word, however, Nestor approached from behind and, with mechanical stiffness to hide the ease with which he could move, he tapped a specific place on the door's frame and a panel opened up.

Nestor began working on the panel while the Grand Druid said, "Truly a marvelous golem you have, Leon. Would it be possible to allow us to study it after this is over?"

"Unfortunately, no," Leon replied. "I have quite a few projects back home that I was hoping the golem could be useful for."

"Sounds tantalizing," Cassandra said as she slunk closer, her eyes on Nestor the entire way. "What is it doing now?"

"I'm guessing some kind of maintenance routine," Leon explained. "Hard to say. From my own tests, I found that it's quite adept at manipulating various enchanted objects, so there's a possibility it was more than just a scribe-golem, but something more akin to a highly-advanced automated assistant or tool or something like that for whoever built it."

Almost as soon as Leon finished his short explanation, Nestor shut the panel and a red runic circle appeared on the door.

"Look at that," Leon breathed. "I was hesitant to bring this thing along, but..." He pressed his hand against the runic circle and activated it with his magic power. The door slid into the wall in response, giving access to the hall beyond—though Leon noted that a few other enchantments in the door activated as well, and if he were correct, they were some kind of blood magic. If he had to guess, then he would say that the ark already knew he was a Clan member. With a smile, he turned back and glanced at Nestor. "... Looks like it's paying off already."

“So it is,” the Grand Druid exclaimed. “Let’s see what’s beyond!”

Despite the Grand Druid’s excitement, there wasn’t much exciting on the other side of the door. A long hallway no wider than the one that ran between the outer and inner hull. There were a few more doors on the inside, and unlike nearly all the other ruins Leon had found of his Clan, these weren’t empty but instead filled with hunks of rusted and dusty metal—they were in a maintenance section of the ark, and these were probably the tools the ark’s complement of engineers used to keep the ark running.

Or so he would’ve guessed. A little further down the hallway, they were stopped by another door, this one a little bigger and sturdier-seeming than the previous one. However, this one didn’t require Nestor to fiddle with an interior panel, and Leon was able to open it without problems. The connected rooms to this hallway were a little fuller than the ones just before, and from the way the lead engineer practically squealed in delight as they came upon these objects, Leon could tell they were of value.

“I... I think these are spare parts for micro-arks!” the lead engineer cried after a few minutes of inspection. “Arks only large enough for one or two people, with small Lance-like weapon systems! Fast and deadly, an ark like this one could carry dozens of micro-arks! Imagine a hundred Lances, all with the mobility of the fastest and most maneuverable arks that we can build today!”

Leon smiled with all the others, but as Cassandra and the Grand Druid began gushing about the possible implications of such a find, Leon found himself glancing at Nestor. The MALLs he and his research division had devised were only possible thanks to the integration of thunder wood into their design. Nestor had previously indicated that such weapon systems were generally seen as useless by the powers-that-be in the Nexus given the sheer amount of power required for such weapons to become mobile, and their relative uselessness in combat with post-Apotheosis mages.

However, such ‘micro-arks’ that the lead engineer described would be similar weapon platforms that could fly. Leon couldn’t help but see some discrepancy there. Why was an armored ground vehicle not used, but these micro-arks were?

Unfortunately, with everyone else around them, Leon couldn’t grill Nestor on this point, but he mentally filed it away for later.

The exploration of the ark continued, with the maintenance section of the supercarrier being a dense warren of rooms, closets, and broken machinery, the latter of which appeared with greater frequency the deeper into the ark they got. They found several large magic lifts in this maintenance section—or ‘engineering’ section, as the lead engineer started calling it as they found more and more complex mechanical and magical machinery—big enough to carry the Director’s personal ark, but even though the ark itself still seemed to have power, the lifts wouldn’t budge. Fortunately, there were emergency stairs just for this purpose.

With this group, Leon led them around the ark as best as he could. However, it soon became clear that many of the interior doors that lead into the heart of the supercarrier were sealed even to him—not that he tried that hard to open them, after a few very subtle warning gestures from Nestor—but most of the outer compartments were easy enough to explore. They found what seemed like the crew quarters, with bays big enough to house hundreds of bunks, nonfunctional hygiene equipment, and trashed and desiccated leisure areas. These areas were easy enough to identify given the furniture, all of which was made of steel, was still there, though any and all organic materials had long since decayed to dust.

More intriguing were the massive bays found close to the hull, from which the lead engineer theorized the micro-arks could be launched. They found four of these massive bays, and within each, they estimated four to six micro-arks could be stored at any one time.

Several doors in the back of each of these bays led into long hallways along the bottom of the supercarrier, much larger than the hallway they'd used to enter the ark, each one with a number of alcoves about large enough for the Director's ark to be stored. Tracks along the floor indicated that the micro-arks likely weren't meant to be stored in the bays, but in these alcoves, where the remnants of many arcane machines could be seen. There were enough alcoves for at least three hundred micro-arks within the supercarrier.

A few of these alcoves were filled, though what was in them was little more than a mound of heavily-deteriorated metal that could have, eighty-thousand years ago, been the small arks in question. As they were now, there was nothing immediately usable to salvage within the supercarrier's storage bays.

To some degree, Leon was surprised that they hadn't found any weapons. He knew from Nestor's briefing prior to coming to the Sacred Golden Empire that supercarriers had at least some complement of onboard weapons, but they were designed mostly to be a base for smaller arks to launch from. Given that they hadn't known any supercarriers remained, Nestor hadn't gone into too much detail, though, leaving Leon to wonder just what kind of weapons were placed onboard, and where they might be located.

Closer to the hull was an obvious place to look, but many of the decks were inaccessible no matter what Leon or Nestor did—crushed when the supercarrier crashed, damaged from whatever it was that made the supercarrier crash, Leon couldn't say.

But, after many hours, their group had explored essentially all that was currently available. By Leon's estimation, at least half, if not more, of the ark remained unexplored, but those areas were within the area of the ark that wasn't opening for him. Leon was a little worried, but he remained patient. He was confident that he and Nestor could get inside if given the chance to do so without people watching over their shoulders.

That would have to wait, though, for the group decided to take a break while the engineers along with them cataloged everything they'd found and mapped out the interior as best they could.

While they did that, Leon stood apart with his people, but he wasn't able to say more than a couple words before the overbearing presence of the Grand Druid washed over him from behind.

Leon turned, a smile plastered over his face, to meet the aged woman right behind him, who wore a similar smile to his.

"Leon," she said, her tone light and pleasant.

"Grand Druid," Leon replied, his tone likewise. "This place is incredible, isn't it?"

"It is. Its majesty has not been matched on this place since its fall. We'll be working to change that, but we'll have to see if we can get further inside before then."

"The aft sections of the ark are mostly opened, now," Leon pointed out. "This ark's engines seemed intact enough to study..."

"Just studying the engines is fine, but they won't do us much good if we can't analyze the ark's power source," the lead engineer called out, having apparently listened in.

"Yes," Leon agreed with some slight annoyance. "But surely that's enough to study for a long while, isn't it? I doubt this thing will ever take to the skies again, not with how damaged it is, but just studying this massive metal corpse ought to be a massive boon to your Empire, wouldn't you say?"

"I would say that," the Grand Druid agreed with a mysterious smile. "As for the rest... we'll have to see. But I came over here to discuss something else with you if you wouldn't mind indulging this old wilting flower for a few minutes..."

With the ease of a grandmother giving direction to a young grandson, the Grand Druid took Leon's arm and steered him to a quieter section of the ark where they wouldn't be interrupted again. Leon gave a quick gesture so that his people wouldn't try to follow, though a glance at Nestor confirmed that the dead man could still overhear since the Grand Druid wasn't putting up any barriers this time.

"Your tree sprite," the Grand Druid said, jumping right in, "I have yet to break more than a few words with it."

"Exotikos isn't 'mine'," Leon responded with more obvious vehemence than he meant to express. "Who they speak with, and for how long, is something that they decide on, so long as it's not my business."

The Grand Druid smiled patronizingly. "I but wished to pass on my continued hopes that our good working relationship might extend to your tree sprite, as well. While I—"

Before the Grand Druid could continue, Cassandra came running over. "Grandmother! There are some fluctuations in the ark's aft sections that looked promising!"

"Oh! Then we should look into them, shouldn't we?" the Grand Druid exclaimed.

Leon smiled and subtly glanced at Nestor. He and the dead man had done quite a bit during their explorations, and Nestor had gained access to a great many maintenance systems.

The dead man cocked his head slightly, and Leon imagined he would've been smiling if he'd had any lips.

"Maybe," Leon said, drawing the two ladies' attention. "I've reactivated a few arks in my time, for both your Empire and Ilion, and though this is certainly the largest one I've ever been in, my retinue and I are likely the most experienced in reactivating old arks like this one. Fluctuations in power aren't anything new, and probably not that exciting, either. I'll have one of my people check it out with a couple of your engineers, but I wouldn't get too excited."

Both Cassandra and the Grand Druid gave him strange looks, but neither could offer any meaningful rebuttal.

"If... you say so," Cassandra grumbled. "I'd rather check it out myself, though. Waiting here is boring."

The Grand Druid glanced between Leon and Cassandra for a moment, then her eyes narrowed as her smile took on a sly note.

"No, let Leon's retainer deal with it," the tenth-tier mage said. "For now, why don't the two of you spend a little more time talking while we rest up? I'll just see to some business with our team before we proceed..."

With a wink sent Leon's way, the Grand Druid spun on her heel and left Leon and Cassandra alone. Leon felt a little awkward, and from the way she was staring after her grandmother in what looked rather like disbelief, Leon got the impression that Cassandra felt the same.

Still, he at least had the advantage of taking a moment to order Gaius, "Head down to the engines and see what's up. Take the thing with you, I'm sure it'll know what to do." Leon nodded to Nestor, and added, "Do you remember the thing we had to do a few years ago with that one ark south of Ilion?"

Gaius frowned for a moment, but said, "Yes. Engines flared as the ark was explored and slowly powered up and drained the power supply, right? Triggered a bunch of problems within the ark."

Leon nodded. "Something like that. Wouldn't want anything like that happening here. Check it out."

Silently, he channeled a whisper of darkness magic and murmured into Gaius' mind, [I trust you. Nestor's opening up a distraction. See if you can widen it.]

Gaius didn't even react, save for his eyes darting to Nestor. "I'll see what I can do," he said, and he and Nestor were off, accompanied by two Evergolden engineers.

And with that, Leon returned to Cassandra.

"Probably nothing," Leon said. "Hopefully not anything serious, but one can never be too sure.

"As you say," Cassandra replied, disappointment giving her tone a bitter flavor. "What do you think happened to this thing?"

"Probably shot down," Leon said. "After the fall of my Clan, the remnants of my Clan's military forces and our vassals fought a big war, didn't they? Losing this supercarrier might've even been the catalyst for many of our vassals quitting the plane entirely and retreating while they still had arks to do so."

"You think?" Cassandra asked with a thoughtful look. "How can you be sure? See something the rest of us didn't?"

"I have my ways," Leon replied with a wry smile. "In this case, though, I'm only speculating. Regardless of what happened, the loss of such a massive ark couldn't have been taken lightly. It would've been a massive strategic loss, and I'm sure many plans changed based on its mere presence."

Cassandra frowned and shrugged in evident agreement. "This vessel was a marvel, wasn't it?" she whispered as she glanced around the bay they were using to rest. "Building such a thing must've been an undertaking greater than any Aeterna has seen in a long time. I would've loved to have seen it in its prime."

"Maybe that'll change," Leon said as he leaned against a nearby wall. "Maybe studying this thing will teach your people how to build one of your own. Assuming you have the resources, anyway."

"And the skill," Cassandra said with a scowl.

"You doubt the skill of your arksmiths? I'll admit that Stephanos seems more bluster than skill, but judging from what I've seen of Evergold's arks, your people are hardly hopeless."

Cassandra groaned. "Let's not bring him up, shall we?"

"Why not?" Leon asked as his smile widened slightly. "He seems quite... taken with you, wouldn't you say?"

"He grew up in the Imperial Palace. We were friends when we—or, maybe I should say that we were friendly when we were young, I would've always hesitated to call him a friend."

"He doesn't appear to feel that way."

Cassandra's ruby eyes narrowed. "You're awfully interested in Steph, Leon..."

"Just curious. When a man acts so arrogantly in front of me, especially one I've never even heard of before, it tends to raise a few eyebrow hairs."

"Not just scoping out the competition?" she asked as she focused entirely on him.

He gave her an exaggerated shrug. "He thinks himself your suitor, I'd say, though I'll be the first to admit I've only ever seen him the two times. And... sure, maybe I'll admit to wanting him to stay right the hells away from you, and from the way you've treated him, I'm not alone in that want?"

"You're not," Cassandra readily admitted. "He's... overbearing, and certainly no suitor of mine. Those I might even consider as a partner have to be of a certain caliber, you understand; I'm an Imperial Princess, and though I'll never succeed my mother, I do have high standards."

Her eyes scanned his body as if in appraisal, and Leon didn't shy away. He almost asked her just how he might rank in her eyes, but he held his tongue. Instead, he just watched her look him up and down, and teasingly glared at her when her eyes found their way back up.

"So nothing to worry about from Stephanos, then?" Leon asked slowly, placing slightly more emphasis on each word than he normally would've.

"He's below your concern," she confirmed in a similar cadence.

They stared at each other for a long moment, a silent contest to see which one of them would blink or look away first.

After that long moment, though, Leon asked, "So, how have your personal projects been, Cassandra?"

She smirked. "Great. And I'll do you the honor of permitting you to call me 'Cassie'."

"Truly, you grace me with your benevolence. Blessed am I for such consideration. Cassie."

Cassandra's smile, which had been naturally fading as they spoke, widened again, accompanied by a quiet chuckle. She spun a lock of her hair around a finger and replied with forced disinterest, "As you ought to be, Leon. I don't think I've given anyone such permission before. Only my family has ever managed to take such... liberties with me."

"Why, my lady!" Leon said with faux outrage. "Surely you aren't accusing me of being untoward?"

Cassandra giggled again. "Of course not, Leon. You can't be untoward when following an invitation. But if you're going to prove yourself to be so good at following directions, then I might just have some other requests."

Leon lowered his head slightly in a playful parody of a bow. "I live to serve," he said without a shred of seriousness. He snuck a look at his ladies as he said this, noting that both Valeria and Maia were watching the exchange, Maia with a look of only relatively vague interest, but Valeria, when she noticed Leon looking at them, smirked for just a moment before returning to her usual stoic, ice-cold expression.

Cassandra was about to continue their banter when a wave of magic power pulsed through the ark, and Leon felt lightning tingle in the air, mixed with light and darkness. Everyone in the bay aside from himself, Cassandra, Valeria, and Maia all vanished as spheres of darkness enclosed them, before dissolving away, leaving nothing behind.

Chapter 834 - Supercarrier II

Cassandra spun around, Sunlight appearing in her hand in a flash of light. Leon, Valeria, and Maia did likewise, the former two drawing their weapons while the latter summoned a relatively small water dragon.

Everyone else in the room with them who'd they'd just spent hours exploring the supercarrier ark with had just disappeared in what, to Leon at least, looked like teleportation spheres. Not even the Grand Druid had managed to avoid the same fate, disappearing along with the rest of the Evergolden team of engineers.

At the same time, the supercarrier began to groan and creak, and Leon could hear a low hum starting from deeper within the vessel, and it was slowly growing louder. Observing with his magic senses, he realized that the amount of power within the supercarrier had skyrocketed. The interior of the ark was fairly damaged, and through bent and broken interior panels, lightning started to burst out in wide arcs as more and more power gushed through the walls.

"Get down!" Leon shouted. "Center of the room!" He ran in the indicated direction, with Cassandra, Valeria, and Maia following behind him only a moment later.

Arcs of golden lightning exploded outward, not quite filling the air, but certainly making the area where they'd just been standing rather dangerous, even to mages of their power.

"What is this?" Cassandra shouted, her voice dripping with wrath and confusion in equal measure.

"I think someone managed to get the supercarrier's power supply back up and running!" Leon shouted as another bolt of lightning flashed through the air above them, and he reached out with his power to intercept any more that may follow. A moment later, one arc did, but he managed to reflect it at the wall, leaving long black scars along the gray metal.

"And the others?" Cassandra followed up.

"Teleported?" Leon guessed. "Maybe? Can't say more!"

Another bolt raced through a hallway and exploded out into the room they stood in, but again, Leon was able to deflect it away from his party.

"Where's Gaius?" Valeria shouted as she shot Leon a look filled with meaning.

Leon bitterly smiled for just a moment in response before he returned his face to stoic seriousness. This wasn't exactly what he had in mind, especially since Cassandra was still here, but he supposed as far as distractions meant to give him unfettered access to the supercarrier went, this wasn't that bad.

'So long as none of us die, that is...'

As if on cue, the power running through the ark and springing from its damaged walls suddenly ceased, leaving Leon and his party standing there in the dark, rather nonplussed.

"What's going on now?" Cassandra whispered as she took an aggressive step away from their group as if she were attempting to advance on something unseen.

"Power's out," Valeria simply replied as she glanced once more at Leon, who nodded his agreement at more than just her statement. "Whatever started it seems to have stopped."

"Then we need to find the others!" Cassandra insisted. "If they've been teleported, then they shouldn't have gone far!"

"Likely not even off the ark," Leon speculated soothingly. "If I had to guess, it's a security measure meant to trap trespassers. Probably why it didn't grab us."

"You, I understand. Why us, too?" Cassandra asked as she turned to face him, her weapon dropping entirely and her aura calming significantly.

"I'm obvious. Valeria and Maia are my wives, so it's possible the ark has enchantments sensitive enough to pick up on that. We've certainly spent enough time together..."

Cassandra made a stifled gagging noise. Taking the hint, Leon moved on.

"And you, Princess, were standing quite close to me at the time. Perhaps the teleportation wasn't fine enough to grab you when we were that close?"

"Leon!" Cassandra responded, sounding faux-scandalized. "Are you suggesting that I ought to stay close to you? You dog!"

"Don't sound so eager," Valeria sarcastically replied, earning her a glare from Cassandra.

[Someone's coming,] Maia whispered into their minds, and everyone turned in the direction she was pointing: down the hallway that Gaius and Nestor had traveled not so long ago.

From the hallway came Gaius, running full-tilt, with Nestor following just behind him.

"Everyone all right?" Gaius asked as he almost skidded to a halt in front of them.

"No!" Cassandra shot back. "Where's everyone else?! What happened?!"

Gaius gave the Princess a quick look, and Nestor remained as silent as he had been since they'd left Occlara. Instead of immediately answering, Gaius turned his gaze to Leon.

It was faint, but Leon saw a hint of pride in the way Gaius was carrying himself. Just a shade of the confidence of a man who'd accomplished what he'd been sent out to do. Leon gave him a small smile and mentally stated, [Careful about the Princess, but speak your piece.]

Gaius nodded in response and thusly explained, "We were working on the engines, as ordered."

Leon raised a hand, interrupting him, and explained to Cassandra, "The Ilian Emperor had a small ark that the Lord Protector wanted us to activate. As soon as we did, though, the engines immediately drained what little power the ark had stored up. Getting it back up and running on backup power was... problematic."

Cassandra frowned. "How would a monster like this even be powered?"

"There are ways," Leon replied. "Magic power can be generated, though most often this comes in the form of wisps created by post-Apotheosis mages powering magical devices to amplify what power they produce. This power goes first to massive gems that store the power, and then from there, the power is channeled to where it needs to go.

"It's been long enough that basically all wisps used for such power generation have long since died off, leaving only stored power available for use, and that stored power will have been largely drained over the eighty millennia these vessels have been in storage or left to the elements."

Cassandra's frown grew deeper. Returning her focus to Gaius, she ordered, "Continue."

Gaius lightly grimaced and looked to Leon, who again nodded.

"We'd barely gotten down to where we thought the engine room to be when one of the engineers started messing around with a control console—trying to get it powered up, I think. Precautions were taken, but power briefly surged and the golem tried to stop the engineer." He nodded to Nestor, who stood there utterly silent and impassive. "We weren't able to stop whatever she did in time, and things just... went off."

"'Went off'?" Cassandra growled. "My grandmother and our entire team are gone! What happened!" Her aura began spiking as her tone grew angrier. Gaius' seventh-tier aura was robust, but Cassandra was an eighth-tier mage, and Gaius' aura couldn't overpower hers.

"Cassie," Leon whispered as he took a couple steps toward her. "Let's find everyone first. Anger is counter-productive."

Cassandra had paused at his use of her requested nickname, and her aura had flickered. When Leon finished speaking, she glared once more at Gaius, took a deep breath, and then relaxed.

"Fine," she vehemently whispered. "It's not like I haven't made my own mistakes in the past few years. This thing is old and damaged. Problems were going to happen no matter what."

Leon chuckled. "The number of times I've been in a ruin built by my family that's still in good working order is not many."

"Then I'll defer to your expertise," Cassandra said. "Where would my grandmother have been sent?"

"Can't say," Leon replied as he surveyed the room, using that as a pretense to briefly glance at Nestor. The dead man remained completely impassive, but Leon couldn't help but think that he'd be just a little more obvious about it if something had gone wrong. So, he decided to run with his assumption.

"Power's limited. The enchantments are advanced, perhaps enough to meter themselves. The ark's main entrance, a brig if this ark had one, or other areas that are more ably secured from within are all possibilities. We won't know unless we get out of this place." Leon gestured around the bay they were still standing in, the walls now blackened in many places from the wild lightning that had bolted through the air only a few minutes ago.

"Pick a direction you think most plausible," Cassandra demanded. "We'll start with the most probable and work our way down."

"A good strategy," Leon commented. He'd sent Nestor and Gaius to make some kind of distraction that might pull away more of the engineering team. This was far more than he could've hoped for. With only Cassandra there with them, while he didn't quite feel like they could act with impunity, he wasn't averse to moving on.

Over the few hours they'd spent exploring the ark, they hadn't gone too far into the more sensitive areas, the doors being locked and neither Leon nor Nestor doing much to try and unlock them. Now, however, with their hangers-on out of the picture...

"Let's head further in," Leon said. "I'm thinking that a brig would be the most likely, and even if everyone didn't land in one, we might find some way to find them."

Cassandra took a moment to ponder it, then said, "Fine. Watch yourself, though. I'd rather not lose another arm."

"I make no promises."

That got a chuckle out of the Princess, and Leon immediately set off on the fastest route to the inner sections of the ark, where the power supply, central enchantment hub, bridge, and commander's quarters would be located, all of which he was hoping would be worth the time taken to explore them.

The others fell in behind him, and as they got moving, Leon projected his magic senses, noting that Gaius, as he and Nestor took up a position at the rear, made a quick Legion hand signal for 'all-clear'. While he couldn't yet know exactly what Nestor and Gaius did, he still smiled.

When they reached the door, Leon and Nestor got it open quickly, reasoning to Cassandra that the door's security enchantments now lacked power and the ark had likely damaged itself even further when the engines flared up. Cassandra seemed to believe that, but Leon made sure to watch her for any signs of suspicion.

As they moved through the security checkpoint further into the supercarrier, Leon half-expected another wisp, like what happened with Jason Keraunos' personal ark, to appear before him and offer advice. However, no such magical construct showed itself, and they were left in the dark halls of the powerless ark.

As they moved to the center of the ark, where Leon reasoned both the central control room and the power supply would be, Leon noted the halls getting a little wider and a little nicer. Not quite palatial,

but the halls had taken on a decidedly more trapezoidal shape and the ceilings were raised a bit. He could imagine if the ark still had the power to spare, the walls would be alight with murals, and the ceiling would have a projection of the sky painting its surface.

They found a few more compartments that looked like leisure areas, storage rooms, and separate control rooms, but it took almost another hour to find the Big Important Room that Leon was looking for, and Cassandra didn't let her irritation and impatience be forgotten. Leon had wanted to take a few moments to study a few of the rooms they'd found, seeing a large number of worthwhile enchantments within, but even though he knew the Grand Druid was fine, Cassandra didn't, so he hurried along.

But finally, they found it, the main control room. Upon entering it, Leon found it almost exactly as he expected: a relatively huge chamber with a series of terraces in the center. Each terrace was covered in control consoles, while at the top was the largest of the seats. Unlike Storm Herald, however, this was no throne, as the top terrace was shared by several other slightly smaller seats, all of them surrounded by control consoles of their own.

"This is it," Leon said, reveling in the discovery. "Regardless of where they've been sent, we'll be able to find our missing compatriots from here."

"How?" Cassandra demanded to know. "There's no power, everything here's dead."

Leon took a closer look around, noting that while the rest of the ark seemed quite damaged, the consoles here seemed fairly intact. None of them, though, were aglow with arcane light, and most seemed little more than slabs of smooth stone. Without magic power, they would be useless.

For a moment, Leon wondered about powering the consoles with their own magic power, but only powering the consoles would do little when the enchantments they were supposed to be controlling had none of their own, and none of them were even close to being powerful enough to power the whole ark. Not even the Grand Druid—and Leon didn't even think all four Emperors—could do so. It would take nothing less than the most powerful of the post-Apotheosis mages, by his estimation, to single-handedly power the whole ark.

"Then we need to find the power room, too," Leon reasoned. "Most of us will stay here and see what we can see. I'll head out and—"

"No," Cassandra interjected. "You're planning something, Leon, I can see it."

Leon gave her a look of utter innocence. "Me? I would never be so duplicitous!"

"You would and you'd likely relish it, wouldn't you? Going off on your own, exploring a long-lost relic of your Clan, all without me there."

Perhaps it was just Leon's imagination, but it seemed like Cassandra was most angered by the last part of her accusation than anything else. Given the way Valeria seemed to stifle some laughter, he thought himself right on the money.

Leon took a moment to think it over. He didn't particularly want to keep secrets from Cassandra, but he also didn't quite trust her to keep anything they did secret. With that in mind, he didn't have to do everything himself.

“Fine,” he said. “We can stay here and monitor the bridge, you and I. The others can explore in our stead.”

“That’s not what I—”

“Too late, the order’s been given, you’re stuck with me now, Princess.” Leon smirked as he nodded to Gaius, Nestor, Maia, and Valeria. He didn’t need to give any specific orders, he felt like they knew what to do already: explore as much as safety would allow. If they found the power supply, either come back and inform him and the Princess, or get it running themselves.

Gaius spared only the time to nod before turning on his heel and marching back out, Nestor in lock-step behind him. Valeria took a second to grin at both Leon and Cassandra before heading out after them. Maia took the longest time of any of them, giving Leon an intimate hug before glaring at Cassandra, and only leaving after the Princess took a step back.

“And so, we’re alone,” Leon said as Maia vanished into the darkness of the halls they’d left behind.

“Expecting something to happen?” Cassandra asked as Leon led the way to the top of the terraces.

“I rather thought you were expecting something to happen,” Leon replied, shooting her a somewhat suggestive look. “You don’t trust me enough to explore on my own, are you thinking that there’s something in this ark that might be hostile to us as well?”

Cassandra sighed as Leon took a seat in the commander’s chair. Instead of sitting anywhere else, she instead walked over and propped herself up on one of the control consoles, propping her head up with an arm resting on the console.

“Leon, I can tell that something’s going on. Your people are too calm, and you’re not that good at lying.”

Leon at least had the decency to look a little embarrassed.

“Just tell me one thing...” the Princess continued, a hint of killing intent permeating her aura, “is my grandmother safe?”

“While she’s obviously not here so I can’t say with absolute certainty, I would stake my life on her being fine.”

“You probably are staking your life on that.”

Leon frowned a moment. “I... suppose I am, aren’t I? The Grand Druid, her physical well-being aside, is probably pissed right the hells off, no?”

“She’s probably trying to force her way out of whatever situation she’s been teleported into, and raining the fury of the stars down upon anyone and anything in her way.”

“I’ll do my best to stay clear, then.”

“For both our sakes, please do. For now, why don’t you tell me what you thought you might find here?”

Leon gave her a long, evaluating look. “Tell me you won’t tell the Grand Druid. Or anyone else, for that matter.”

Cassandra's serious look morphed into something more curious and intrigued, and she didn't hesitate a moment to emphatically agree. "Yes! Yes, yes, yes! Just between us!"

Leon choked back a chuckle at her earnestness. "You sure? Such a dreadful secret getting out might destroy the whole plane!"

"You have to tell me now!"

Leon smiled and leaned in conspiratorially, Cassandra leaning in at the same time. They drew nearer than Leon thought they needed to, but he didn't mind, and if she did, she was doing a horrible job of showing it, flashing him a dazzling smile and locking eyes with him.

Barely able to enunciate with how much he was smiling, Leon said, "I had no idea what this ark had. I just wanted to explore on my own and see for myself."

Cassandra didn't look at all surprised, not leaning back at all and whispering, "Bastard."

"So I've been accused of being," Leon stated, his tone a little bitterer than he'd intended it to be as he leaned back into the chair. Cassandra, if she noticed, said nothing about it, but any flirtation in her attitude disappeared.

After another minute of sitting in silence, the lights in the supercarrier came back on, the walls lighting up with familiar murals, and the ceiling glowing with a projection of the night sky, three moons prominently hovering over the terraces.

"Ha! Looks like someone found what they were looking for!" Leon exclaimed.

"That 'Gaius' retainer of yours, I'd think," Cassandra guessed. "He has that golem of yours, Naiad and Val went off in a different direction after leaving."

"My thoughts align with yours," Leon murmured as he turned his attention to the consoles, all of which had reactivated along with the lights.

After his exploration of Storm Herald, Leon had Nestor give him a crash course on these control consoles. Given Nestor's lack of military or command experience, a crash course was all he was qualified to give, so Leon didn't think himself even remotely capable of actually using any connected enchantments to even boil water, he at least knew how to call up an overview of the ark's situation, as reported by the wisps that power and help to control the place.

Unfortunately, the wisp that was supposed to aid the commander in reading the report didn't appear, but the report itself did appear, a light screen appearing before Leon after he'd activated a few runic circles in the proper sequence. Diagnostics and floorplans for every one of the supercarrier's levels were now at Leon's fingertips, and he wasted not a second in skimming through them.

His heart sank the more he read, seeing the extent of the damage wrought upon the ark. His earlier estimation that it would never fly again was correct if his reading of the report was accurate. The ark's damage, while not dealing too much overall damage to the superstructure, had still crippled it entirely. The subsequent crash and eighty-thousand-ish years spent buried and entangled in a massive tree's roots had caused much greater damage than even that crippling blow, unfortunately.

While there was still time to check the place out, Leon realized that there would be very little he might be able to salvage from the supercarrier—at least, not without being even more obvious than he was apparently already being about it.

He sighed as he slumped back in his chair. It was looking like his coming here would be a waste of time—at least, for himself. The Grand Druid's engineers would likely learn plenty from it, but the wreck was as portable as any other Thunderbird Clan ruin Leon had visited.

There just wasn't anything here for him.

"Leon," Cassandra said, grabbing his attention. "My grandmother. Is. She. Safe?" She spoke calmly, but the insistence in her tone demanded he move quicker.

On one of the consoles before him was a blinking light, indicating a security alert if he was reading it rightly. Sure enough, when he pressed the adjacent runic circle, it opened another screen that showed the Grand Druid and the rest of the engineers in the ark's main entrance bay, trying to get through the locked door. The Grand Druid looked just about at the point where she was going to try and cut her way through the offending obstacle, while the engineers did their best to open the door without destroying the whole thing in the process.

Leon was able to open it remotely, effectively opening the entire ark in the process, but he'd largely exhausted his ability to control the ark. With Cassandra now a little more mollified at seeing the Grand Druid, Leon was left in enough peace to contemplate what would come next, and perhaps of more immediate importance, how to explain what happened to the Grand Druid in a way that Cassandra wouldn't take issue with.

Chapter 835 - Nestor's Haul

835 - Nestor's Haul

"What's wrong, Leon?" Cassandra asked teasingly, smiling rather smugly at Leon as they waited on the bridge for the Grand Druid to arrive. With Leon in control of the ark, they'd gotten the rest of the ark open, allowing everyone that had been teleported away to finally make their way back. They hadn't yet arrived, however, and the rest of Leon's retinue were still off seeing to their respective tasks.

Leon wasn't feeling that great about the expedition, having not found much of anything within the ark. Given the extent of its damage, he didn't think he was missing out on much, but it still hurt just a bit that this wasn't that great of an opportunity for salvage—at least, not the sort that he was able to conduct.

That feeling must've been showing on his face, leading to the Princess' question.

Leaning in a little more and giving him an even more playful look, Cassandra added, "Feeling down that there wasn't anything here for you to steal out from under us?"

Leon gave her a sardonic smile. "How much is it considered stealing? No one formally signed this ark over to your Empire, did they?"

"It's implied with your agreement with my grandmother," the Princess said. "You're giving up all claims to anything and everything on Aeterna in return for us not enacting vengeance upon you. Isn't that right?"

Leon shrugged, unbothered by the Princess' flippant and rather provocative tone. "So it is. So it is."

"Sounding a little bitter there, lightning boy, aren't you?"

Leon's smile flickered. "'Lightning boy'? Where did that come from?"

"From my head. Just wanted to know what's got you feeling so down."

"And why do you think I'm feeling down?"

"Because you stopped talking as soon as that schematic came up, and you looked like someone kicked your puppy. Doesn't take a genius to put the two together."

Leon shrugged again. "My disappointment towers above all other emotions right now. It is the titan within me, crushing all hope and wonder, demanding that I yield to reality."

"You're being dramatic."

"Was just hoping for at least some reminder of what my Clan once was and what we could be again."

"Conquerors?"

"Planar travelers. Kings in the Nexus. Gods among mortals. That kind of stuff."

"You're surprisingly arrogant, you know that?"

"I'd say the same about you, but Royalty is allowed to be prideful, aren't they?"

"They are, such is our privilege."

As they spoke, footsteps could be heard approaching the bridge. With all the doors open and the security enchantments down, magic senses could be used within the ark, allowing Leon to see essentially everything that was going on if he so wished. He'd been more lost in thought, however, and so it came as a bit of surprise when Gaius came in carrying the broken golem-body of Nestor.

Leons sprang to his feet, shock writ large upon his face.

"What happened?" he demanded.

Gaius, looking suitably uncomfortable, explained, "The golem... it was attempting to fix something in the power room, but the room was unstable and a lot of heavy equipment fell on it. It was an accident."

Leon's fury swiftly overtook his disappointment, but it was soundly tempered when Gaius, disguising it by adjusting his hold on the main part of Nestor's golem frame, made a quick Legion 'all-clear' signal.

Leon frowned, but he refrained from letting his anger go wild. And, upon a little more in-depth inspection, he realized that while Nestor's body was out of power, most of the damage seemed confined to the body's extremities. The torso, where Nestor's ruby was stored, seemed largely undamaged, save for a few dents and burns—though its head was nowhere to be seen.

Quickly descending the terraces, Leon and Cassandra met Gaius at the foot of the stairs, and Gaius handed Nestor's body over. Leon quickly confirmed his initial inspection, sighed a little more dramatically than might've been necessary, and pulled Nestor's body into his soul realm.

"I'll deal with this later," he growled, but coming from his soul realm, he heard the voice of his kinsman resound in his ears.

[Ugh, can't believe I'm back here. Degrading.]

[Shut your fat face, dead man,] Xaphan crackled.

[Ah, the foul-mouthed demon. I did not miss you, though I'll admit the chance to speak with my Honored Ancestor again has me feeling excited.]

Speaking up, Leon asked, [Nestor, we'll speak more later, but is everything all right?]

[Yes, boy. I just needed an excuse to get back in here. We need to talk, and you were refusing—for good reason—to do so until we returned to the lab.]

[And your body?]

[Easily replaced, and with something better. What I found, and what your man stashed in my chassis, is worth a little deception.]

Leon fought to keep the smile off his face. With Nestor's ringing endorsement about what they found, Leon glanced at Gaius and saw his retainer standing respectfully off to the side, his face impassive though with a certain glint of pride in his eye.

"Good job," he said, making sure to keep a little bitterness in his voice, though as he ran his fingers through his hair, he made a quick 'all-clear' gesture, too. Turning back to Cassandra, he said, "I hope your people are able to find some good stuff here. If it's all the same to you, I'd rather leave as soon as possible, even if it's just back to Evergold. I think this place has taken enough of my time."

Cassandra frowned a bit but nodded. "I suppose we won't need you, anymore," she said. "We can let the others take over from here. Steph, I know, will be dying to see this..." Her frown turned up a bit into a more provocative smile, and Leon had to fight not to rise to the challenge.

Unable to entirely stop himself from giving in, he asked, "I thought he wasn't a concern of mine? Going to be giving him a chance, then? Is your grandmother going to be disappointed?"

"Yes," a loud voice shouted from the doorway, "am I?"

Cassandra about jumped out of her skin as she spun around to see the Grand Druid standing in the doorway, the small team of engineers behind her trying hard not to look like they were listening in too closely. Since the Grand Druid was standing in the doorway, however, they couldn't just pass her by without showing disrespect, so they were forced to stand behind her and look awkward as all the hells.

"We can talk about that later," Cassandra emphatically insisted.

The Grand Druid gave her a long, searching look, and eventually said, "Fine. For now, Leon, I'd like to discuss what happened. How were we separated?"

"Hard for me to say, really," Leon replied as the Grand Druid finally entered the bridge proper, allowing the engineers, all of whom were practically chomping at the bit, to finally spill into the room from

behind her. "It looked like teleportation, and my retainer told me that some kind of security system was tripped when in the engine room."

"True enough," one of the engineers corroborated, whom Leon recognized as one of the two who'd been sent off with Gaius and Nestor. "The golem of yours was messing around in a control console—"

The engineer was silenced by a sharp glare from the Grand Druid, and she sheepishly looked away and scuttled back to work.

"It seems to have been an accident, then," the Grand Druid slowly stated, enunciating every word. "For now, Leon, if you wish to return to Evergold, I can make that happen. Cassandra, would you be a dear and accompany him back home?"

"Sure thing, Grandmother," Cassandra replied with altogether far too much sweetness. She grinned at Leon, and he briefly wondered if leaving a little sooner would be worth whatever the Princess might be planning.

Leon breathed a sigh of relief as he and his retainers returned to their quarters in Evergold's Imperial Palace. He'd dismissed Gaius as soon as they returned with what he hoped was the unspoken understanding that there would be a more in-depth briefing upon their return to Occulara.

As he gingerly lowered himself into a sofa, Valeria to his right and Maia to his left, he cast himself into his soul realm. Cassandra had demanded his attention almost the entire way back from the supercarrier, preventing him from holding a conversation with Nestor about what had been found or what had happened. Now that he was back and he had a few minutes, however, he dove straight in to get the events of the day sorted out.

Upon opening his eyes in his Mind Palace, he was surprised to see the Thunderbird herself upon her perch, idly preening her feathers.

"Ancestor," he respectfully stated.

"Leon," she said as she pulled her beak out of her feathers. Her tone indicated that, if she were human, she would've been smiling. "How did you find the ark you just explored?"

Leon grinned. "A magnificent ruin." He briefly glanced at Nestor's broken golem body, noting that it had been propped up on the table that the dead man's ruby had once been placed upon, whereas Leon had left him in a somewhat more dignified position close to a set of small golem construction cranes. The front of Nestor's body had been lightly scorched and looked partially melted.

Before he could explain himself further to the Thunderbird, he glared questioningly at Xaphan, quietly burning in his pavilion.

The dim shadow of the demon within his perpetual flames merely shrugged.

"Leon!" Nestor shouted from his frame, taking away any momentary concern Leon had that Xaphan had destroyed the dead man's magic body. "It's about time! We have to talk!"

Leon's grin widened a bit. "In a moment."

The Thunderbird chirped in amusement in a manner almost uncannily like human laughter. “Tell me my Clan’s glorious construct,” she demanded, her eyes so alight with delight that they practically flashed with golden lightning.

Leon summoned a chair and jumped right in. “Epic in scale, elegant in design, and so far beyond me in complexity that I couldn’t even comprehend it.”

“You say that as if such a thing is an accomplishment!” Xaphan called out. Leon and the Thunderbird ignored him, though one of Leon’s eyes twitched in transient anger.

“I was... frustrated when Nestor told me of the complexity of arks, especially the larger ones that were capable of traversing the Void. Now that I’ve seen the inner workings of several, it’s clear to me that... as much as it pains me to admit, he was right.”

“Take it as a lesson not to doubt those who know better than you!” Nestor shouted.

Leon shrugged.

“It’s good to get perspective,” the Thunderbird said. “Now you know how far you have to go.”

Leon nodded. “Speaking of which... Nestor, we need to break words about what happened in that ark.”

“That we do, boy, that we do.”

Leon gave his Ancestor one last respectful nod, which she reciprocated—though her head nod wasn’t as deep—and made his way over to Nestor.

“First off, old man, what in the hells happened to your body?” Leon demanded. “Significant financial resources were poured into its creation, how did it get in such a state?”

“It was by design,” Nestor unashamedly replied. “Let’s start at the beginning, I would rather not jump around.”

Leon waved his hand, telling the man to proceed.

“By your order, Gaius and I left to examine the engines. As we discussed before coming here, I was to try and find some way to cause a distraction, allowing you to explore as you pleased, so long as any distractions made weren’t life-threatening.”

“You tested the limits of that restriction,” Leon drily stated.

“I know what I’m doing, which is quite a bit more than I can say about you most of the time.”

Leon frowned. “Fair,” he said. “That’s fair.”

“While I’m not too familiar with the security systems of military arks,” Nestor continued, “I was well aware of the supercarrier’s teleportation enchantments. They’re standard for arks of that size, though rarely used for any but the most highly-ranked officers to get around, and in a particularly violent situation, to control those on board. But it costs a lot of power.”

“And you noticed it in the engine room of all places?” Leon asked, seeking clarification.

"I saw the signs that this system was still operational all over the ark," Nestor corrected. "It was in the engine room that I saw an opportunity to trigger it. It was easy enough to gain access to the system, set rough targets, and let the ark's remaining wisps go to work."

"The ark had wisps?" Leon all but shouted in surprise. Of all the pieces of potential salvage that he might've taken from that ark, wisps ranked near the top.

"Had wisps. In pretending to 'fix' some of the consoles that were supposed to operate the engines, I was able to direct these wisps to send the rest of the expedition somewhere safe."

"You missed one," Leon observed.

"Cassandra was standing too close to you to exclude, and my window of opportunity was closing. I figured you wouldn't mind her tagging along."

"Quite the assumption. You're lucky you guessed rightly."

"Saying it was a 'guess' would imply that I didn't know for sure. If you weren't quite so obviously taken with each other, it would've been more uncertain. As it was, I left nothing to chance."

Leon clicked his tongue in annoyance but said no more on the topic.

"Unfortunately," Nestor continued, "the use of all that power further damaged the ark. I was able to mask it as the engines firing up, but the power supply of the ark was nearly drained, with all of its stored magic power ravaging the ark. There's likely significantly less to be salvaged within that hulk now than there was."

Leon frowned a moment but nodded in appreciation. He supposed it was better for something so powerful to be destroyed if he couldn't claim it, though he also supposed that the scale of destruction it could potentially cause was something the Empires were already capable of doing, so it hardly mattered.

Regardless, his more prideful side found some comfort in further denying the Sacred Golden Empire access to the supercarrier, though he knew it to be hypocritical and potentially self-destructive.

"And then you two linked back up with us," Leon said, picking up as Nestor paused a moment.

"Yes. Given I was forced to miss Cassandra, there was little time to waste to return if we wanted to avoid suspicion."

"Failed in that respect," Leon murmured.

"Blame yourself for that, not me."

Leon shrugged again.

"So. Wisps. Your broken body. These things happened after you and Gaius left the second time. Tell me about that."

"I took Gaius with me to find the wisps," Nestor explained. "He was most useful in planning out our course of action after I explained our dilemma."

'Sounds like I have to reward him, then,' Leon thought.

“When we reached our destination, I found three wisps were still intact, including one of the most valuable wisps we had: one that maintained our navigational systems!”

One of Leon’s eyebrows rose in intrigue, though he wasn’t exactly jumping out of his skin in excitement.

“That does sound tasty,” he said, “but how useful could it be for us?”

“Ugh. Children,” Nestor grumbled, and Leon had to fight the urge to light his already battered chassis on fire. “Listen, boy, the number of planes under the control of our Clan was immense. Counting both those directly owned and those administered by vassals, we had many thousands of planes belonging to us. Millions paid us tribute. The scale of the universe is immense, even for a post-Apotheosis mage. Having a dedicated wisp to handle navigation within the Void is not only incredibly valuable, it’s also incredibly rare. Such powerful wisps aren’t easily created and they’re jealously guarded. They require ungodly amounts of power to function properly, such that only Anakes or Elemental Kings are usually strong enough to make them.”

Leon’s other eyebrow rose as he started to get a better idea of what Nestor had.

“Where is that wisp?” Leon asked. “And the other two?”

“After locating them, Gaius and I decided that we had to secure them. I refused to allow Gaius to take them into his soul realm, so the decision was made to hide them within me. For added security, I had Gaius damage my body, giving you the perfect excuse to take me into your soul realm, where the wisps would be safe.

“Open my chest, Leon, the wisps are here with me.”

Leon licked his lips as he approached the broken form Nestor had built for himself. There were a few small tools needed to open the golem’s chest, but Nestor had included a small compartment in his back where those tools could be stored. Leon, having helped to build Nestor’s previous body, had his current one open in just a few minutes.

Once it had been opened, Leon was treated to the sight of countless tiny rings made of stone, steel, and glass, all covered in runes and all spinning around in Nestor’s body, aligning their enchantments as needed to keep Nestor’s body functioning. Many of them had gone dark with the breaking of Nestor’s extremities, Nestor’s body automatically cutting power to them to increase efficiency.

Where Nestor’s heart would be was where his ruby was stored, glowing red in a small container of enchanted glass. Nestled in the container with him were three small tubes, each no larger than his index finger, looking like they were made of some kind of golden metal. In the center of these tubes was a glass window, through which golden light was spilling forth.

“Containers for wisps,” Nestor informed him. “Made of Lumenite, making them almost indestructible. Such containers aren’t needed for wisps, but when it came to our most powerful war machines, we spared not a single expense.”

Leon carefully extracted the wisps from Nestor’s chest cavity, almost reverently laying them down on a folded silk sheet he’d retrieved from deeper in his soul realm. He could sense immense power within each of those Lumenite tubes, such intense concentrations of lightning magic that he hadn’t seen anywhere until he’d found the Iron Needle.

“Well,” he muttered. “Aren’t these something...”

Chapter 836 - Navigation Wisp

Leon stared in awe at the scene around him. Points of light all hovering in stasis around one central point, brighter than all the rest. Millions upon millions of them, so many that he couldn’t even begin to count, stretching all over his Mind Palace and beyond.

The universe as it was the last time the navigational wisp had been updated—that was what Leon was looking at—or rather, a projection of it, lacking much in the way of details. The wisp didn’t store any maps of these countless planes, but merely their positions to allow its assigned ark to navigate the Void with ease.

Given the sheer scale of what he was looking at, Leon understood the need for such a dedicated wisp. Keeping track of all of this seemed like a nightmarish task, and one that he could barely comprehend tackling.

After learning of just what Nestor had managed to get out of the supercarrier, he’d directed Leon in creating this simple projection enchantment for the wisp to utilize. It was simple, merely representing each plane known to the wisp as little more than a bead of light floating in the air.

While the air around Leon’s Mind Palace and for thousands of feet beyond filled was filled with so many beads of light, the Nexus was still easily identifiable. It was by far the brightest of all the points and lay in the exact center of the projected universal map.

Perhaps more interesting to Leon was the tiny cluster of lights so close to the Nexus that they were almost lost in its halo. They numbered twelve in total and were by a relatively wide margin the closest planes to the Nexus.

“So close, yet so far,” Leon murmured as he hovered next to the Nexus and gave it a good inspection. The Divine Graveyard was only a couple of inches away from the Nexus on this map projection.

Floating beside him, carried on a cushion of his power, was Nestor’s broken golem body. “That amounts to a distance of some fifteen trillion miles,” he said.

“Trillion?” Leon breathed. He could barely fathom getting something the size of the supercarrier to move at all, let alone move so far, and even then, it was only from the Divine Graveyard to the Nexus. On a universal scale, his Clan had moved a titanic fleet much, much further than that, and did so on a regular basis.

“Yes, boy, trillion,” Nestor bragged. “Understanding just a little bit better how much further you have to go?”

“Just a little bit,” Leon said, smiling despite himself. Such power... would be his, that much wasn’t at all in doubt in his mind. It only remained to be seen how much longer it would take to get there. At the very least, it seemed that he’d be able to fly through the Void under his own power once he achieved Apotheosis, but traveling so far and so fast, even in such a relatively clustered universal neighborhood blew his mind more than a little. “It seems incredible. Literally, without credibility. Such difference between what can be accomplished by tenth-tier mages and those who’ve achieved Apotheosis...”

"It's quite the dramatic change," Nestor said, his tone softening with nostalgia. "On a human scale, a tenth-tier mage is still within the realm of mortality, even if they're just about to pass beyond the clouds of the heavens. Their power, as potent as it can be, as catastrophic as it can be, is still understandable by a human. By the time one reaches Apotheosis and moves beyond mere magic, the power they can command is unlike anything they would've experienced before. The power to bend the universe as they see fit, making great distances short, and imposing their will upon reality."

"That sounds... hard to believe."

"Make no mistake, Leon, post-Apotheosis mages are hardly all-powerful, and reality especially dislikes being treated poorly, but once you condense an Origin Spark within you, you will be able to do things you never thought possible, and the true extent of your powers will become that much clearer to you."

"Origin Spark'," Leon repeated, hearing the capital letters in Nestor's explanation. "That term sounds familiar..."

"I and our Ancestor have undoubtedly used it in the past."

"... And haven't explained it all that much."

"It hasn't been relevant to you. It still isn't quite relevant to what you need to do, but I suppose I can explain it if you so desperately want me to."

"We're not going to get very far if you two keep many secrets, you know. What if something were to happen to you both and I were left on my own, without your guidance?"

"Our Clan would end, no doubt about that. I wouldn't trust you to find your way out of a corridor, honestly. You'd probably smash it to pieces in frustration, despite having doors on either side of you right there..."

Leon took a deep, steadying breath, forcing himself not to rise to Nestor's provocation.

He failed, remaining silent but dropping Nestor's already broken body back down to the ground of his soul realm. It was damaged, but it was still made of the finest materials that Elise could provide Nestor in only a few months. The dead man was fine, as Leon confirmed after taking one last look at the map and floating down himself.

"Struck a nerve, did I?" Nestor asked, sounding smug and unapologetic despite what Leon had just done.

"You certainly managed to annoy me, if that's what you mean."

"How about instead of displaying how sharp your tongue is, you explain in no uncertain terms what an 'Origin Spark' is?"

"It is, in short, magic power that has been condensed so far it returns to its Primal state. The core of the Nexus is a gargantuan Origin Spark, and all magic in the universe that wasn't produced within a body comes from it, as runoff from its cosmic power. When enough magic power is condensed within a soul realm, a new Origin Spark is ignited within a mage, ascending them to divinity, giving them access to the original powers of creation that forged this universe, as the name might imply."

Leon stared at Nestor's broken form, his face blank, unsure what exactly he ought to make of what Nestor had just told him. "That... I have so many more questions..."

"We can cover them later when they're more relevant. But for now, just know that the process of Apotheosis isn't contemplating the mysteries of the universe or anything like that. You don't need to achieve some kind of enlightenment or have a grand realization of the nature of existence. You need only to ignite an Origin Spark. Doing so will give you access to origin power, which will allow you some limited power over the universe that's a little more potent than magic. It's this power that properly animates a wisp. You'll see when you're older—assuming you even get there."

As Nestor's words settled into Leon's mind, he had to fight to keep his mouth shut, lest he drool all over his clothes. The scope of what Nestor had just told him was large, and while he assumed that a fresh post-Apotheosis mage's power over this 'origin power' might be significantly more limited than an older post-Apotheosis mage at their peak, he had to assume that a fresh post-Apotheosis mage could still perform wonders he could only dream of now.

"Leon," Nestor sternly stated, interrupting his thoughts, "we can discuss this later. For now, how about you put me down and start planning on how to build me a new body?"

"I'll put you down," Leon said as he floated them gently down back to the ground, "but instead of planning out your rebuilding, I'd like a geography lesson. Minos, Tiryns, Kypros, where are they on this map? What were our Clan's borders? All I'm seeing here are lights, how am I to get any useful information from this map if I can't identify anything?"

Despite grumbling for a couple seconds, Nestor did start walking Leon through the universal geography as he remembered it. Since there were millions of planes, however, and the political situation of the Thunderbird's Clan, its many vassals, its tributaries, and its allies, denoting borders was much, much harder to do. But Leon got the general gist of how far-flung his Clan once was.

As the Clan of an Elemental King, he might've expected his Clan to rule over at least a seventh of the universe, but in truth, most planes were simply not inhabited—at least, not by life that could be considered human or intelligent. There were plenty of barren planar clusters and plenty more that were under some kind of protection almost as wildlife sanctuaries, where life was allowed to flourish under its own terms.

In short, the Thunderbird Clan had direct or indirect rule over about a twelfth of the map currently projected—a staggering number of planes, to be sure, but less than what Leon had expected.

Making matters far more complicated, however, was when Xaphan rather indignantly mentioned that the realm of the demons wasn't on the map, and Nestor begrudgingly stated that the map was incomplete, only showing what was in essence, the 'realm of man'. There were even more planes off the edges of the projected map, and the Elemental Planes even further beyond. Beyond even those, not even Nestor knew—though Xaphan claimed nothing lay beyond the Elemental Planes, just the wide, empty Void, bereft of even the most basic forms of life.

Leon came away from that discussion feeling fairly well enriched—though he was certainly going to be bringing up the matter of Origin Sparks later with Nestor, Xaphan, and the Thunderbird, for now, he was content with what Nestor had told him. He was just a little bit more preoccupied with now having some

general idea of the direction he had to go to secure his Clan's legitimacy. Seizing Minor and Tiryns—his Clan's symbolic capital outside of their palaces in the Nexus, and their most powerful fortress plane—would be coups that would firmly establish him and his as the heirs of the Thunderbird and the inheritor of her will, and the wills of all the Storm Kings who'd come before.

Seizing Kypros, however, would firmly establish himself as the next Storm King—the richest plane in their vast multiplanar Empire, and the one most fought over in the wake of his Clan's downfall if Justin could be believed. Such a rich addition to his pool of resources, in his mind, would prove to all the universe that the Thunderbird Clan was back, and ready to reclaim its ancient powers.

For now, though, he had to deal with a few Empires and the remnants of his Clan's vassals still here. They seemed almost like petty concerns after the talk he and Nestor had just had, but he forced his perspective back from the universal scale. He'd get there eventually, but he could only fly through one storm at a time.

After more than a week spent in the Sacred Golden Empire, Leon was ready to return home. The Grand Druid had had to call him back out to the supercarrier a few times since they'd first entered the wreck, and Leon had had to endure some condescension from Stephanos in those times, but otherwise, he was largely left on his own. Cassandra stopped by thrice more for sparring and to chat for a few hours after, but though they'd said much to each other, little of value had been passed along.

Now, it seemed that Leon wasn't needed in Evergold, so he decided to leave the following morning, despite both the Grand Druid and Cassandra inviting him and his people to stay a little while longer. While he was tempted—mostly by the latter's invitation, spoken softly and with a look that promised much, if only he stayed—he wanted to get back home. He'd spoken with Elise often during these days, so he'd known almost when she did that a message from Anshu had just come in of great importance.

But more than that, he just wanted to be home for a while. He enjoyed the aesthetics of the Sacred Golden Empire, but it couldn't hold a candle to the villa he considered to be his home.

He had to make sure that everyone else felt that way, though. Valeria, Maia, Gaius, and Nestor were more than happy to get home. Helen and Anna, however, Leon was about to check in with.

Heading over there not long after dinner with his whole retinue, he was shown in by a surprised Helen. His conversation with Helen and Anna was short but productive enough. They both seemed more relaxed, and Anna in particular looked much happier, having spent much of her time off reconnecting with old family friends who still remembered their parents fondly.

But like everyone else, they were eager to return home. Helen had a great deal of work to get back to, and Leon suspected if he told them he was going to stay a little longer, even if he name-dropped Cassandra or the Grand Druid, Helen would've been frothing at the mouth in anger.

Leon could understand, having a few pies in the oven that he was waiting for updates on, so to speak.

So, the following morning, Leon and his retainers were escorted back to Occulara by the Grand Druid, who left immediately after dropping him and his off, returning to her Empire without even setting foot off her personal ark.

Given what Elise was waiting with, Leon was glad the Grand Druid didn't stick around.

A frown deeply etched itself into Leon's face as he read and re-read the letter in his hand. It was short and succinct, as was Anshu's usual style for these sorts of things, even when writing in code, but it was still quite concerning.

The man had finally managed to get into regular contact with some Sky Devils. More concerningly, there was a plan being hatched to smuggle a few of them to the mainland, though Anshu wasn't yet sure what they wanted on the main continent.

The Indradian was just waiting on Leon's go-ahead to proceed with the plan, and Leon had to admit that he was conflicted.

"We don't know what they're trying to come here for," Elise said, her voice tremendously concerned. "We don't want to be responsible for the sacking of another city, which might be in the works. Even if something of that level is prevented, we'd be burned if we're at all connected to bringing Sky Devils across the Veins of Vigilance."

"We don't have to do anything," Valeria insisted. "Just talking to them should be enough."

"Humans need more," Maia argued. "There will be no dialogue if one side doesn't think they're getting what they want."

"Is getting Leon in contact with them not what they want?" Valeria asked.

"No one can say," Elise replied. "That Jaguar's reaction to Leon's power aside, we still don't know anything about their internal politics. We haven't heard so much as a meow from the Jaguar since he retreated from Argos. Maybe he was executed upon returning to their lands? Can we trust anyone other than him? Is the man himself even trustworthy?"

Leon sighed as he scanned the letter again before turning his eyes upward to regard his family. Elise, Maia, Valeria, and Anzu were all with him in one of his private sitting rooms, discussing the possibility of finally getting some contact with the Sky Devils, thanks to Anshu's efforts. Of all of them, however, Anzu was the only quiet one, as the griffin seemed barely able to stay awake despite the disagreement, his blood-red eyes drooping even as he curled up in front of the hearth, his large wings mostly blocking out the light from the fire lit there.

"The Jaguar seemed an honorable sort," Leon said. "Honorable enough, anyway. If he were to reach out, I'd respond. Were it anyone else, I'd hesitate. Probably even refuse. But we still need some kind of contact within the Sky Devils. I'm inclined to tell Anshu to go with them. He's not working alone, anyway."

"That hardly makes it better," Elise protested. "Working with smugglers and pirates is..."

"Necessary," Leon finished. "Detestable, sure, but in this one case, necessary. We're not going to be getting in contact with the Sky Devils through legitimate means. So that only leaves the illegitimate ones. And who knows when, or even if Anshu might get in contact with the Sky Devils again? This is an opportunity that can't be wasted."

Elise sighed and leaned back in her chair. "If you think this is the way to go, husband, then I'll support you. I trust your judgment."

Leon smiled, though he had to resist the urge to make some self-deprecating joke at her statement. And then, he began composing his response.

Anshu stared out across the dark bay. He was far to the south of the Empires, along the coast of the Pegasi States.

For the most part, the Pegasi States were flat along the coast, so there weren't any coves tucked away in mountains or hills to hide in. There were, however, a few forests and swamps that could, and often were, used by smugglers to move cargo into and out of the region. That the areas were often patrolled by Imperial and Pegasi ships didn't matter since few ships actually stayed too long. Only long enough to load or unload cargo.

In this case, Anshu and his colleagues weren't waiting for any shipments of contraband, but rather a small party of people who were entirely unwelcome on Aeterna's shores.

But Anshu, and the hundred or so people he was working with, including the sixth-tier pirate who was at least nominally in charge of the entire operation, were willing to work with the Sky Devils, in exchange for a hefty payment. They just had to meet with the Sky Devil party, escort them further inland, and provide them with some needed resources, such as a guide and local clothing.

They hadn't had to wait on the shore for long when a huge beast emerged from the water, startling the entire force of assembled and mostly-hidden pirates. The creature appeared to be some kind of massive eel, with pale white scales and cloudy white eyes, each eye larger than Anshu was tall.

It was clearly uncomfortable being above the surface, and not just in a psychological way, but it lingered only long enough for half a dozen figures clinging to its back to jump off and land among the trees of the shore. The enormous eel then turned around and dove back beneath the sea, disappearing so quickly and with such speed and grace that it hardly seemed like it had been there at all.

Anshu, however, kept his eyes firmly locked upon the Sky Devil party that had just made landfall, and on the man who seemed their leader. He radiated power and authority and cut quite a distinctive figure with his pale yellow skin covered in black moles and spots. Somehow, despite this, he was still possessed of handsome looks, but Anshu registered almost none of that, as the man's aura was so great that it towered above even his.

Any further observations had to be cut short, however, as speeding around a small tree-covered island several miles off the coast was a large Sunlit warship, and it was quite clearly turning unerringly in their direction.

Chapter 837 - Blood Magic Breakthrough

Anshu sighed in relief as he and the group he'd been running with reached the relative safety of their underground base, buried deep in a forest within one of the coastal Pegasi States. Though they'd nearly had a run-in with an Imperial patrol, they'd managed to escape before any Imperials were able to get in range.

The Indradian was still worried that they were being tracked however—Leon, his patron, had arranged for the Imperials to have ready access to easy flight, and while his magic senses weren't picking up on any followers, he still couldn't shake the feeling that they were being watched.

The feeling likely had something to do with who they were escorting: a group of Sky Devils, one of them particularly powerful. From what he'd heard of Leon's brief encounter in Argos, he guessed that this man they'd found was at least related to the Jaguar, if not the man himself.

This pleased Anshu. He'd known that the Jaguar had been sighted on the Sword, and had been working hard at getting into contact with those smugglers who were working with the Sky Devils. It seemed that if his invitation hadn't been accepted, then this was at least a lucky coincidence.

Now, all he had to do was somehow get close enough to the Jaguar and extend Leon's invitation to talk. How that was going to go, he wasn't sure, but just in case, he was ready to run away as fast as he possibly could...

Leon couldn't keep the smile off his face as he read through the various reports of the research teams working in his branch. Not all of the many, many projects he had his people working on were bearing fruit, but the ones he'd at least personally started and had actively provided some assistance on were showing great promise. The MALLs, in particular, were being worked on and a new design was being developed that promised to increase its movement speed without noticeably impacting its power requirements.

In addition, some refinements to Tikos' comm lotuses certainly added to his smile, and a possible breakthrough in an enchantment that could project a powerful light shield from something as small as a ring was more than good news.

However, when he got a certain report, he froze in shock. This report wasn't for one of his personal projects, but rather for something that he was only begrudgingly carrying on from Rufus', his predecessor's, time.

It was blood magic, originally meant to assist the Director in cracking the security on his family's arks. In fact, Rufus had devoted quite a large amount of resources to the study and application of blood magic, some of which Leon had released to Narses to upgrade Heaven's Eye's security. Most of those projects, however, Leon had stopped, except one.

The Director himself had asked Leon to continue that line of research, even when Leon had felt that the resources allocated for it would've been better spent on golem research. In these past few years, the team still working on blood magic had been studying, to no avail, how the security enchantments on his Clan's arks interacted with his blood. He'd even given them a few drops of his blood to help them study it—it wasn't like he hadn't given Heaven's Eye his blood before, though he made sure these new drops were heavily secured anyway.

And now, the report he was given of their work had arrived. The blood mages weren't yet able to crack his Clan's defenses, but they'd at least isolated and thoroughly explored the section of the security enchantments that were directly responsible for reading Leon's power.

Looking this bit of blood magic over had Leon feeling no small amount of familiarity with it, despite his otherwise negligible understanding of blood magic. There was plenty of lightning magic in the enchantment, to be sure, and he could read through those runes and glyphs perfectly fine, but it was the enchantment as a whole that was giving him the feeling of great familiarity.

After a few moments of thought, the realization of where he'd seen something at least similar to this magic hit him like a bolt from the blue. He stood up from behind his desk in his Tower next to the Hexagon, told his secretaries that he was not to be disturbed, and dove into his soul realm, the report clutched firmly in his hand.

Upon his arrival back in his Mind Palace, was greeted with none but the silence of a meditating Xaphan, the Thunderbird being out in the Mists of Chaos somewhere and Nestor being back at his home, working on rebuilding his upgraded golem body after Leon got him mobile and relatively functional again.

But Leon appreciated the silence, not wanting to explain exactly what he'd seen in the report just yet. Instead, he took to the skies over his soul realm and flew to the huge cylindrical pit within which lay the enchantment that he used to transform into his Thunderbird form.

He dove into the pit, observing the floating runes of light that spiraled through the air throughout the pit, and the runes that lined the walls. The runes numbered easily in the hundreds of thousands, if not millions, but it didn't take him long to find the section that he was looking for.

The section of the enchantment that targeted his bloodline, stimulating it enough that his body changed shape and began a near-identical copy of the Thunderbird's form, though of much smaller stature and majesty. It was hardly even close to being identical to the reports in his hand, but as he inspected them both, he saw similarities all over. Similar applications of the same principles, despite the differing objectives of each of the enchantments.

After a long period spent studying, Leon's smile grew even wider. He retrieved a veritable mountain of paper and ink and began to write.

A knock came on his door, and when Leon called for it to open, one of his secretaries stuck his head into his office.

"She's here, Chief."

"Send her in," Leon replied, his back otherwise to the door as he stared out of his window at the square around the Hexagon.

A moment later, in walked Valentina, looking a little confused and a lot suspicious. A frown had etched itself deep into her angular features, and she only took a few steps into Leon's office before coming to a halt, her arms crossed and her jaw set with displeasure.

"Leon," she whispered.

"Valentina," Leon answered. He turned to face her, though he didn't move out from behind his desk. "I take it you already know why I called you here?"

"I had to pass the best blood mages in all of Heaven's Eye outside of your office," she replied. "I can make a guess."

Leon slowly nodded and took a few steps closer until he stood directly behind his desk, his smile fading slightly into something more quietly excited rather than loudly pleased.

"I... understand the thoughts that must place in your head," he said deliberately, choosing his words as carefully as he could. "I'm not here to demand anything of you."

"It's looking like you want me to work on blood magic again."

Leon softly chuckled. "What I want is your expertise. You worked on blood magic for sixty years."

"Against my will. My vampirism is gone, I no longer want anything to do with that."

"And you've done spectacularly well working on anti-magic."

That finally broke Valentina's frown just a little as a look of pride entered her eyes for just a moment before she snuffed it out in favor of something stern and resolute.

"I couldn't ask for a better researcher," Leon continued. "You're truly one of my best. And I've looked over much of the work of the 'best blood mages in Heaven's Eye', directly comparing it to the work you did under Rufus. They're talented, knowledgeable, and even sometimes brilliant. But you always got results no matter the task given to you."

"Almost always..." she muttered.

Leon's smile thinned a bit as he nodded in sympathy. She'd never managed to fully break the security on his Clan's arks, though he hardly held that against her.

"What I'm offering you is a choice," he said. "You've done good work where you are now, pursuing your passions. And I'm more than happy to leave you where you are. But what I'm offering is magic the likes of which you've never seen before. Blood magic, yes, but also something more. I'm offering to make you the leader of a new project. If you agree, then great! If not, then you'll stay where you are. The choice is yours."

Valentina gave him a long, hard look, but curiosity seemed to win out over her reluctance, at least for the moment.

"What kind of team?" she asked.

Leon bluntly pulled a few runic sketches out from his soul realm and laid them on his desk, motioning her to come closer at the same time. The sketches were of some of the larger glyphs in his transformation enchantment—not enough to completely recreate the thing, it was much too large and three-dimensional to commit to paper, but certainly enough to understand just how much more advanced and complex anything that Heaven's Eye might be working on at that moment.

"It will be small," he said as Valentina walked over and began examining his sketches, "but this team will have unlimited resources—or as close to it as I can give. There's more to this enchantment—" Valentina, despite only having a few seconds to examine what he was showing her, glanced at him in shock, her frown already vanished in favor of a look of utter astonishment. "—and they will be given greater access

to it later. But for now, I want to know exactly how this enchantment interacts with someone's body, how it stimulates Inherited Bloodlines... whether or not it can be reproduced or adapted to other bloodlines."

Valentina's eyes were now locked on the sketches. Leon had retrieved only three of them from his soul realm, each one intricate and exceedingly complex, having necessitated hours to copy entirely even with his skill in enchanting. As she rifled around these three sketches, Leon retrieved three more and dropped them on the table, which she practically tore into like a ravenous beast into a freshly-killed carcass.

"Should I take your interest as an encouraging sign?" he asked amusedly.

Valentina froze and looked back at him. "What is all this?" she asked.

"If you accept the position, you'll be able to figure it out for yourself," Leon responded.

Her frown returned, though it was shallower than before. She glanced several times between Leon and the sketches, but eventually, she turned back to him and said, "Fine. I'm in."

"You just gave away such secrets?" Nestor shouted in abject horror. "What kind of fool are you?"

"One who understands his limits," Leon coolly answered. "It would take me years to fully understand that enchantment, I simply don't have the necessary background to peel it apart on my own. So I had to get help."

"From a bunch of savages?" Nestor raged. Were he not in a fragile and rather cumbersome golem, Leon thought he might've even trashed the workshop just a little bit to make his feelings better felt.

"Our plates are full," Leon shot back, nodding both to the golden tube containing the Iron Needle, which was now surrounded by several more intricate enchantment consoles, and to the back of his workshop, where his work designing his new sword continued. "Any bit of analysis is valuable, even if done by comparative amateurs. Unless you're saying you had someone better in mind for such work?"

"Of course I don't, everyone who I would've tasked with such a project is dead!"

"And neither of us were paying the enchantment much mind, were we?" Leon pointedly asked, to which Nestor had at least the self-awareness to relax a bit, what little body language Leon could read from the featureless golem looking somewhat like guilt. "You have your golems. I have my weapons. We both have the Iron Needle. What's the point if I'm the Chief of Research and Development if I can't use my resources to look into things we don't have the time, skills, or inclination to research ourselves? Aren't you one of the people always telling me to delegate?"

"I believe others have been constantly telling you that, not me," Nestor grumbled.

"Whatever. It's done. But cheer up, dead man, it's not like I gave them the whole damned enchantment! Even with the team I assembled, it will take them months to analyze just the small fragment I've given them. It would take centuries to analyze the whole thing!"

"If it would take that long, why give it away at all? Why not just keep it to yourself until you could brush up your own skills to study it yourself?"

"Is that what you would've done? Not given it to trusted researchers? Not even those researchers you just mentioned?"

Nestor sighed—a strange sound coming from a golem. "For something like this, I would've trusted none but family. In fact, if we'd had something like that transformation enchantment in my day, I would've studied it myself, even over the moon stone."

"Something touched and infused with the power of a Primal God, and you would've devoted yourself to this transformation enchantment instead?" Leon's voice was thick with disbelief, Nestor having not paid much attention to the transformation enchantment before.

"Creation power is something that came naturally to the Primal beings, but which all post-Apotheosis mages can wield. The transformation enchantment is something unique to us, boy, and exploration of our Clan's power would be far more beneficial than researching something that I, my father, and nearly all of my siblings once wielded, save only for Demetrios, my youngest brother and the sire of your House." Nestor practically spat his closing statement, taking Leon somewhat by surprise.

"You sound as if you hated Demetrios."

"I loved him the most out of my brothers," Nestor countered. "That's not to say I loved him at all, though. My sister was the only one of them whom I had any attachment to beyond familial bonds. I loved my family, Leon, but no more than I had to."

"And I suppose my Ancestor surviving when all the others didn't has nothing at all to do with that attitude, hmm?"

"Careful, boy, you're treading on thin ground."

Leon's smile died just a little. Nestor wasn't joking, so he dropped that specific topic.

"Nestor," he began, "we can't do everything ourselves. And we're on a time crunch."

"I see no clocks counting down."

"So long as I continue to gain power despite remaining relatively under the thumb of the Empires, we'll be on a time crunch. I need to reach Apotheosis and take all of you away from Aeterna, to where we can grow in peace. I need to take control of the Sky Devils and reassert our Clan's authority over the Nexus. I'd rather not wait ten million years to do so. And that means we need help."

"And you went with savages..."

"Who else is there? Speak their name and I'll seek them out! Who is available that we can call upon to study this transformation enchantment?"

Nestor went quiet for a long moment before theatrically throwing his hands up in frustration. "Do as you will, boy. Our Clan is in your hands, to do with as you please. As are its secrets."

"You say that as if you've brought me in on all of our Clan's old secrets." It was Leon's tone that was a little bitter, now. Nestor, however, just stared at him, not responding. "Nestor," Leon continued, his tone a little more conciliatory, "this was necessary. Especially with the possibility of interacting with the Sky Devils coming up, if Anshu is to be believed."

"Going to bargain with those who should be falling to their knees in worship of our Ancestor's power?"

"Did they fall to their knees when they were first made vassals? Or were they conquered?"

Nestor's silence was all the answer Leon needed.

Continuing, he said, "Most of the vassal Clans were bearers of Inherited Bloodlines of their own, were they not?" Nestor nodded in confirmation. "Then it only makes sense that we put some resources into better understanding the power that we bear. And the more knowledge we have, the better our bargaining position. If we learn secrets from this, then we can bargain those secrets to loyal vassals. We can use those secrets to gain loyal vassals."

Nestor clicked his nonexistent tongue in displeasure.

"I'd rather not give up our 'secrets' like this, too, you know," Leon continued. "but I judged it to be the best course of action. I think you'll come around to seeing the same."

Without another word, Leon turned away from Nestor and walked over to the consoles around the Iron Needle. He didn't do much, simply monitored some of the scans that the enchantments were making of the Needle, his head lost in thoughts about the possibilities that unlocking the secrets of Krith's transformation enchantment might bring. It wasn't like Valentina or any of the other enchanters and blood mages Leon had put on the team would be able to do much without bloodlines of their own, so he felt comfortable enough with what he'd given them. What little disquiet he did feel was easily minimized by the thought of possibly improving upon the Primal God's design, or at least unlocking some greater efficiency with greater knowledge of its workings.

He'd certainly have to bring the Thunderbird herself in on the research, too, or at least its results. The enchantment was a result of her labors to adapt the original enchantment, and if she hadn't been absent from his soul realm for a while, he would've already consulted her on this move.

His thoughts were interrupted when Valeria came walking into his workshop, a grave look on her face.

"Leon," she whispered, her tone as serious as her expression, "we have... guests..."

Chapter 838 - Devilish Guest

Waiting for Leon in one of his private sitting rooms was Anshu and a man with strange features. Leon smiled upon entering, though his alarm was immediately raised, having had no idea that Anshu was even on his way here, despite the Indradian having one of Tikos' comm lotuses. Given what he'd ordered the man to do only a matter of weeks ago, his alarm was elevated even more.

"Leon," Anshu said as he rose. He seemed about to say something, but then glanced at Valeria standing in the still-open door just behind Leon and hesitated.

Leon glanced back at Valeria and motioned for her to enter, ignoring Anshu's discomfort. The man hadn't seemed to have lost his attitude, but at least he didn't make nearly as big of a deal of them as he once did.

Valeria took a couple steps further in and closed the door, her eyes locked on the unknown man, her aura feeling restrained, almost like a coiled serpent, ready to strike.

"Anshu," Leon responded as he clasped the other man's wrist, treating Anshu a little friendlier than he was otherwise wont to do, mindful of the few seconds it took for his privacy enchantments to fully activate after the room was sealed. "It's good to see you again. Who have you brought to my home?"

Leon regarded the new man. His features were unfamiliar to Leon, though only in their details; the man was the very picture of average in appearance. His skin was a light dusky brown, his eyes were dark brown, and his hair, cropped short, was dark brown as well. Of all his features, only his stature was remarkable, with the man standing a few inches taller than Leon. His expression, however, was utterly blank; the man was not only completely stone-faced, but his eyes seemed glazed over, as the man wasn't actually focusing on anything despite looking right back at him.

"Leon," Anshu repeated, "There have been some... developments..."

"Developments so great that you couldn't send a message ahead?" Leon asked, his tone good-natured despite the reprimand.

"We had to move quickly," Anshu explained. "I couldn't return home to collect my lotus."

Leon shrugged. It wasn't like Anshu had always used the lotuses, the man not quite trusting them to relay information as securely as they needed it to be. Updates sent by letter were more the rule for him than the exception. Still, the fact that he'd brought someone unknown to Leon's home was... not appreciated, even though the stone-faced man appeared only to be fifth-tier.

"I hope I'm not a burden," the man said, and Leon's alarm skyrocketed as the man's lips hadn't moved. Still, Leon thought he recognized the voice, though he wasn't quite sure from where. "I made request of Anshu to bring me here not long ago. I was told you were looking to speak with me again, so I believed myself invited."

As the man finished speaking, he brought a hand up to his jaw and, to Leon's astonishment, took his face off. The blank, average face flickered as it was brought away from his skull, revealing it to have been nothing more than an illusion the entire time, attached to the front of a metal mask.

From behind the mask, the Jaguar revealed himself, his skin turning yellow with black spots as the mask's enchantments were removed from his body. Also revealed was a glowing amulet around his neck that appeared to be projecting some kind of shield over the man. It was weak, Leon guessing even a fifth-tier mage might be strong enough to break through it without much effort, but he supposed that wasn't the point—instead, he guessed that the amulet was hiding the Jaguar's ninth-tier strength, making him seem four tiers weaker than he actually was.

Valeria donned her armor and drew her glaive in a moment, and Leon fought to stop himself from doing the same thing on instinct. While the Jaguar had just revealed that Leon couldn't quite trust his eyes, he

didn't assume an aggressive posture, draw a weapon, or call upon his magic. He simply stood there, his mask disappearing into his soul realm in a flash of light, and stared back at Leon as Leon stared at him.

A long silence fell upon them, broken only when Valeria took another step forward, her glaive brandished. Leon held out a hand to stop her, and he said, "I would've preferred you call ahead, Anshu. This is what comm lotuses are for. This is why I've been insisting on you using yours instead of sending letters."

"I left it at home," Anshu confessed with a shrug. "I didn't want to risk it by keeping it in my soul realm, especially given the life I live. And after picking up this one, I couldn't exactly head back home to get it."

"I stressed haste," the Jaguar intoned. "We were detected by Imperial ships on our crossing, though fortunately, they were too late to stop our landing, thanks to the assistance of your man." The Sky Devil gave Anshu a brief nod of acknowledgment.

Leon stared at the man for a long moment, evaluating him as a guest. The Jaguar simply stood there, not a single threatening movement to be seen. To his credit, he neither puffed himself up nor shied away from Leon's evaluating gaze.

"You can't have come alone," Leon stated. Glancing at Anshu, he added, "Anshu was telling me about a potential landing of a group of your people." Anshu nodded in confirmation, but it was the Jaguar who verbally responded first.

"Yes, several of my Tribesman accompanied me to the continent, and have been given shelter some miles to the south."

"I have some friends keeping an eye on them," Anshu flatly stated.

Leon smiled and nodded with more cheer than he felt. He was taken completely off-guard, and while he was hoping to get in contact with the Sky Devils, he never thought that the Jaguar of all people would be brought into his home without his knowledge. His displeasure at the surprise and his delight at the opportunity were fighting it out in his head, and neither had the advantage yet.

So, Leon changed subjects a bit.

"That was an interesting mask," he observed as he walked over to the sitting room's small bar, pouring for himself a small tumbler of juice. "Can I get either of you anything?" he asked, fulfilling his obligation as a host.

Anshu politely refused, and the Jaguar, for just a moment, seemed almost aghast before covering his expression with careful stoicism. Valeria, now unarmed and unarmored, didn't respond, her focus reserved solely for the Jaguar. One wrong move from him and her weapon, so recently put away, would be back out. She leaned against the door frame, not quite blocking it, but making it clear that no one was leaving without going through her, first.

"The mask is an old design," the Jaguar said after a long moment of silence as Leon took a seat, sitting down himself after Leon gestured for him to do so. "We no longer have the capacity to make them, and there are only a few left. My Clan and Tribe both agreed that it was in the interests of my mission to carry it."

"And what mission would that be?" Leon asked.

The Jaguar fixed him in his gaze and said with grave seriousness, "To find you."

Leon shallowly smiled, but his elation suddenly gained a huge advantage against his displeasure.

"Interesting. Why are your people so interested in me?"

The Jaguar cocked his head slightly, his eyes narrowing. "You piqued our interest, Raptor, and I believe that was your intention."

"Me? No, I find attention, especially from those I'm unfamiliar with, to be quite undesirable." So Leon spoke, but he didn't even try to make his tone all that convincing.

"Let's not play coy, this room is warded against those with low ears and lower honor," the Jaguar growled. "Let us be blunt, Raptor. My presence here deprives my people of my power and places you at risk."

Leon held back a chuckle of amusement, but he supposed he agreed. "Fine, then. Why don't you start? What do you want? What do you hope to gain from this adventure of yours?"

"A King," the Jaguar candidly stated. "Not all of the Ten Tribes remember their past, but my Jaguar Tribe still recalls the power of the Thunderbird, and the glories we earned under your Clan's wing. There is no better ruler for our people, the only King that could rule us is one of your blood. Kingship over our people is your birthright."

Leon blinked in surprise once the spiel was over. "What a distance to travel, for something so small as a crown," he sarcastically stated.

"It is something you seek as well if the lengths your man went to so that we may speak here now are any indication," the Jaguar riposted. "It is not unknown to me how long he's been attempting to send messages to my fellow Tribesmen on the Sword."

"If we're being blunt, then fine, I'll admit that I wished to get into contact with your people. I was hoping to learn if there were any that still remembered my Clan down there. Being offered a throne was not, I'll admit, something I was expecting."

The Jaguar averted his gaze, an awkward look crossing his face. "I... My Tribe remembers the Thunderbird, but we are in thin company. No matter to us, jaguars are solitary creatures, but in this, we cannot directly offer you a throne. We can only offer you our support."

Leon nodded again, though his smile thinned. "More in line with what I was expecting," he muttered. "Were I not inclined to take up your offer of Kingship, Jaguar, what would you do?"

"I would return home," the Jaguar readily replied. "Though I would see the rule of your bloodline reestablished, fulfilling the ancient will of my ancestors, I would not force you to do anything. An unwilling King is a terrible King."

Leon hummed in thought. "And if I were to accept...?"

“My Tribe would acclaim you as the rightful ruler of the Ten Tribes. Your claim would be heard by the Elder Council, and I believe we could eventually get enough support for you to claim the throne of our people, so long left vacant.”

Again, Leon had to fight the urge to laugh, though it was a far different laugh than the first. “Just like that? It would be that easy? I would walk into your capitol building and your people would fall to their knees in worship and adoration, all but forcing me into a crown? Please forgive me my doubt, but I rather expect the opposite. It’s been a long eighty-thousand years, and a lot of blood has been spilled between your people and those of the mainland.”

“Great is our anger with the savages of this continent,” the Jaguar admitted. He began to look slightly more uncomfortable as he continued. “I... would also confess that... there would be much friction back in Stormhollow. Again, my Tribe would acclaim you readily, as would, I believe, several others. But many Tribes and Clans would not have us return to the old ways. They seek to destroy our traditions and histories, and would place their faith in others, and their new ways.”

Leon read more than a little anger in the Jaguar’s otherwise controlled tone and body language. There was more there than the man wasn’t telling him, or at least hadn’t gotten around to yet. If this was an introductory meeting, then there would doubtlessly be nuance later. For now, he guessed all the Jaguar wanted to know was whether or not Leon was willing to be their King.

Though, he had to admit that he found it just a little strange that the Jaguar hadn’t demanded some proof of his identity before spilling all these secrets.

‘As a matter of fact,’ Leon thought to himself as he leaned forward.

To the Jaguar, he said in an authoritative tone, “Give me your hand.” He held out his hand for the Jaguar to take, and the spotted man didn’t hesitate for more than a second. He leaned forward and presented his hand to Leon.

Leon then took his hand and channeled some of his power. Silver-blue lightning danced merrily along his arm and over the Jaguar’s hand. The Jaguar, a slight smile breaking out over his face, called upon his own bloodline’s magic, and red lightning rose to meet the silver-blue.

However, Leon could feel that he had the advantage in their unserious clash. Whether that was because of his new ninth-tier power or because the Jaguar was holding back, he wasn’t sure. He hardly believed himself yet an equal to a man who’d been a ninth-tier mage for longer than he’d been alive.

He glanced at Valeria, and his gaze seemed to draw her attention. Their eyes met, and she gave him a subtly skeptical look, one he was inclined to agree with.

Turning back to the Jaguar, he let go of the man’s hand, letting their brief friendly clash end inconclusively.

“You’re giving me quite a lot to think about, Jaguar,” he said. “I have great power and position within Heaven’s Eye. I’ve already reclaimed that much for my bloodline. What more could I need from your people? Especially when, by your own implication, I would be less than welcome by a large number of your people—perhaps even a majority of them. More than that, I know just about nothing of the

structure of your society, yet you expect me to drop everything I have here, everything that I've built, to come and be your King? You're not selling this idea of Kingship to me very well at all."

"I understand that," the Jaguar admitted. "I do not expect an answer now. I merely wished to make my purpose known to you. I hope in the coming days and weeks we might be able to speak more, discuss my people more, and only later will I ask for your answer. An uninformed King is almost as bad as an unwilling King, after all."

Leon nodded and smiled. "For... serious reasons, I can't have you stay here in my home. We'll never meet here again, either, at least not while you yet war with the Empires. But I can have my people arrange for suitable accommodations for you and your people."

"That... is agreeable," the Jaguar responded.

"Good. Then I will confer with my family and allies, and only after a few days will I call upon you to speak again. And we'll likely not be speaking alone. I have no intention of relaying your every word and concern to my people when they could simply hear it from your tongue themselves."

"That is also agreeable."

"Then so be it," Leon said as he rose, the Jaguar following suit only a moment later. Once more Leon clasped his hand, though he didn't call upon his power in challenge this time.

The Jaguar donned his mask again and Leon proceeded to have his assistants and household servants follow through on the promise of accommodations.

It wouldn't do to leave a ninth-tier mage hostile to just about everyone around them to his own devices, after all.

"This is suspicious as fuck," Alix stated as Leon finished his quick spiel. "No one just offers anyone else that kind of power. Never. This has to be a trap!"

"I find myself agreeing with Alix," Gaius stated. "Kingship is a fine prize and one that isn't easily turned away. Fine bait for a trap, I say."

"I hope I'm not finding myself too presumptuous," Marcus said as he glanced around the room at Leon's retainers, "but I believe we're all on the same side of this fence. This is an awfully convenient thing to just be given. Exactly what you've been looking for, just falling into your lap."

"I can't imagine it'll be that easy," Leon replied. "The Jaguar has already said that his Clan—or Tribe, or whatever it is they have down there—will support me, but that's just one of ten. The others will not so easily bow."

"And the one that will bow is the one you just so happened to have a duel with?" Gaius asked.

"A familiar figure," Anna whispered loudly enough for the entire room to hear, "no one finer to set the bait."

“Someone who tried to kill me,” Leon reminded them. “I’m not looking to believe him right away, but why go to all this trouble to get into contact if we’re just going to dismiss everything the man has to say?”

“Why go to all this trouble just to believe the first words he speaks?” Marcus counters.

“I’m not,” Leon shot back.

“Then there’s no problem, is there?” Marcus responded. “If we’re aware that they’re untrustworthy—or at least have yet to win our trust—then discussions can begin. Trust building. Move on from there.”

“Bah,” Alcander scoffed. “If they betray us, we’ll just cut them down and make our escape!”

“Not letting that seventh-tier power go to your head, Al?” Marcus asked.

Alcander laughed. “We’re all equals of Paladins, Marcus. Why can’t we indulge a bit in that power?”

“So that we don’t blind ourselves to otherwise obvious dangers,” Gaius said.

“Many hunters have fallen when underestimating their prey,” Anna added. “Not that we’re hunting, technically, but hunting and diplomacy do share a few principles.”

“I’m not looking to immediately drop everything and run for the Sky Devil’s Hell,” Leon interjected, hoping to calm some of their emotions. “I’d rather have a few more talks with the Jaguar before making even the smallest of commitments. But I wanted to know what all of you think about the situation. I’m... close to this, personally. I don’t think I can keep myself objective about what he’s offering. I’ll be relying on all of you, as people who know me and my situation, to keep my head on straight.”

“We’re not going to let you lead us all to our certain deaths, Leon,” Alix playfully replied.

“We’d be poor retainers if we did,” Marcus added.

Leon glanced around the room, noting similar sentiments from Anna, Helen, Alcander, Gaius, Red, Tikos, and Anshu. Of his retainers, it was only Talal that was absent, though these days he was less Leon’s retainer and more the man he dumped the administrative duties he didn’t want to deal with on.

Anzu, Elise, Valeria, and Maia, on the other hand, all looked like they had more to say, though they largely agreed with the others that this offer wasn’t to be trusted. They were just holding their peace until they could get into private, that much Leon could see.

But, at least, it was enough to see that his family and retainers were all on the same side, for once. Were it not so important, he might even relish the fact that even Anna and Anshu were in agreement.

Of course, he was hardly going to kick the Jaguar to the curb, all of this just meant he had to tread very carefully as he proceeded. After all, as Gaius said, Kingship was not easily turned down...

Chapter 839 - Devil's Honor

Leon stared at the document in his hand, his eyes not taking in a word that was written upon it. Despite the fact that it was a report from his researchers that promised to help him fix the problems he’d had with his darkness gem—namely its inability to make him incorporeal when he used it, as true darkness mages could do—he couldn’t concentrate even a little bit on it.

The reason was fairly simple: he was harboring a Sky Devil in Occulara, and not just any Sky Devil, but the ninth-tier commander who'd led the sacking of Argos and sank so much of the Imperial Fleets that they were still recovering.

And that man had proclaimed him to be his King. The King of the Sky Devils, or the 'Ten Tribes', as he'd called them.

Leon wanted that much, but having it dropped so neatly into his lap had him feeling terribly cautious. The fact that the Jaguar had admitted to Leon's face that his support started and ended with his own Tribe didn't help matters. If Leon wanted to become the King of his Clan's former vassals, starting his reign by starting a civil war amongst their people was hardly the way he wanted to begin.

He'd consulted with his retainers and his family, and while everyone was about on the same page of thinking that this was some kind of trap, Leon was a little more skeptical. It had been about a day since the meeting with the Jaguar, and in that time, Leon had wondered at the wisdom of sending someone as powerful and important as the Jaguar to simply act as bait. That had the terrible possibility of backfiring, and ninth-tier mages didn't exactly grow on trees. If the Jaguar were caught somehow, or otherwise lost—hardly implausible, especially given how close he and Anshu came to being caught when first bringing him onto the continent—then the Sky Devils would've lost an essentially irreplaceable asset.

Beyond that, Leon simply didn't think the Jaguar was lying. His encounter with the man in Argos had him reasonably convinced that the Jaguar was fairly honorable, especially since he'd backed off as soon as Leon had revealed his bloodline, despite Leon not having the power to actually stop him if he'd pressed onward with his sack.

In some ways, he was placing himself at Leon's mercy as Leon had placed himself at the Jaguar's back in Argos.

Leon sighed as he contemplated this problem. The Jaguar had been moved to a safer location where he now awaited with the rest of his people. Anastasios and the Grand Druid were still staying in Leon's villa, so keeping a Sky Devil there would be beyond foolish.

But if there was one person Leon wanted to know about this, it was the Director, both to fulfill his obligation to their partnership and to simply get the man's advice and support. If Leon accepted the Jaguar's offer, then he would be relying on the Director to watch over his assets back here in Occulara, after all.

Unfortunately, the man was away, which had taken Leon by surprise. He wondered what kind of business might take the Director out of his office since he'd seldom seen the man outside of it...

... Save for when he dealt with Rufus and when the Director had shown him his Clan's arks.

'He'd better be seeing to something of equal imp—' Leon began to think when Talal stuck his head into Leon's office.

"He's back," the Samarid man said, and Leon all but threw the reports he was reading into his soul realm and sprang to his feet.

Without a word, Leon made his way over to the Hexagon, and the Director's office within.

Upon being shown in, he found the Director standing in front of his desk, his back turned to the door.

"I heard you were looking for me, Leon," he said in gravelly tones.

"There's been... a development," Leon responded.

"Let me guess: the Grand Druid's ark is more important than we first thought? Or does the Lord Protector have need of you now, so that he can show up the Grand Druid a bit?"

Bluntly, Leon informed the Director, "The Sky Devils sent someone to meet with me. I met with him in my own home."

The Director spun around, rare surprise carved into his aged features.

"The Jaguar," Leon continued, "the one I fought in Argos. He's claiming that his people want me to be their King. Not all of the Sky Devils, but the Tribe he's aligned with."

The Director's face quickly righted itself to its usual business-like demeanor. "That's... serious," he growled. "Where's the Sky Devil now?"

"I put him up in a small villa just outside of Occulara. Quiet. Out of the way. No reason for them to be seen there."

"That won't be enough. We need security. We need... so many things."

"We need to talk before we do anything. No one's looking for Sky Devils in Occulara, and I think we can afford to wait until the end of this conversation before we start figuring out what to do with those already here."

The Director lightly scowled but tipped his head slightly. "Agreed. A strategy going forward is needed before we can decide how to handle this 'Jaguar'. Tell me what you know."

Leon quickly informed of what little the Jaguar had told him the night before.

"Fascinating," the Director murmured as Leon finished his short explanation. "We know so little of the Sky Devils, getting someone so high up in their rank structure that we can speak with is a rare pleasure... Leon, all caution must be taken to prevent this Jaguar from falling into Imperial hands. Such a valuable target isn't one they'd be willing to just let go."

"I'm aware of that. I'm more concerned about whether or not I ought to accept his offer, or whether or not I should head to their island..."

"Has this not been your goal for years, now? You've been speaking a great deal for more than a decade about the Sky Devils, and now an opportunity comes to see their lands and speak with their leaders, and you're balking?"

"Everyone's convinced that it's a trap. I... it's a possibility that can't be ignored."

The Director sighed. "It would be... remarkable of them if they were able to stop a ninth-tier mage from going where he wanted. If anyone could do it, I wouldn't be surprised if the Sky Devils could, but... Have you spoken with Jaguar since your initial conversation last night?"

“No.”

“Why don’t you bring him here? We can speak to him together.”

“In the fucking Hexagon itself? Are you insane? There’s no way he wouldn’t be missed if we just walk in through the front door! Even if we tried something more stealthy, it still carries greater risk than if we just met him somewhere else!”

The Director scowled again. “The Hexagon has some of the finest security enchantments and procedures in all Imperial territory, but I concede you the point. There are other options to pursue...”

Leon, invisible, moved quickly through the air, the Jaguar just behind him. The two moved unencumbered by retainers or assistants, completely undetectable to anyone not using one of Leon’s darkness gems. Their destination was none other than one of Penelope’s more modest countryside villas about thirty miles outside of Occulara’s city limits.

As they approached, Leon inspected it. It was private, well-secured, and unassuming. It seemed that if the villa was under any kind of Imperial surveillance, as the Hexagon and Penelope’s more utilized homes might be, then the surveillance was subtle indeed for Leon couldn’t sense anything. As far as he could tell, this place was as good as he could hope for, for a clandestine meeting.

He and the Jaguar skipped right over most of the villa, landing in the back courtyard. The enchantments on the villa caused them both to become visible again almost immediately upon landing, but Leon darted forward, ushering the Jaguar inside in a matter of seconds.

“Quite cautious, aren’t you?” the Jaguar asked as Leon closed the back door behind them.

Leon gave him a slightly exasperated look. “We’re in the heart of Imperial territory. A little caution is warranted, I think.”

“As you say,” said a voice from just beyond the back atrium, and Leon looked up to see the familiar figure of Penelope standing in a door frame, her arms crossed as she stared at the two of them. “Come on in. Let’s get this over with.”

She led them deeper into the villa and Leon noticed that there wasn’t a servant to be seen. The estate, relatively small as it was, would’ve still required a staff of at least a handful to maintain, yet he was gratified to see that Penelope had gotten them all out for a while.

Upon arriving at the dining room, Leon found the Director already waiting for them. The old man smiled and stood upon their entrance, and Leon relaxed slightly. As much as he didn’t think the Jaguar one to stab him in the back, it still alleviated his stressed mind to have another ninth-tier mage with him, watching his back.

The Jaguar’s response wasn’t nearly so relaxed, as the man had wound himself tense from the moment Leon had gone to grab him and bring him to this meeting. He glared at the Director, though Leon noted his aura barely flickered. As much as his body language conveyed anger, his aura showed that he was keeping a tight lid on his emotions.

"It's good that we're all here, now," the Director said slowly. "Shall we take our seats now, and begin our talks?"

The Jaguar sighed. "Working with thieves and savages..."

"Why don't we start there?" Leon said as he sat at the head of the dining table, flanked on both sides by Penelope and the Director. "How are we thieves and savages?"

The Jaguar smirked, taking a seat at the opposite end of the table, not looking at all like he considered himself outbalanced despite being outnumbered.

"Traitors. That's what Heaven's Eye was in the wake of the devastation eighty-thousand years ago. Remains of your Clan, but puppeted by the barbarians of this plane, turning the resources that should've sustained our war against the locals instead against us. The Empires could not exist without those organizations that became Heaven's Eye. Neither would my people have been forced to Kataigida."

"Kataigida?" Penelope asked.

"What we call our home. You call it our Hell. I'll admit to finding it... somewhat flattering, though we prefer our name for our new homeland."

"Lord Jaguar," the Director began, "you made quite the offer to my colleague. I wish to discuss the terms further."

"Your 'colleague'?" the Jaguar whispered, his tone offended.

"Yes," Leon interjected. "Colleague. 'Partner' would also be accurate. I can't say that I've returned Heaven's Eye to the purview of my Clan, but I will say that I've... retaken some of it. The Director still maintains direct control, but he's tied his fate to mine and allowed me to claim at least some of Heaven's Eye for myself."

The Jaguar smiled and said nothing.

"We can discuss the nuances of our alliance later," the Director diplomatically stated. "For now, I was more interested in the nuances of your people, Jaguar."

"And I'm inclined to keep you wondering," the Jaguar replied, his tone almost mocking.

"I would know, too," Leon responded. "If you would call me King, then it's unseemly to judge my allies so harshly."

"There is no judgment here," the Jaguar growled.

'Horse shit,' Leon thought.

Aloud, he said, "Good. We're all friends here. That's what we're going to need if all of our ambitions are to be met."

"And what are our ambitions?" the Jaguar inquired.

"To be discussed later," Leon deflected. "For now, politics. Can you give us the general political breakdown of your people?"

The Jaguar continued smiling and saying nothing for several long seconds, his eyes flickering from Leon to the Director and back. Penelope, it seemed, didn't warrant his attention that much.

Right before Leon was going to reiterate his question, however, the Jaguar said, "We are an alliance of ten Tribes. We formed from the remains of the followers of the Most Venerable Thunderbird and her successors, to whom we were sworn. Under them, we achieved many great things. We were also here when her bloodline met its end. In the chaos that followed that catastrophe, to which I cannot speak too knowledgeably having never studied the fall too closely, many Clans were forced south, unable to evacuate with many other vassals and the remains of the Most Venerable Thunderbird administration.

"We numbered several million, divided amongst many Clans. Upon reaching Kataigida, we reorganized ourselves and managed to repel those locals who attempted to follow us to our island. After managing to secure our survival, those groups we formed to defend ourselves became the basis for the Ten Tribes. Clans, led by Chiefs, united into Tribes, governing themselves by a council of each Clan's elders. The Ten Tribes as a whole remained unified by forming an Elder Council, where every Clan elder was allowed to be heard—though only those who directly presided over a Tribal council had a vote."

"Who are these presidents?" the Director asked.

"Leaders elected by each Tribal Council," the Jaguar explained. "Their only purpose is to officiate Tribal business, and to vote in the Elder Council."

"How many Clans exist now?" Penelope asked, finally joining the conversation.

The Jaguar appeared utterly unperturbed by her sudden interjection, answering, "Hundreds. The largest of our Tribes is the Booming Brown Bears, possessing by itself more than a hundred and fifty constituent Clans. Our smallest, however, is the Ancestral Harts, composed of only thirty Clans."

"That's some disparity," the Director murmured. "Say Leon were to accept your offer, how many of these Clans and Tribes would rally to him? You've committed your Tribe, but would others be so willing?"

The Jaguar's features remained unclouded by doubt, projecting nothing but stoic seriousness and conviction as he said, "I can make no promises for any but my own Tribe. There are other Tribes that hold the old ways to be true, who remember our pledges and years to reclaim old honors. But others wish for change, who would turn us away from our ancient traditions and forget who we were."

"Some might say that change is necessary to adapt to changing circumstances," Penelope drily observed.

"And others," the Jaguar countered, "might say that change for the sake of it can be destructive. If we lose who we are, then what's the point of changing at all? Better to die faithful to your Ancestors than to give up all that you are for the sake of survival."

The spotted man spoke with conviction, and Leon was inclined to believe that he truly believed these words, at least.

"If we must change, then we must," he continued, sounding just a little more resigned. "However, we must always keep who we are and who we were in mind, lest we lose ourselves forging ourselves anew."

Those in power now would see us discard all that we are and that we once were for the sake of petty victory over savages. I would see my people down a new path.”

“A path that leads to me?” Leon asked. He smirked and cocked an eyebrow. “Or a path that leads through me?”

“The Kings of old that we swore ourselves to,” the Jaguar said, “led us to thousands of years of glory and power. Our existence as it is now can’t even be compared to what it once was. What’s more, our honor, in not following our Lords to the great beyond, is terribly tarnished—as much as others might wish to deny that fact. It has been thousands of years more that we’ve been absent our monarchs, and it has led us to stagnation and greater dishonor.

“My path leads to you, for it is only you who can deliver us from our miserable existence. It is only a Prince of the blood that can truly unite us, who can forgive our dishonor and allow us to move beyond the limits of this savage plane. I wish for us to return home, to our ancient home, within the Nexus, and amongst distant stars. You are the best hope we have for a future, and the clearest choice to lead us.

“Ask any questions you wish, and I’ll answer as I can, but as far as I’m concerned, that’s all that I need to say.”

Leon smiled a little more, finding the man fairly persuasive. He could detect no falsehood in him—not that he considered himself particularly skilled at ferreting out falsehoods, but he believed that the Jaguar was speaking his truth.

The problem was that it sounded like there were others in the Ten Tribes who had their own truths, as well, and from the way that the Jaguar was speaking, he didn’t think the man would give him an accurate accounting of their truths even if he were to ask.

If he wanted that, he’d have to go to the Sky Devil’s H—to Kataigida—and speak with the Tribes themselves.

“Who are these Tribes that you speak of with such vague, yet vehement disdain?” the Director asked.

“The Tiger Tribe,” the Jaguar readily answered. “The Bears. They wish to break Tribal allegiances, shatter our system, and create what they believe would be ‘one people’. They would erase all that we are, force us all to fit into their one vision of unity, and leave us culturally and spiritually deprived. They would have us forget not only our honor, but our Ancestors, and our true Kings. They would have my people hand them their fates, to be decided by them and them alone. I would not see this happen.”

“And how would you go about that?” Leon asked. “I’m sure your Tribe is strong, but can it handle the other nine if it came to open war?”

“I would never fight my own people,” the Jaguar protested, but after a moment he added, “Willingly. Not that it would ever come down to that. I’m sure the Blackhearted Lions would join my Jaguars. The Screaming Eagles could be easily persuaded, I believe. Only three more Tribes after that, and Kataigida is yours.”

“You make it sound so easy,” Leon quipped.

“It isn’t,” the Jaguar responded. “The Thunderer would not see it so.”

“Who’s that?” Penelope asked.

“Thunderers are, in effect if not in name, monarchs. Kings.” The Jaguar practically spat the term, where he’d spoken it only with reverence when trying to get Leon to take the title. “They are elected by the Elder Council when it is deemed appropriate, and as such are not permanent posts. In the past thousand years, the current Thunderer is only the second to be called upon to serve. And he did so under the banner of ‘reform’, pushing the changes that are killing my people.”

“Who is he, specifically?” Penelope pressed.

“A tenth-tier mage of great tactical brilliance and strategically competent,” the Jaguar replied, though speaking only grudgingly. “Were he not attempting to destroy my people, I would respect him greatly. But he is not the King to whom we owe our allegiance, and his attempts to make himself one will never succeed.”

“However bad this Thunderer is,” Leon said, “how can you be sure that I would be any different? You don’t know me, you don’t know how great of a King I may make. Why bet so much on me, then?”

The Jaguar sighed. “When our way of life is threatened, then we do what we must. We make the surest bets we possibly can. I would bet upon you and the power you wield. You needn’t rule directly, the Elder Council can continue as they have been. But you can unite us, settle our disagreements as needed. You are the rallying cry we need to halt our infighting, and truly become one people. That requires a great leader, but not necessarily a great administrator.”

Leon smiled self-deprecatingly. ‘If he knew my history, he wouldn’t be so quick to jump into my corner,’ he thought.

But aloud, he said, “Your faith is... overwhelming. I thank you for the information. We’ll likely have more meetings like this in the coming days, but for the moment, might I confer with my partners? You can rest assured that the moment I make my decision, you’ll be among the first to know.”

The Jaguar gave Penelope and the Director suspicious looks, but nodded and stood up, and Leon showed him into an adjacent room. They’d return to the Jaguar’s temporary villa together after Leon checked in with the other two. Upon returning, he found the Director and Penelope already deep in conversation about what the Jaguar had revealed.

“We need a better idea of their military capability,” the Director immediately said as Leon sat back down. “How proficient are they in building arks? Their weapons are potent, and we’ll certainly need them, but what more can they provide us in our rise to the Nexus?”

“However many they need, they’ll need to save for their own people, not for us,” Penelope pointed out. “Evacuating a small continent to the Nexus isn’t going to be easy, to put it insultingly mildly.”

“But having a larger base to work with will be needed,” the Director pointed out. “What’s the point of heading to the Nexus if we lose all that we’ve built along the way? If we have to start over as soon as we arrive, then we might as well stay here and die in luxury and power.”

“I think that whatever happens,” Leon said, “they’ll be integral to our plans to get off this plane.”

"Are you saying you're going to take him up on his offer?" Penelope asked a little skeptically. "Can't resist the lure of that throne now that someone's offering it?"

Leon shrugged. "I'm leaning towards accepting now. But nothing's set in stone, and there's plenty of time for that to change. Let's see what comes next, and how the Empires might react to it. Let's see how easily I might be able to fly to and from their island. Let's see about a lot of things, and then maybe I'll come to a decision, and we can finally properly start to plan our escape from this plane, once and for all."

Chapter 840 - Dangerous Hypothetical

"Are you ready for this, husband?" Elise asked as she straightened Leon's collar with a gentle touch.

"I don't think I'm ever ready for anything when it comes to them," Leon replied, smiling at his wife. She leaned into him, pressing her forehead against his upper chest, while he wrapped his arms around her waist and held her close.

"I'm not ready to leave," Elise whispered.

"If all goes well, then you won't have to. If they're amenable, then no one will be in any danger at all."

Maia ducked in, a somewhat jealous look on her face as she pried one of Leon's arms away from Elise and wrapped it around her. "Foolish," the river nymph murmured as she burrowed her way into Leon and Elise's shared embrace, both of whom happily made room for her. "They want more. However much they have, they want more."

"True. But they have the power here, whether or not they seek more," Leon replied.

"It's still strange that the Director agreed to this," Elise observed as Maia got settled in with both Leon and Elise's arms around her.

"He emphasized discretion," Leon reminded. "I'm not going to walk in there and tell them everything. Just feel them out a bit. See what happens then. We'll need to know where Anastasios and the Grand Druid stand, and there are ways to go about doing so without directly telling them that we're allying with their Empires' nemesis."

"Still dangerous," Elise whispered.

"Rather not tell them anything," Maia bitterly spat. "I don't like them. They're always around. This isn't their home, they shouldn't be here."

"Have they been bothering you?" Leon gently asked.

"Their presence is bothersome enough," Maia replied.

Leon chuckled. "You know, if I actually follow through with what seemingly everyone's been telling me to do—courting Cassandra—then the Grand Druid, at least, will likely be here more often..."

Maia groaned. "Cassandra can stay. Not the Grand Druid."

"I don't think that's how it works," Elise said, a wide smile on her face. "She'll be family."

“She already treats herself as such with how many demands she makes,” Maia growled.

“That’s just the nature of our relationship right now,” Leon quietly said. “So long as we’re weak enough for her to exploit, then she’s going to exploit us. Or me, at any rate. Once we’re strong enough to do our own thing, then any leverage she has on us will be gone. If anything, I’d almost take it as a compliment, that she and the Lord Protector know that we’re going to grow beyond them—if I weren’t convinced their behavior would be exactly the same regardless.”

“Greedy,” Maia again stated.

“Are you sure you should be judging anyone for that?” Elise asked the river nymph, a playful smile on her lips. “I seem to recall you being quite... demanding when we first met.”

Maia only shrugged, then snuggled closer to them both. “I have what I wanted. Most of what I wanted.” She gave Leon a pointed stare and moved his arm so that his hand pressed against her abdomen.

“Someday,” he promised. “Someday.”

She huffed, but Leon knew her well enough to know that she wasn’t truly upset.

“I should get going,” he said. “No need to keep two of the most powerful beings on the plane waiting for too long. Besides, the sooner I get this done, the better.”

“Just be careful, husband,” Elise whispered as she brushed her lips against his. “In fact, to make sure you move quickly...” She slithered out of Leon’s embrace, pulling Maia with her. The three were speaking in their bedroom, so she didn’t have to go far to toss the river nymph down on their large shared bed. “Stay there,” she sternly ordered Maia, whose bronze features had already flushed with desire and anticipation.

Elise then moved around to one of their bedside tables and began taking out leather straps and silk cords. Leon grinned as Elise began to pull Maia’s clothes off and tie her to the bed.

But then, she paused and glanced back at him. “Go on, then,” she playfully ordered him. “Take care of your business. Then come back here and take care of us.”

“Go quickly,” Maia gasped, her voice already ragged with arousal.

Leon’s face almost hurt from how widely he was smiling as he called upon all the restraint he could and left the bedroom. He had to take a couple minutes just outside the door to compose himself; breathing deeply, wiping the smile off his face, and making sure that he wasn’t showing any signs of the lust that his ladies had stoked within him.

Once he’d managed to bring himself under control, he set out for his meeting.

He didn’t have to go far, simply walking to one of his villa’s private sitting rooms. He knew from the handful of guards posted up in the hallway that Anastasios and the Grand Druid had both beaten him there, but they’d had enough meetings with him in his home that the guards hardly even looked up as he approached. Anastasios’ guard captain merely stuck his head into the sitting room and announced Leon’s arrival.

“Leon!” Anastasios boomed as Leon walked in and the guard shut the door behind him, sealing the three of them in. Leon felt the tell-tale rush of magic through his villa’s walls that indicated his privacy enchantments activated properly. “Good to see you again, my boy!”

“Leon,” the Grand Druid said more quietly, though with nothing less than familial warmth as Leon took a seat opposite the two of them. He couldn’t help but notice that the two of them had been sitting right next to each other on the same sofa, as was their wont.

As he sat down, Anastasios asked, “How has life been treating you, Leon? It can’t have been easy fulfilling this old girl’s requests, but I hope you’ve been otherwise thriving...”

The Grand Druid pinched Anastasios in the side for that remark, though she smirked anyway.

“Things have been great,” Leon honestly said. “I’ve been thinking about things lately that weigh upon my mind, but other than that, these past few years have been some of the best, most productive years of my life.”

“Wonderful to hear, wonderful to hear,” the Lord Protector responded. “If there’s anything at all I can do to add to that prosperity, please don’t hesitate to ask. I’ve been thinking, myself, lately, and I believe I owe you an apology. I believe we both owe you apologies, but I can speak only for myself...”

Again, the Grand Druid pinched him, and Leon did his best to ignore the blatantly flirtatious looks they gave each other.

“We’ve been a bit too demanding of you, Leon, is what I’m trying to say,” Anastasios said. “It’s... We must balance what’s best for our Empires, and what’s best for our partners. We don’t always get the balance right, as old, powerful, and experienced as we are.”

“We’ve gotten the balance wrong, dear,” the Grand Druid finished. “You’re more than just a tool to us. We both wanted you to know that.”

Leon smiled and nodded, though he didn’t take the words to heart. Words were easy to speak, but following through was the important part.

“Your words bring joy to my ears,” he said. “It’s an honor and a privilege to have you two stay here so often.”

“Oh, you needn’t be so polite,” Anastasios said with a dismissive wave of his hand. “Not for a pair of old folks like us.”

“Actually,” Leon interjected before the Lord Protector could continue or the Grand Druid could add her thoughts, “I believe it’s necessary, especially for what I wanted to bring up with you.”

Anastasios stiffened, and after giving Leon a searching look, straightened up. The Grand Druid, however, remained fairly relaxed, though Leon felt her attention quite acutely.

“I’ve been thinking about my place on Aeterna,” Leon continued. “How much power and influence my name and my power could have upon it. I’m happy with where I am and have no desire to upset this apple cart, so to speak, but especially with all that I’ve been hearing coming out of the south, I can’t help but wonder if there’s more I can do to promote peace.”

“Such is a natural wonder for all men of virtue,” Anastasios said slowly. “But it’s in the details that we find the agents of Malefal.”

Leon nodded, recognizing the name of one of the few gods in the Ilian pantheon that was generally considered irredeemably evil. He’d even seen in some of the more feverish pieces of propaganda or historical fiction his Clan being tied directly to the deity, or at least the evil god being hinted to have a hand in the actions of the Sky Devils.

“That’s what I wanted to consult with the two of you about,” Leon stated. “Given how reluctant everyone seems to be to let me go south, is it safe for me to assume that my name, or at least my power, would have some level of influence upon the Sky Devils?”

Any trace of joviality in the sitting room had vanished, though Anastasios and the Grand Druid were still smiling.

“That’s... a concerning question,” Anastasios said.

“Are you asking to visit the Sky Devils, Leon?” the Grand Druid seriously inquired.

“I’m not asking anything,” Leon replied. “But I can’t help but be curious about the descendants of those who followed my Clan to this plane. I can’t help but wonder if I can somehow make peace between your peoples. Failing that, I can’t help but ask myself if Aeterna would be a more peaceful and prosperous place if I were to... take the Sky Devils with me, should I ever achieve Apotheosis and proceed with my plan to head for the Nexus.

“Let me put it another way: I don’t want anyone to die. This war between the Empires and the Sky Devils... If there’s some way that I could possibly broker peace, well... wouldn’t that be in everyone’s best interests?”

“Leon...” Anastasios said with a soft chuckle.

“The world is never so straightforward,” the Grand Druid quietly said. “The hatred between our peoples runs deep.”

“It’s in your power to change that,” Leon quickly countered. “Your Empires spend a great deal of time setting the Sky Devils up to be the bad guys in your national narratives. Ease up on that, and the people will turn their attention somewhere else. Let enough time pass, and peace can be declared. There will still be some bad blood, of course, but that will also eventually be forgotten with time as these wars pass beyond living memory, so long as you don’t start killing each other again.”

“Everything sounds easy when so condensed,” the Lord Protector bemoaned.

“It’s just an idea,” Leon conceded. “Speaking with the two of you is a prelude to figuring out details—and even then, only if you two find the idea agreeable. As I’ve said, my power and the legacy of my Clan have been on my mind. I wouldn’t call it a stretch to say that I bear at least some responsibility to bring some manner of peace to Aeterna—even if I bear no personal responsibility for the actions of my ancestors, I have the power to affect some kind of change. Is it not the moral thing to try and make a change for the better? That I have a responsibility because of the power within me?”

“Morality... can be frustratingly flexible,” Anastasios said. “Talk something over for long enough, and just about anything can be justified.”

“Are you saying that I’m wrong?” Leon asked.

“No, I actually find it admirable—the desire to help where one can.”

“We just don’t think this is a problem you can help with,” the Grand Druid added. “Your power presents many problems for us, and we know that the Keeper, and likely the Sunlit bastard as well, would be much more comfortable knowing that you were nowhere near the Sky Devils.”

“Here in the west,” Anastasios explained, “we are largely untouched by the events of eighty-thousand years ago. But it’s different in the east; their land was torn asunder during the wars following your Clan’s downfall and remains broken and barren to this day. Keeper is the one who fears your rise most of all, and gods only know how Sunlit might react to you visiting the Sky Devils.”

“It’s been his sailors and marines that have been dying in droves, for the most part, as he’s so fond of reminding us,” the Grand Druid added.

“I’m not talking to them,” Leon said. “I’m talking to the two of you. I won’t say that I’m not interested in your opinions of the other two, but what I want most of all is your opinions, absent consideration of others. Is the Sky Devils my responsibility? If I were to intervene in this, for the sake of peace, would you support me, or would I become an enemy?”

“You speak as if it’s already your intention to seek the Sky Devils out,” Anastasios observed.

“No decisions have been made yet,” Leon replied. “But as I’ve reiterated several times now, doing so has been on my mind. I... wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I managed the impossible and left Aeterna, yet didn’t use my gifts to deprive this plane of a peace that I could’ve given it.”

Anastasios and the Grand Druid each fell silent, both staring at Leon for a long time. Then, they slowly looked at each other.

“Leon,” the Grand Druid said.

“Yes?” was his reply.

“Could you give us the room for a few minutes?”

Leon smiled, though the expression was without warmth. “I’ll wait outside.”

He stood and returned to the door, pausing as he reached for the doorknob. He looked back at the two tenth-tier mages, finding that neither of them were looking at him. Instead, they were staring at each other, possibly communicating silently, through darkness magic—though, he wondered if they could do that, why they would send him out of the room.

With a sigh, he opened the door, walked out into the hallway, and closed the door behind him. The guards gave him a few strange looks, but when he returned them, they looked away.

Fortunately, he wasn’t left waiting there for too long before the door opened again, and the Grand Druid invited him back in.

"I apologize for that," the Grand Druid said as Leon took a seat again.

"No, it's fine," Leon replied, practically chewing the sarcasm it was so thick. "I love being asked to leave rooms in my own home by those who, just a few minutes before, were trying to apologize for being too demanding."

"We but needed a couple minutes to confer with each other," Anastasios said. "Again, you have our apologies for that. Might we focus on the topic at hand?"

Leon stared at him for a long moment, a provocative half-smile on his face as he internally debated just how much of a thing he wanted to make of this insult. In the end, he decided that it was better to just let this be—better for his goals, at least.

"Before we continue," he said, "I'd like to remind the two of you that what I spoke of was only hypothetical. Musings on morality. It's advice I want, nothing more, for I do not yet intend on doing anything."

"Yet," the Grand Druid pointed out.

"We have... conditions," Anastasios added. "Concessions on your part if you do wind up making a decision that might... impact us negatively."

Leon smiled thinly. Their conversation started fine enough just a few minutes prior, but it seemed that despite the apology, the Lord Protector wasn't intending on being any less demanding.

'Not that I can blame him,' Leon thought. Anastasios had an Empire of billions to watch out for, he couldn't make decisions without keeping all of them in mind.

"What kind of concessions?" Leon asked. "And what would these concessions buy me? Hypothetically speaking?"

"There would be an outcry in Ilion and Evergold if you were to get into contact with the Sky Devils," the Grand Druid said.

"More than there is now?" Leon asked, his eyes narrowing slightly.

Anastasios simply replied, "Yes."

"But..." the Grand Druid said, "the more worrying cries of outrage would come from the east, and perhaps the south. It could lead to a war between Empires, which hasn't happened in many thousands of years. Risks like that can't be taken lightly."

"Indeed," Leon responded.

"But risks like that can be taken... for family," the Grand Druid said with a wolfish look of expectation.

Leon's smile widened a bit, growing just that little bit more genuine. "Cassandra," he whispered.

"If you were to become my grandson-in-law, I could overlook many indiscretions. I would even be compelled to defend you, assuming you weren't bringing great dishonor to me, my family, or my domain."

Leon slowly nodded, then glanced at Anastasios. "I hope you're not asking me to marry someone to buy your support."

"No," he said. "But there are... certain obligations I would ask you to fulfill. As the Grand Druid has said, to defend you would require quite a few sacrifices on your part to make antagonizing our eastern or southern counterparts worth it."

"Peace with the Sky Devils isn't worth it?" Leon asked, only somewhat seriously.

The Lord Protector smiled humorlessly. "Peace is an obligation for us all, and one I do not intend to shirk. But the methods by which we attain peace can sometimes sow the seeds for future war. We must ensure that, in securing peace, we do not create greater conflict in the future."

"And how would you propose we go about doing that?" Leon asked.

Anastasios leaned forward, his pink nebulous eyes flashing with ambition. "You managed to grow Hesperidic Apple Trees outside of the Menomonee Valley. And as the last scion of the Thunderbird Clan, you possess insights into achieving Apotheosis that we must not if you are so confident that you'll achieve it."

"And you want both," Leon said.

Anastasios' smile widened slightly, and he sat back without a word, simply giving Leon a smug, almost expectant look.

"This all depends on you, Leon," the Grand Druid softly stated. "It would be inadvisable to get tangled up with the Sky Devils. But if you believe it's your obligation to try and do so, then these are our terms. This is how you might buy yourself our support."

He nodded. "I'll think this over."

Anastasios sighed, relaxing his demeanor. "It is distasteful to ask these things of you when you speak of peace, Leon. But we must ensure that our Empires remain as peaceful as we can. As much as you believe achieving peace is your obligation, it is ours many times over. And maintaining peace with the Sentinels and the Sunlit Empire is easier and safer than attempting to make peace with the Sky Devils. It's just that simple."

"I understand," Leon replied. "I... I don't like this. I may not even decide to do it. But it's something I must keep in mind, myself; I may find myself sitting where you are, someday."

"I'm glad you understand. Leon, I want to emphasize that I think very highly of you, and do not wish for any bad blood."

"Think no more of it," Leon said with a dismissive wave of his hand. "I'll be sure to keep the two of you informed if I continue to find myself mulling this problem over."

The Grand Druid practically leaped to her feet and appeared next to Leon in a flash of light. "Good! Now, we simply must begin planning your wedding to Cassandra right this moment! Imperial weddings are grand affairs, and one can never start planning too soon!"

“I haven’t even decided on th—” Leon said as the Grand Druid started dragging him out of his seat and toward the door, but she interrupted him before he could finish.

“Nonsense! You two were made for each other! Just accept it and we can all be happier!”

She continued to chatter about destinations and themes as she led Leon out of the room, while all he could think of was Elise and Maia and his depressing realization that it would be just a little longer yet before he could join in their fun.