

Storm King 841

Chapter 841 - Princess' Arrival

"I'm surprised you went with the morality option," the Director said. "I would've thought that you realized by now that any words they might have about peace, justice, and morality were entirely self-serving."

"Had to try," Leon replied with a shrug. "Give them the option of letting me do my own thing. I didn't think they'd take it, and I wasn't surprised. The price they demanded, though..."

"The Grand Druid's shouldn't be too onerous," Penelope said with a wry smile. "Unless you consider getting to bed a beautiful Princess to be a steep price to pay."

Leon chuckled. "No, no, her 'price' wasn't immediately heavy. I worry about what she might ask once we're 'family', though."

"Does that mean you're going to accept her proposal?" the Director asked with a light scowl.

Leon gave him a pained smile. "Probably."

"Hmm. That puts us in a bit of a bind. Heaven's Eye is to be politically neutral, but a marriage like this between a branch Chief and an Imperial Princess would be a bad look. If it's possible, delay any official marriage. Mollify the Grand Druid any other way you can. If you can get Princess Cassandra on side, then all the better."

"We'll see," Leon whispered. "What are your thoughts on Anastasios' ask?"

"Intriguing," the Director replied. "I have to admit that I hope whatever you might share with him might also make its way to us, as well..." He gave Penelope a meaningful look, and she smiled rather wickedly at Leon.

"I wouldn't mind learning what you know about Apotheosis, Leon," she said. "Nor would I turn down the opportunity to get more of those Hesperidic Apples..."

Leon smiled again. "For the sake of our alliance, I'll see what I can do. But my apples grow with the aid of my tree sprite retainer. I'm not loaning Tikos to anyone, so the yield on any apples you might grow won't be nearly as great as mine."

"I'm sure we'll figure something out," the Director said. "You have our research division, might as well put some of them to work on the task, no?"

"I already have many researchers working on a host of other projects. I hesitate to add more to their to-do list."

"Even for something so critical?"

"Even for this, yes. I'll have to speak with Tikos first to figure out how any transfer of apple seeds will work. I'll keep you in the loop."

"Good," the Director practically cooed, his yellow eyes alight with greed and ambition. "Good."

"Might want to close your mouth there, old man," Leon quipped, letting a bit of his frustration out. "Stay like that for too long and you might start catching flies."

Penelope giggled as the Director sent a toothless glare Leon's way.

"To be a little more serious," Leon continued, "I hope I don't have to start treating all of my allies like transactional partners. What I'm going to be giving you, then, is quite the prize, and I'll not be asking for anything in return. I'll be doing this simply because we're partners, and if that's true, then when you thrive, so do I."

"That is how partnerships work, yes," the Director replied.

"Good," Leon whispered. He reiterated, "I will not ask for recompense. I merely wish for the giving of Hesperidic Apples and knowledge of Apotheosis to be a gift. One to be remembered."

"If you give me immortality, Leon," Penelope breathed, "I'll remember it for the rest of my life."

"Indeed," the Director intoned, not a trace of deceit to be seen in his statement.

Leon smiled and nodded. "Then we're all in agreement? I should accept these offers? Purchase the support of Ilion and Evergold? Give body and seed to one, power and knowledge to the other?"

"Did you have to phrase it like that?" Penelope bemoaned.

"Yes," Leon immediately replied, though he wore a teasing smile. "Yes, I did. This is a serious matter, so seriously is how I'm taking it. Much serious, need flowery language."

"No, no you don't. I'd rather not hear the word 'seed' come from you again in this context..."

Leon shrugged. "Have it your way. Some of us will be comfortable with our bodily processes over here, you can shelter everyone else."

"Ugh, can we just move on?"

"If you insist. What concerns me is that there isn't much we can do to actually guarantee either of their support. Or, I suppose, the Lord Protector's support; the Grand Druid will support Cassandra no matter what, I think. But once I give Anastasios the knowledge and apple seeds he's looking for, he can pretty much do anything."

Leon shot Penelope a cheeky grin, which she studiously ignored.

"There won't be anything other than his own word keeping him honest," Leon added.

"Aren't there?" the Director asked. "How would the Grand Druid react if she saw the Lord Protector going against his word?"

"Tear him a new one, I'd imagine," Leon stated. "I was hoping for something... less dependent on her, though."

"The problem here is a matter of power," the Director responded. "Then we need only seek to match them in power. If you and I were to manage to ascend to the tenth-tier, then the other Empires won't be able to touch us—assuming the Lord Protector doesn't achieve Apotheosis before then, of course."

“Hmm. Of course.”

“I’m wondering why the Grand Druid didn’t ask for the same thing,” Penelope spoke. “Achieving Apotheosis is no small thing, I would’ve thought she’d be just as interested in reaching it as the Lord Protector. So why only ask for a marriage?”

“She’s probably hoping to reap the same benefits, just indirectly,” Leon speculated. “She might hope that I might share the secrets and apples with her after Cassandra and I get together. She might be hoping that I would share those secrets and resources with Cassandra, who would then pass them on to her.”

“And would you?” Penelope wondered. “Share those secrets and resources, I mean?”

Leon smiled at her, feeling almost insulted she’d even have to ask. Blond hair and red eyes flashed through his mind, and he momentarily contemplated leaving Cassandra behind on Aeterna, now that he’d finally agreed to the Grand Druid’s offer of hooking them up, and immediately hated the thought. If he were to take Cassandra as a wife, or even a lover or concubine, then he was in it for the long haul, he wasn’t going to leave her behind.

He quickly explained as much to Penelope, adding, “If the Princess wants to share whatever she might gain from me with the Grand Druid, I won’t stop her. She might be worried about her own family—a reasonable concern, in my mind. I’ll not stop her from taking care of them.”

“How generous,” Penelope whispered. “I’m sure the Grand Druid is practically rolling in delight. She got all the same as the Lord Protector did, along with a marriage pact.”

Leon scowled lightly. “She... just accelerated what was already going to happen, I think. I like Cassandra, and she likes me. So... yeah. We’re doing this.”

The Director hummed in thought, drawing both Leon and Penelope’s attention. “Let’s get this started, then, Leon. If we’re to guarantee our power and autonomy from the Empires, then we’re going to have to start immediately.”

Leon nodded in agreement, and the meeting was soon wrapped up after they discussed a few more logistical hurdles they had to surmount. Once that was over, Leon returned home to begin seeing to his part of these shadowy bargains.

Leon stood at the top of his villa’s short staircase leading up to his front door, just about his entire household out in the courtyard with him. Elise, Maia, and Valeria were there at his shoulder, Anzu and the rest of his retinue standing just behind him—Anshu being the only exception, as he was no longer in Occulara.

Even Red was there, Leon having dragged her out of her afternoon nap, though he did concede to her an allowance that she didn’t have to be in human form, so she was lying down on top of the stables in her massive red wyvern form, the building having long been reinforced enough to allow that when Anna’s two wyverns had taken to doing the same.

Along with all of Leon's retainers and primary household servants—the laborers who worked out in the field weren't forced to show up, so few of them did—a large contingent of Heaven's Eye and Ilian dignitaries were assembled. They were led by Penelope and Anastasios, with the Grand Druid and her entourage standing at the front of the group, their eyes locked on the sky. Even Cristina, Asiya, and all of the Bull Princess' knightesses were present, cutting striking figures even amongst their august company.

Of all the people in Leon's home, only Nestor was missing, though Leon didn't even want the golem-man present for this welcoming party.

They weren't waiting long; the group had only been roughly assembled for about ten minutes before a relatively small, but incredibly fast ark came into view, flying through some distant clouds about a hundred miles distant. It was a familiar ark to Leon; he'd become familiar enough with it during the wyvern hunt he and Princess Cassandra had participated in together.

It was the Princess' personal ark.

The call went out for everyone to get formed up into a proper welcome party, and about twenty minutes later, the ark had landed in Leon's forecourt and begun to disgorge its contents.

First came Princess Cassandra's guards, led by the familiar figure of Evgenia, the woman who'd led Cassandra's guard detail into the Prota Forest. A dozen guards spilled out behind her, all dressed in resplendent golden ceremonial armor that seemed more designed to embody ideal feminine beauty rather than function as battlefield protection. They formed up before the ark's ramp, awaiting the rest of the ark's passengers.

They weren't waiting even a second before a handful of attendants emerged, each one dressed to the nines in the Evergolden fashion: long golden dresses and half a dragon's hoard in jewelry. They took positions just to the sides of the ark's door.

And then she stepped out. The Princess. And when she emerged, Leon heard several gasps ripple through the crowd, and he could understand why.

Were the Princess not an eighth-tier mage, she might've been crushed under the weight of all the gold she wore. A diadem on her head, looking made of pure gold and set with three massive emeralds just above her eyes; golden bands running up her arms, every band adorned with different colored glowing jewels, turning her arms into shining rainbows; a huge golden choker that covered her from clavicle almost to the jaw, again solid gold and set with many jewels. All of this was on top of her spectacular dress, made of glittering cloth-of-gold and set with hundreds of tiny sapphires. The dress trailed behind her for more than a dozen feet, and the attendants that had emerged before her immediately picked it up and carried the trailing fabric for her as she stepped off the ark.

She made a regal, Imperial impression, and with her hair done into an elegant updo rather than her usual ponytail or braid, she almost seemed a different person. Only the cloth-of-gold cloak about her shoulders that she'd taken from the black wyvern's hoard five years ago and Sunlight that she prominently wore at her waist suggested her true martial nature—and even then, Leon doubted anyone but he and those on that wyvern hunt would take the cloak in that way.

Still, she acted the perfect Imperial Princess as she slowly made her way in Leon's direction, stopping practically with every step to greet someone in her way, exchanging a few words with seemingly

everyone. As she slowly approached, Leon found himself staring at her clothes, realizing that there were lightning bolts embroidered into the design so subtly that they only became apparent to the eye when the light struck the dress just right, appearing for just a moment before vanishing again as the Princess moved.

It took many minutes, but Cassandra managed to get through the crowd in Leon's front courtyard, finally standing in front of him and the rest of his family. She smiled regally, pleasantly, charmingly.

But Leon saw in her demeanor a certain... hunger, like a lioness who'd finally cornered her prey and couldn't wait to sink her teeth into its neck. He smiled back, making sure his eyes never strayed from hers. If she was going to challenge him like this, then he would meet it head-on.

They wound up staring at each other for what must have seemed an interminably long time to everyone else, the majority of whom had gone just as quiet as Leon and Cassandra stared at each other.

But finally, after longer than Leon cared to keep track of, Cassandra broke first.

"Leon," she whispered, her melodic voice easily carrying throughout the forecourt despite the gentleness with which she spoke.

"Cassie," Leon whispered back, feeling rather like a brutish barbarian after her, though the way her eyes lit up at his use of the name, he found that he didn't care too much.

Together, and with Elise, Maia, and Valeria, they headed inside to finalize arrangements. This was the first time they'd seen each other since Leon left Evergold, and more than a month had passed since Leon had accepted the Grand Druid's offer of marriage between himself and Cassandra, tacitly telling her about his future plans at the same time. Plans that would now include Cassandra, if the Princess wanted them to...

Cassandra collapsed on the sofa, her flashy arrival outfit vanishing into her soul realm with a flash of light, replaced with a tight gold shirt, even tighter black silk pants, and stylish black boots. She looked both exhausted and out of patience, though were she and Leon not among family, Leon doubted she would even show a fraction of that fatigue.

"Was the journey here that trying?" Leon asked as he took his seat on a sofa opposite the Princess, Elise, Valeria, and Maia sitting next to him. The Grand Druid slid into place right next to her granddaughter and wrapped an arm around Cassandra for support.

"There there," the aged woman whispered, "it can't have been that bad?"

"No, Grandmother, I love being treated like a doll being prettied up before being sold off!" Cassandra shot back, though with less force than Leon had feared she might express upon her arrival.

"Oh no!" Valeria sarcastically responded. "You poor thing! Being dressed up in so much gold must've been so demanding! You must have been so brave to face such a gruesome challenge and come out unscathed!" Leon's silver-haired lover then dropped the sarcasm in favor of a mocking smile. "I'm sure there are starving orphans somewhere who would've killed to take your place."

"They would be hard to find," Cassandra venomously replied. "I don't know how things worked in whatever backwater you're from, but in my Empire, no one starves. Not even the local stray dogs."

The two women stared at each other for a long moment, and Leon held his breath, wondering how the Grand Druid would take this display. Valeria and Cassandra's words were barbed, to be sure, but they came absent of killing intent. Still, Leon couldn't be sure that the tenth-tier mage wouldn't take offense.

Fortunately, the older woman just laughed, and Cassandra and Valeria followed suit.

"About time you got here, you entitled bitch," Valeria said.

"I needed to prepare to be in your presence, Val," Cassandra replied. "I would've thought by now that you would've figured out that dry sweat isn't a flattering smell; perhaps you never learned how to bathe?"

"Let's not get too into this," Leon interjected. "You two can trade shots all you want later, once we can get some training weapons into your hands. For now, how about we stick to the matter at hand?"

"Yes," Cassandra responded as she turned to the Grand Druid. "I would like an explanation, Grandmother, as to why you saw fit to sell me off?"

"Are you disappointed with your match?" the Grand Druid inquired as she gave Leon an appraising smile. "He's not the most handsome man I could've chosen, of course, but in terms of wealth and ability, you'd be hard-pressed to find someone better..."

"It's not that," Cassandra complained, "this has hit me like a bolt from the blue. I was given little time to prepare before Mother ordered me to come here. Now, what is this? Are we really getting married? Why would you agree to such a thing?" As she spoke, she turned her eyes in Leon's direction, her red eyes demanding an explanation.

"I'm... looking into the possibility of brokering peace between the Empires and the Sky Devils," Leon hesitantly answered. "As a guarantor of intent, the Grand Druid demanded that we be married. I... well, I like you, as we've established. It took some time, but I agreed to the proposal, on the condition that you also agree."

"Hmm," Cassandra mumbled, her eyes having widened at the mention of the Sky Devils. She took a moment to respond, and she seemed about ready to start roaring in anger. "Wait, wait, wait, Sky Devils? What in the Ashen Fields are you on about?!"

Leon grinned. "Many things. Peace. Saving lives. Preparing for Apotheosis. The Nexus. Greater understanding of magic power, and the realms of power and influence that lay beyond just this plane. A realm of power so great that it can build supercarriers and fleets of arks that traverse the Void with ease.

"Cassie. I like you a lot. I have a lot of work ahead of me, and while it's going to be dangerous, it will be rewarding beyond the ability of any in Aeterna to measure. It will involve courting the Sky Devils, ensuring that the strife that my Clan brought to Aeterna is finally ended for good, and departing from this plane for the Nexus. My Clan once stretched across thousands of planes throughout the universe, and by the time I'm done, I would have it returned to that former glory.

“Will you join me in this?”

Cassandra laughed, though her expression had turned somewhat nervous. “You... already have your fair share of beauty, Leon,” she whispered as she nodded to Elise, Valeria, and Maia. “Do you have enough time left for me?”

Leon smiled. “I’ll make time. And to be clear, I will take no more wives after you, nor will I have concubines, lovers, mistresses, or what-have-you. You four—or three, if you turn me down, Cassie—are it for me. I will divide my time no further, and only for you four will it be divided.”

“A true romantic you are, Leon,” Cassandra replied sarcastically. “Has there been anyone more eloquent in asking a woman to be his fourth?”

“Human history is long and full of great people,” Leon stated. “I’m sure there have been people before me who make me look like a toddler trying to mumble out a few basic words. But that makes me no less serious. If you need some time...”

“No,” Cassandra said as she leaned forward, any fatigue in her expression vanishing as she stared at Leon. “I don’t need any time. I’ll give you my answer right now, Leon.”

Leon smiled back at her, forcing his expression to stay pleasantly neutral as he awaited her answer, his heart thumping louder and louder with every passing second that Cassandra dragged her answer out.

Finally, she laughed and said, “Yes, Leon! I can think of no one better to be my husband.”

Relief flooded through Leon, and he felt like he was about to melt into a puddle of staticky goo as his muscles, tensed up more than he’d realized, relaxed. But before that could happen, to the delight of Elise and the Grand Druid, Cassandra stood up, crossed over to Leon’s family’s sofa, and slid into his lap. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed her lips against his, her clear inexperience contrasting sharply with her boldness of action.

Still, Leon responded in kind. It had been more than a month since he’d accepted the Grand Druid’s offer of marriage, but it was only now that he was truly realizing this was going to happen. He was actually going to marry Cassandra.

Chapter 842 - Growing Family

“That was fast,” Valeria observed as Leon and his family returned to the more private wing of his villa. Only Elise, Maia, Valeria, himself, and now Cassandra were here; everyone else was busy preparing a celebration for the upcoming nuptials, though when precisely that was going to be was still up in the air.

“I can’t help it, I’m a romantic,” Cassandra replied nonchalantly.

“Still,” Elise said, cutting Valeria off from what Leon was sure would’ve been quite the barbed retort, “I’ll admit to having some misgivings about how quickly you accepted the offer... I would be a little more comfortable with these proceedings if you could help us to understand that this isn’t just a spur-of-the-moment decision on your part and that you are actually on board with joining our little flight...”

Cassandra smiled and laughed. “I’m a Princess,” she explained, “I’ve been brought up to be bold and to commit to my actions. I’m not to second-guess myself before the consequences have even borne out.” Elise looked like she was about to interject again when Cassandra silenced her with a raising of her hand.

“What’s more,” the Princess continued, “this is something that I’ll admit I’ve long considered. My suitors back in Evergold have proven themselves... lacking, to say the least—Leon, you met Stephanos yourself, you know the kind of people I was dealing with.”

Leon nodded, briefly scowling at the reminder of that particularly arrogant man.

“Ever since I accepted to myself that I liked Leon,” the Princess said, “I’ve thought about this. When Leon told me that he reciprocated my feelings back during the exploration of that supercarrier, this has been on my mind: when we would finally give this a shot. While getting married was, itself, a little out of the blue, my grandmother had given me a few days to come to grips with it before I headed here; or did you think I came all dressed up like that for nothing? I had to impress my future husband and sisters-in-law...”

She beamed at Elise, flashed a polite smile to Maia, and then finally grinned provocatively at Valeria.

“I’ve thought this over, Elise,” she said. “I would’ve preferred a little more time to get to know everyone else, but it seems that this is happening. I’ll be joining your ‘flight’. Not for a few months at least, but it’s been decided. So let’s do our best to get to know each other from here on.”

Elise frowned lightly, but Leon knew what she was going to say already. She’d pressed him to commit to this course of action several times, and now that he finally was, he doubted she was going to back out now. Having an Imperial Princess on side was going to be the kind of boon to their family that turning her away was not an option at all.

True to what he knew of his wife, after taking a few moments to make a show of deliberating on the subject, Elise smiled and said, “Then let’s figure out a way to make this work so that we’re all happy. This is going to be quite the adjustment we need to make to our family.”

“That’s not the least of what we need to prepare for,” Leon said, speaking again for the first time since they’d retreated further into the villa. “With this marriage, Heaven’s Eye is going to be seen as aligning itself more closely with Evergold. Evergold is going to be seen as aligning itself more closely with me. There will be consequences.”

“We can handle them,” Cassandra said almost dismissively, but Leon saw a momentary tightening in the corners of her mouth and eyes, telling him that she wasn’t quite as confident in that as she was making herself appear.

“Be that as it may,” Leon responded, “it’s still for the best that we consider how this is going to affect not only our families but also Heaven’s Eye and the Sacred Golden Empire.”

“We’re going to eventually leave this plane, are we not?” Cassandra asked, surprising Leon only a little. He supposed it was only natural that the Grand Druid made sure Cassandra knew what his stated plans for the future were. “If that’s the case, then these problems are only temporary. We can focus on growing stronger and preparing for our departure when the time comes. Let those in other Empires cry foul as we leave them behind, it’s not like they’ll be able to do anything about us.”

“But they can do something about it now,” Leon said. “Having the support of Evergold and Ilion will be crucial. And that’s why I’ll probably be pretty deep in work for the next few months, making sure that we have Ilion in our corner.”

“And what of Evergold?” Cassandra asked with a sly smile. “Or were you just going to give all that information to the Lord Protector and leave none for my Empire?”

Leon snorted. “I figured that would be asked for. I was assuming that I was going to handing off at least some of what the Lord Protector wants to the Grand Druid as well. I’m sure she’d press for it anyway.”

“She will,” Cassandra replied. “Grandmother always gets what she wants, so it’s better to head her off where you can.”

“Regardless,” Leon continued with a growing headache, “nothing’s ready yet. Hesperidic Apples aren’t ready, my information on Apotheosis isn’t ready. You not only need to be integrated into my family and my retinue’s power structure, but you also need to be filled in on my own personal projects and subordinates.”

Cassandra’s ruby eyes began to shimmer more intensely than they already were at those words, but what Leon had to say next had her scowl returning.

“Most of these projects—or all of them, really—are need-to-know, Cassie. And your grandmother doesn’t. I’d rather she kept her nose out of our business. She’ll get what she thinks she’s owed, but that doesn’t mean I want her hovering over our shoulders, micro-managing our affairs, and denying us any secrets.”

Cassandra stared back at him, her expression turning even more serious than when she was trying to reassure Elise. After a long moment of silence, she whispered, “I... can understand that. And... I... agree. There are things... that my grandmother doesn’t need to know.”

“Things that I’ve kept secret for good reasons,” Leon emphasized. “Lots of not-so-good reasons, too, but mostly good reasons. If I’m going to bring you up to speed on my family and what we’re doing, then I want you to know that I’m placing a great deal of trust in you not to spread that information. And that it will be nigh-impossible for me to trust you ever again if this trust is betrayed.”

For a moment, Cassandra looked almost annoyed, but she took a deep breath and mastered herself. When she made eye contact with Leon again, she continued to speak with great seriousness.

“I understand, Leon. And if you’re going to trust me with your secrets, then I will keep them. Besides, it’s not like I haven’t before—I haven’t told anyone about your black fire, I’ll have you know.”

Leon smiled and bowed his head slightly in gratitude. “Thank you, Cassie.”

Cassandra smirked. “Is this it? Can we get to the fun parts now?”

“In that much of a hurry to get Leon inside you?” Valeria sarcastically asked.

Cassandra laughed. “I won’t deny that I’m looking forward to my—our—first experience quite a lot, especially if Leon’s good enough to keep all three of you satisfied, but that’s not going to happen for a while. We have other business to handle, such as wedding planning, and revealing those secrets to me, don’t you think?”

Leon sighed as he stared at Cassandra, his lips turns upward in a gentle smile. “Trust, right?” he whispered.

“Trust,” she repeated.

Leon sprang to his feet. “Very well,” he said. “I suppose the first place we should start with, then, is my workshop...”

Leon stared at the report in his hand and the intricate diagrams on the table in front of him. He was in one of his most secure research facilities, one that he’d had made even more secure after consigning Valentina and a dozen of his finest blood mages to its depths, tasking them with research that might aid him in unlocking the secrets of his transformation enchantment.

The Thunderbird had done much to create that enchantment, of course, and Leon had asked her about it as much as he could. Unfortunately, she had admitted that she hadn’t done as much as Leon had hoped, merely adapting the Primal God Krith’s work using what knowledge she’d managed to glean from the Great Black Dragon before he’d stopped talking to her, and from her knowledge of her bloodline. As a result, she wasn’t as useful as Leon had been hoping she’d be in adapting the transformation enchantment for other bloodlines.

So, if Leon wanted to make sure that this was a useful carrot for bribing the Ten Tribes to his side, then he needed to unlock it himself. Or have others do it—so long as the secrets were his to parcel out, then it didn’t matter too awfully much.

The report in his hand was their preliminary findings: a brief summation of their attempts to break down and completely analyze the intricate and exceedingly complex enchantment crafted by literal divinity. Most enchanters had never considered working with three-dimensional enchantments, so Leon understood why they were a little flabbergasted at the work he’d laid before them, but in the same breath, he was surprised at just how quickly they’d managed to get him some kind of report on their progress.

Using the report in his hand and the transcription of the relevant passages of his transformation enchantment that targeted his bloodline, he was able to trace the lines of logic through the entire enchantment, with helpful notations on just what each section was supposed to do—in broad theory, at least, his people were still working on the details. The bits that the Thunderbird had specifically tailored to her bloodline were still stumping them a bit, but progress was progress.

And that progress had him convinced that even if he didn’t yet have the more universally-applicable transformation enchantment that he was looking for, he would in a reasonable time.

Once he was done tracing the entirety of the enchantment he’d given them to study, Leon smiled and left the research facility. He had a meeting with a certain devil to arrange...

“Have you been thinking over my proposal?” the Jaguar asked Leon as they were left alone.

They were standing in the small villa that Leon had set aside for the Jaguar and his people, in the most private of the villa’s conference rooms. They’d met at least once a week, with the Jaguar giving Leon more and more in-depth information on the Ten Tribes’ political and social structure. Leon found it easy to enjoy these meetings, as these were people he was intending to take under his banner rather than

those he held no interest in ruling over. That one distinction alone made the Sky Devils infinitely more interesting to learn about in Leon's opinion as opposed to the internal workings of the Bull Kingdom.

Leon wasn't surprised by the Jaguar's question. It had been the man's first every time they'd met, and Leon's answer hadn't changed.

"Your proposal occupies a great deal of my time," Leon replied. "I've not thought about anything more than what you've proposed, I'd say."

"And two months hasn't been enough to come to a decision?" the Jaguar asked, impatience evident in his tone despite his obvious attempts to hide it.

"Were you expecting me to immediately answer affirmatively as soon as you offered me a throne? By your own admission, it will not be just given to me, but even if it were to be mine with no more than an admission that I wanted it, I would still take as much time as I needed to deliberate over it. A crown is no small burden to bear."

The Jaguar nodded, his expression looking like relief and consternation were at war within him. "An... admirable attitude to have. Still, I would rather have an answer soon; I do not enjoy being this far from my people and this deep in enemy territory."

"Then I'll at least tell you that I'm inclined towards accepting your offer, despite some misgivings amongst my advisors. As heavy as a crown is, I would like to think I'm strong enough to bear it, especially if I have good, reliable souls around me who can take a little bit of weight."

Leon gave the Jaguar a long, serious look, and the Jaguar's eyes widened a moment before he bowed ever so slightly.

"If I do not mistake your intent, then I would be honored to advise you."

"Good. I would see that all the Ten Tribes have proper avenues to consult with me and have me consult with them in turn. Assuming I do become their King, at any rate; I do not expect them to bend their knees so easily, if what you've told me is accurate."

The Jaguar looked somewhat insulted, and Leon quickly added, "I do not question your honor, but all men have their biases."

That seemed to mollify the other man a little bit, but not entirely, so Leon quickly shifted topics to something a little more beneficial to the man.

"When we first met and had our little duel, you called me 'Raptor'. You know that I can transform, yet in the two months you've been here, you've not asked me about it. I find that curious."

The Jaguar gave him something of an incredulous look. "We all have our secret magical techniques," he said. "Some are more worth keeping secret than others, but it takes a special kind of relationship to ask after them. We are not close, so I did not ask about your ability to transform. It is not my place to pry where I'm not wanted."

"Hmm. I like that philosophy. But in this case, I think you would've found prying to be a little more beneficial than you might've thought..."

Leon waved his hand and conjured another copy of the section of his transformation enchantment that targeted his bloodline, having it fall into place on the conference room table.

"My ability to transform is unique to me, I'm afraid—or simply to my bloodline, but those are one and the same until I start having kids. But I have some of my people working on making it a little more acceptable to those with other bloodlines."

The Jaguar's eyes turned in Leon's direction and seemed to sparkle more and more as he continued.

"Would you like to transform into a jaguar, Jaguar? I can personally assure you that nothing will help you feel as close to your Ancestor as when you're sharing their form. It also comes with a healthy power boost, to boot..."

"That... sounds too good to be true," the Jaguar whispered.

"My thoughts exactly regarding your throne," Leon responded.

"Are... are you sure that having Heaven's Eye study this enchantment is the best course of action?" the Jaguar asked, switching seamlessly back into his business mode despite the obvious greed and desire that Leon read in his eyes.

"I'm glad you brought that up," Leon said, "because it was something that we had to talk about. It's one of the biggest reasons why I'm not making for your Ten Tribes right now. You see, I have a good thing with Heaven's Eye. I'm in an alliance with the guild's director, giving me unfettered access to the guild's resources, including some of what they looted from the corpse of my Clan. The relationship has been quite beneficial to me, even if it's been... rocky, at times. And it affords me the ability to select those I find trustworthy and task them with work I don't have the time or the knowledge to pursue.

"Since I have such control over Heaven's Eye, I don't see it at all as risky; Heaven's Eye is now squarely in my corner, where it should be."

"If you say so," the Jaguar murmured.

"I do. And making sure that I retain that control even from down on your island is something that I need to do. I will not give up my position in Heaven's Eye just for the chance at becoming your people's King. I would have both, and that takes some serious prep work. What's more, I want to ensure that I can return to the continent as needed; I'm not just going to drop off the face of the Imperial world as I politick with your people."

The Jaguar scowled lightly but said nothing.

"In that vein, I'm securing some support from the Empires themselves. I'm even going to be marrying one of their Princesses. This will allow me to broker peace between the Empires and your people."

Anger flashed across the Jaguar's face. "Peace?" he said disbelievingly. "Impossible. Eighty-thousand years of blood have been shed, enough to fill our oceans several times over. There can be no peace between our peoples, there's just too much bloody history to try and forget."

"I think it's possible," Leon disagreed.

"Then you—" the Jaguar growled, though he caught himself before he could finish the thought.

"Listen here, Jaguar," Leon said through clenched teeth, his anger now rising to match his feline counterpart, "I'll not decry your conflicts with the four Empires as 'petty'. There is legitimate anger on both sides. Great atrocities have been visited upon you both by the other, and I won't ask anyone to forget them.

"But, were I to become your King, your future would not reside upon this plane, but in the Nexus, and out in the Void. This petty plane and its petty conflicts will be left behind, in favor of the grand and glorious Nexus, and all the equally petty conflicts that likely exist up there."

The Jaguar cracked a smile, thin though it was.

"Our future lies in front of us, not behind," Leon continued. "We will move on, we will not become bogged down fighting a bunch of, as you've called them, savages and barbarians. At least, such is the direction I would lead us in. Do you still want me to be your King?"

"Yes," the Jaguar answered without hesitation. "No one else other than you could possibly unite my people, for you are the last of your bloodline. To have my people united is my greatest dream, and one that I never thought I would live to witness."

"Then bear with me a little longer," Leon said. "A few more months. A wedding, a lot of paperwork with Heaven's Eye, and ensuring that the Ilian and Sacred Golden Empires don't stab me in the back, and I can be on my way to your island."

"Just those things?" the Jaguar sarcastically asked.

"Just those," Leon confirmed, consciously taking the Jaguar's question at face value. "Just a few more months. Can you spare that time, or must you return to your people first?"

"I will stay," the Jaguar declared. "I must return with my people's King, or do everything I can to facilitate his return to my people."

"Then you'll have to get used to waiting," Leon said. "Just not for much longer. On that, you have my word. Besides, there are some projects here in Occulara that I'm running, one of which might be of great value to all Ten Tribes. Tell me, how much do you know of our Inherited Bloodlines?"

Chapter 843 - Princess' Concerns

Leon's concentration was absolute. He manipulated his magic slowly and carefully, only enough to cause his object of study to slowly twirl in the air. It responded well to his power—to his will—but given its strength, he was terribly conscious of just how easy it could be to destroy everything around him.

The Iron Needle spun around slowly in time with his manipulations, occasionally sparking with golden lightning whenever Leon needed another burst of power. It was almost horrifically easy to call upon the power of the Needle, as if the Universe Fragment were an extension of Leon's own body, but Leon knew that it wasn't and didn't trust his control over it.

"Very good," Nestor whispered as he took copious notes documenting Leon's experiments. "Are you ready, Leon?"

Leon smiled thinly, feeling ready, yet also nervous at the same time. Having an artifact of such titanic power that a Clan could be built in the Nexus out and in hand had his heart hammering his ribs without mercy.

Before him and Nestor lay a ceramic box filled with sand. The Iron Needle possessed, as far as Leon could tell and as far as the Thunderbird could tell him, perfect control over essentially all lightning. Leon couldn't even begin to imagine what feats the thing was capable of, though he knew of a few already, such as the Thunderbird first learning the power that she would make her own from it.

Another power of the Needle—or, perhaps more accurately, an incidental byproduct of its power—he'd witnessed at its resting place in Tusk's lair: the storing of its power in fulgurite. In the months since acquiring the Needle, Leon had conducted more than a few experiments with the Iron Needle, but so far, he'd not yet managed to successfully make fulgurite that stored the Iron Needle's power.

Now, he was trying again.

He carefully 'aimed' the Needle and whispered a command in his mind. A single bolt of lightning erupted from the tip of the Needle and hit the sand. The sand all but exploded outward, only remaining within the ceramic container thanks to the vast array of enchantments that Leon and Nestor had layered upon its exterior.

As the sand settled, there were a few traces of vitrified glass, still smoking black and growing rough as it cooled and un-melted sand stuck to its exterior, but no signs of the same kind of fulgurite that Leon had seen in Tusk's lair. That glass had held vast seas of power; the glass he'd just made most emphatically did not.

"Another failure," Nestor whispered, sounding just as disappointed as Leon felt.

"We just need to try again," Leon responded with determination as he pushed down his growing sense of pessimism. "We'll keep trying until it works. It already worked once, so it has to be reproducible."

"Or," Nestor countered, "it worked merely because of the unique circumstances of the cave that you found it in."

"Having some second thoughts about continuing this line of experimentation?" Leon asked.

"Ancestor's no!" Nestor responded. "All I'm saying is that using such plain sand might not give us the same results, and expecting the same results would be foolish. We need to isolate what properties made that lightning glass in the first place if we're to replicate it."

"I don't even know what that lightning glass was made of," Leon growled as he glared down at the sand in the large ceramic bowl. "Even if we can't use regular sand, though, there has to be some kind of substance that we can glass that will contain this power..."

"There is... another possibility," Nestor whispered.

"No," Leon shot back. He knew what Nestor was going to say, and he wasn't quite ready to face that, yet. He wanted to explore all other options first before admitting to what could very well be the truth, that the fulgurite in that cave had only been charged with the Iron Needle's power due to its proximity

for thousands of years. “We’re just missing something, and we’ll find it. How much power leaked from the container?”

“Hmm,” Nestor whispered as he examined the bowl. Judging by the micro-cracks left in the ceramic, Nestor was able to make a ballpark estimate, and he and Leon moved on to another ceramic bowl with a slightly different enchantment.

In total, Leon and Nestor blasted through several dozen enchanted bowls, creating some fulgurite each time, but never creating any that either contained the Needle’s power from the moment of creation or any that could absorb its power after it cooled. Each time Leon and Nestor attempted to facilitate its power storage using enchantment, their attempts would fail.

As he and Nestor cleaned up after this most recent round of experiments, Leon asked, “Just how much control should I gain if I master the Needle’s power?”

Nestor paused as he made a few last notes in his notebook. “Are you thinking of trying this more manually?”

“I am.”

“Other storage mediums have failed, why would this be any different?”

Leon grimaced slightly, remembering how he and Nestor had attempted to store the Iron Needle’s power in more conventional gems and suffered the gems exploding every time. No matter how weakly Leon made his attempts, the gems would always explode. Not even when they used more conventional methods of storing magic power would it work. It was almost as if the Iron Needle’s power simply refused to be stored, no matter if Leon was the Needle’s master or not.

“But I know that lightning glass can work. So if I’m able to force lightning into the glass and not let it out...”

“That sounds like a good way to make something that explodes,” Nestor observed.

“I fail to see how that would be a bad thing,” Leon said with a cheeky smile. More seriously, he added, “We can take more precautions, but I think it’s worth investigating.”

Nestor stared at Leon for a long time before sighing, his lungless body slumping over a bit. “That would take some preparation to experiment with safely. And we’ll need more lightning glass.”

“We can make just about all that we need,” Leon said as he raised a hand, silver-blue lightning dancing about his fingers.

“If it’s so easy, then get to it,” Nestor challenged.

Leon smirked and got to work, using his lightning to melt the sand into glass as best as he could—which was to say, not very. In the end, though, he was still left with a goodly amount of fulgurite, none of which was in any way magical.

With hardly more than a word, Leon began channeling the power of the Iron Needle again, the Universe Fragment responding to his will as it floated just above his hand. Lightning sparked about it, and with little more than an errant thought on Leon’s part, a spectacular bolt of violet lightning sprang from the

tip of the Needle and hit one of his larger pieces of fulgurite, which promptly exploded, showering the area around Leon's testing table in glassy shrapnel.

"Well done," Nestor drily stated as bits of black glassy crystal bounced off his enchanted steel chest.

"Just my first time," Leon protested.

He tried again three more times, for he only had three more pieces of fulgurite of substantial size. Each time, he tried to direct the lightning with more and more control, but each time, the lightning emanated from the Needle was too much for the fulgurite to bear, causing the crystalline substance to shatter.

"Those didn't explode," Nestor observed. "You're making progress."

"Your powers of observation never cease to amaze and astound, dead man."

"Neither does your capacity for failure. Do try again, I haven't had my fill of exploding lightning glass yet."

Leon gave the man a withering glare, but before he could respond, he heard a quick bang on his workshop's door, followed by a muffled curse in familiar tones.

With a frown, he glared at Nestor again, secured the Iron Needle in its golden tube, and moved to the door just as whoever was outside knocked on it a few times.

Since he'd been experimenting with the Iron Needle, he'd completely locked the workshop down. With Nestor's upgrades to the workshop's security enchantments, Leon doubted even a tenth-tier mage could get in or out if its defenses were raised.

The one outside wasn't a tenth-tier mage, though, as revealed when Leon opened the door.

"Ah!" Cassandra cried out in momentary surprise, her hand raised to rap her knuckles against the door, almost rapping them on Leon's forehead.

"Cassie," Leon warmly said in greeting, ignoring all else. He was about to slip out of his workshop when Cassandra made to enter, and seeing no reason not to let her in, he stepped aside. Once she was inside, though, he shut the door tightly, raising its defenses again.

Cassandra took a moment to glance curiously at Nestor—Leon having introduced them weeks ago—and smiled briefly at Nestor's large cat napping in the corner, which he'd named Kibeh. Cassandra had been briefly quite taken with Nestor, seeing him as a possible font of knowledge of the past, but after Nestor revealed that he'd participated quite little in the Thunderbird Clan's political and administrative apparatus, she'd quickly lost interest—though she'd maintained a healthy wariness of the man. She was still vaguely interested in the mechanics of how he was still alive, his magic body having been implanted into a specially-created golem, but since she seemed to have no interest in golems themselves, she rarely asked Leon about him.

Finally, she turned back to Leon.

"Hey," she said. "Am I interrupting?"

"Yes!" Nestor called out, but aside from a slight narrowing of her eyes, she ignored the dead man completely.

"Nothing so important that it can't be done later. What's on your mind that you had to come down here?" Leon responded.

"I wanted to talk about a few things," she explained as she took a few steps back and began surveying Leon's somewhat eclectic workshop, with its blacksmithing, enchanting, and golem-crafting tools.

"How're things down in here? Still working on... what was it? Cloud forging?"

"Sky forging," Leon corrected her. "And yes, I'm still working on it. I'm having some problems with the Iron Needle, so it's looking more and more necessary that I'll need something to aid me in channeling its power. I have Sid helping me with some research on the topic, but since she's not a lightning mage, she was quite adamant that I not expect too much from her."

Cassandra hummed in thought, and Leon wondered if she was actually listening. He found himself growing a little more concerned about what was on her mind, especially since she'd never come to seek him out in his workshop before, though she had while he was in other parts of the villa.

In those weeks, he'd brought her up to speed on just about all of his family's goings-on. It was a calculated risk, but he'd made it clear that he was trusting her with sensitive information, and she'd given him no reason to think that she'd passed any of it on to anyone else. Still, he refrained from telling her about the Jaguar in Occulara, or about the Director's arks. For the most part, however, he told her about his work, including the Iron Needle. That had been a particularly nerve-wracking conversation, but all that had happened as a result was her insistence on seeing the artifact for herself.

After confirming that Leon hadn't lied about it and that it was practically useless to her, she lost interest pretty quickly, choosing instead to spend most of her time with Tikos and Helen in attempting to try and grow Hesperidic Apple trees without the tree sprite's constant attention. So far, they'd made some progress, but not enough for Leon to properly bribe the Lord Protector into not screwing with his property while he was at the Sky Devil's Hell, yet.

And in regards to the Sky Devil's Hell, while he'd not told Cassandra about the Jaguar yet, he hadn't been shy in telling her about his plans to win the Ten Tribes over, nor about his attempts to get in contact. To say that she was surprised was an understatement, but given the distance between the Sacred Golden Empire and the Sky Devil's Hell, and the fact that the Sky Devils were largely seen as a problem for the Sunlit Empire, she wasn't too upset.

"And what were you working on here?" she asked, her tone distant like she wasn't really all the invested in hearing the answer, her mind miles away.

Leon quickly informed her of what he'd been doing over the past few hours, and the fruits of that labor—or lack thereof, as it were.

"... but I'm confident we'll get what we need once I get a handle on using the Iron Needle," Leon finished, and Cassandra still looked like her attention wasn't quite on the here and now. "... And once that happens, I'll be able to strip you down and tickle you to death."

"Hmm, that's good," Cassandra whispered.

Leon fought to stop himself from laughing. "And once I'm done with that, it won't be too hard to wave my naked ass at the Keeper and have my revenge..."

"Ohhh," Cassandra said. Leon was about to continue when, after a second, her eyes widened and she turned fully toward him. "Wait, what?"

"Nothing," Leon replied. "You had to have a reason for coming here, what's going on?"

She frowned and glanced at Nestor again. "Mind if we talk in private?"

Leon nodded, and together, the two of them left the workshop, the sound of Nestor's grumbling filling the air as they departed. Only a few minutes later, they were in Cassandra's suite in the villa, Leon having given her the largest set of rooms that he still had open in his home so that not only the Princess but also some of her personal guards and servants could stay close to her. He was also hosting more Evergolden guards and servants in his home, but they were resting their heads elsewhere.

Cassandra led him to her bedroom, but before Leon could start getting any ideas of what she wanted, she collapsed on her bed and just laid there for a long moment, staring up at the ceiling.

"I... My grandmother... Actually, basically everyone has been asking me about you," she explained.

"They... I get the feeling that, even though they're not saying it, they want me to spy on you."

"Oh!" Leon exclaimed in faux surprise. "My word! What a horrible and completely unforeseen thing to have happen! Betrayal! I have been betrayed!"

"This is serious," Cassandra protested, her ruby eyes narrowing as she sat up and crossed her arms across her chest.

Leon chuckled and sat down next to her. He almost wrapped an arm around her waist until he noticed her shy away from his touch a bit, so he contented himself with just being a little closer to her.

"I know that it's serious, but it's not surprising. Have you told anyone anything that you've learned about me, yet?"

"You ask as if you expect me to reveal your secrets at some point."

"Poor choice of phrasing on my part, then." Leon smiled at her, but the only reason that was a poor choice of words was that he said what he really felt. He fully expected Cassandra to keep her family apprised of what he was doing, at the very least. "But you didn't answer my question."

"You need more?" Cassandra asked, sounding offended. "You placed your trust in me, Leon. We are to be married in just a few months. I would not betray that trust, even more so because we're to become family. A betrayal of you is a betrayal of myself."

Leon shrugged, not intending to argue the point. "Have there been any issues? Has the Grand Druid or Her Imperial Majesty been too keen on pressing for details of my work?"

"Not as much, but it's clear to me that they're expecting... certain information to flow to them..."

"Then 'certain information' can flow to them," Leon said with another shrug, and Cassandra stared at him like he'd started speaking in tongues. "Look, Cassie, what I prize most is autonomy, not so much

secrecy. I'm in a unique position where I'm largely left alone, yet also present a clear threat to the stability of this plane. I'm left alone because I've made myself useful. If I'm not useful, then why would your family, or the Ilian Imperials for that matter, keep me around? So, yes, I'm fine with some information making its way out of my halls. Just... you know, not the really important stuff."

Cassandra scowled lightly. "I don't like this," she declared. "I don't want to feel like I'm being forced to choose between you or my family."

"We're about to unite our families, so it's not like you're really choosing, are you? And unless you know something I don't, then we're not at war, and we're not going to be at war. So... I suppose let's start with this: what sort of information does the Grand Druid and the Empress think having you here will buy them?"

"Apotheosis," Cassandra readily replied. "Hesperidic Apples. Other secrets that you no doubt have regarding old Thunderbird Clan magics."

"All of which can be shared—after review, of course. How about this? We can prepare some small concessions. Things I don't need, like some enchantments, a few of my older Lightning Lance designs, that sort of thing. Those aren't even better than their Flame Lances, but it'll take time for them to determine that. Should buy us some time. Not like this is unexpected, honestly."

"I still don't like it. It feels like... I don't like feeling used."

"Do you feel like I'm using you?"

"A little bit."

"Then what is it you want to do?"

Cassandra took a long moment to think it over. "I want to continue seeing the world. I want to see all that lies beyond the borders of this plane. I want the universe to lay at my feet and have the freedom to go wherever I want and do whatever I want. There's so much beyond Aeterna, and I want to see it all. I don't want to be just another finger wrapped around you, squeezing you for all that my Empire can. Nor do I want to be a dagger you stick in my grandmother's back."

"I won't force you to do anything. And if you don't want me speaking on this matter again..."

"You're involved, not speaking on the matter would be foolish."

"Then I say handle this however you want. You have my trust. There aren't many that can say that you know, and just about all of them live under this roof."

Cassandra stared at him a long time, seemingly searching for any sign of deceit. But in this, at least, Leon was being sincere. There were always new things to discover, higher magics that could be his. He didn't mind leaving some of what he'd discovered behind when he departed from this plane. If it kept tenth-tier mages from kicking in his door, then all the better.

Leon reached out and brushed her fingertips with his. This time, she didn't flinch away, but instead reached out and tangled her fingers with his, not quite holding his hand but coming close.

"Things are going to get interesting soon," he said.

“Sooner than I’d like,” she replied. “I’d have preferred more time spent with my new husband before he goes off courting Sky Devils.”

“It must be done. Strike while the iron’s hot, and all.”

Cassandra grunted and grabbed his arm. “Yes. And right now, the iron’s demanding a spar. Let’s go.”

Leon sighed but allowed her to drag him out of the bedroom. He had been working a while, and while he and Nestor hadn’t made much concrete progress on the fulgurite, they’d at least gotten some valuable data, so he had no pressing need to return to the workshop.

There would be time enough to continue his work later, but he was heading off to the Sky Devil’s Hell not long after his marriage with Cassandra, hopefully—just so long as he could be sure both Ilion and Evergold wouldn’t get on his family’s back while he was gone—and he only had so much time to spend with his friends and family who weren’t going to be coming with him on that initial journey before he left. And he intended to spend that time as well as he could.

Chapter 844 - Origin Spark

Leon stared at the expectant gaze of Anastasios sitting across from him, the object of their discussion sitting on the table in between them.

It was a fairly innocuous thing, a small box small enough to fit in Leon’s hand. But within it lay the potential key for Anastasios to grow strong enough to reach Apotheosis since, by his own admission, he likely wouldn’t gain enough power to do so without it.

Within the box was a single Hesperidic Apple seed. Such seeds were hard to get since most apples produced by the trees were seedless. It was a rare apple that had seeds. In the past five years, Leon had only added a single tree to his grove, and one that hadn’t yet grown enough to produce apples. This seed would’ve become his second in just a few months after Tikos finished preparing it, but Anastasios had made his desire for it known, and while Leon felt comfortable enough refusing it, he still accepted for what it would buy him.

“So, are we in agreement?” Leon asked.

“If everything works out as you’ve said,” Anastasios responded, but before he could continue, Leon cut him off.

“It will work, or are you casting doubt on my people’s skills? Or is it my word you doubt?”

“Let’s not be so quick to jump down each other’s throats, Leon.”

“No, let’s just be quick with b... the rest of this business.” Leon caught himself before saying something he would’ve regretted, his frustration at the constant cost of Anastasios’ partnership growing at a commiserate rate. “So, are we in agreement?” he repeated, his words carrying far more emphasis than they had a moment ago.

Anastasios stared at him for a long time, a pleasant smile frozen on his face. “... Yes,” he finally declared. He made to take the box, but Leon leaned forward and laid a hand upon it before Anastasios could take it. The Lord Protector stopped and gave him a wide smile. “What have I done to deserve such mistrust, Leon? Tell me where I’ve wronged and I shall endeavor to make everything right with you...”

"I would simply prefer something a little more concrete than a simple 'yes'," Leon said. "Tell me our agreement. What is this seed for?"

"The seed is but a gift between friends," Anastasios replied. "A welcome surprise, one that will lead to even greater prosperity for my family and my Empire. And it is but the harbinger of an even greater gift you plan on bringing: that of peace with the Sky Devils. I look forward to how your talks with our... neighbors across the sea go. I hope they prove fruitful, and will wait patiently for your return. I will pray for your success, and continue to offer your property and whatever family you leave here my protection in your absence."

Anastasios stared at Leon for a long moment, Leon debating with himself just how big of a deal he wanted to make out of this. Anastasios could say all he wanted, but Leon was buying leeway with the Sky Devils with this seed. It was an exchange, despite the Lord Protector's steering of the narrative.

In the end, Leon leaned back, releasing his hold on the box. Anastasios then leaned forward himself and took the box into his soul realm.

And like that, their deal was done, and Leon supposed at least one tenth-tier mage had been successfully bought off—though how long that might last, he couldn't say. At the very least, he'd need to follow through on the second half of their agreement if he wanted it to last for long enough to actually gain some power in the Sky Devil's Hell.

"... Just how much do you need?" the Thunderbird asked, her avian eyes narrowed as she carefully scrutinized Leon. "It's not like you're attempting it yourself, so great detail in the process isn't something you yet need..."

"No," Leon admitted, "but I need enough to finish bribing the Lord Protector. I've given him an apple seed with the instructions for his nature mages to help it grow. But he still wants information on Apotheosis. So, at the very least, some basics would be appreciated. General theory, nothing more."

The Thunderbird made a low chirping sound as she idly started running her beak through some wing feathers. "Apotheosis..." she murmured. "A great prize. Why are you so keen on giving such a thing away?"

"Why not? Merely having the information is no guarantee that he can actually achieve it, is it? Unless there's something I'm missing."

The Thunderbird paused her preening and turned her attention fully onto him. "To achieve Apotheosis is... easy, and yet not. It's a simple process to explain, but to put it into practice is something else entirely. How much do you know already?"

"You and Nestor have both told me about Origin Sparks," Leon said. "To my understanding, creating one within my soul realm is the key to achieving Apotheosis."

"Indeed it is. But do you know how to condense one?"

Leon frowned. "Gathering up as much magic power as I can until one 'ignites', or so Nestor has told me."

"Such is how it goes. Quite simple, isn't it?"

“You just said there was more to it than that. I doubt just condensing all the magic power in my soul realm will ‘ignite’ into one of these things.”

“No. To condense an Origin Spark, one needs to revert magic to its primal state. It will only do that once enough has been condensed, and even then, it’ll need a bit of a kick.”

Leon lightly frowned. “What kind of ‘kick’?”

The Thunderbird took a moment to think. “What we’ve said so far, that’s the extent that you need to tell anyone else. Condense as much magic as possible. A soul realm exceeding ten thousand miles in radius ought to contain enough magic power for the process to be successful.”

Leon sighed. “And if I wanted someone else to ascend to divinity with me?”

“I... will not judge you. But keep in mind that those who strengthen enemies do not usually live long.”

Leon was about to argue that the Lord Protector and the Grand Druid weren’t his enemies, but he caught himself before opening his mouth. He supposed neither of them had ever acted overtly hostile towards him, but there had been subtle threats and ‘suggestions’, attempts to steer him towards their interests, perhaps at the expense of his own. These were not the actions of a friend, and he could easily see either of them becoming hostile if he were to act a little too independently.

He’d bought their cooperation in keeping the Keeper—and, to a much lesser extent, the Sunlit Emperor—off his back, but they only did that because they benefited from his knowledge lineage. It was not out of the goodness of either of their hearts that they protected him, nor that the Grand Druid was so pushy in trying to get him together with Cassandra.

“I’ll... do what I must,” he quietly stated.

The Thunderbird coldly regarded him a moment before her gaze softened. “Do as you will. But if you’re going to so willfully disregard counsel that seeks only your survival and prosperity, do be sure to impregnate one of your girls before you die.”

She spoke lightly, but Leon heard the low growl beneath it. He, despite having been sleeping with Elise, Maia, and Valeria for years, still had no children. Granted, all three went through stacks of contraception spells, but that was more because he wasn’t yet comfortable with raising children yet rather than out of any desire that any of them—or Elise and Maia, at the very least, Valeria was still a little on the fence about having kids yet—had to refrain from making a few little ones.

With a tight smile, Leon repeated, “I’ll do what I must.”

The Thunderbird clicked her beak.

“To condense an Origin Spark,” she continued, moving on as if their short interlude hadn’t happened, “one needs an immense amount of magic power. All of that power must be condensed into as small a space as possible within one’s soul realm. And then, just as one forges their Mind Palace, one must add the Mists of Chaos to their magic power, and will their spark of magic to ignite. Once alight, magic will return to its basest, most primal state, and become an eternal Origin Spark.”

“Leaving aside a few details of how that happens,” Leon said, “what are the characteristics of an Origin Spark? How does it function? Does it produce magic power? Nestor told me about ‘origin power’, and

that it has the capacity to change the universe around me, and that magic power is but its runoff. How do the two interact? Can I—”

“By your Ancestors, Leon, take a breath!”

Leon paused, and the Thunderbird gave him an exasperated sigh. “Now,” she said like a stressed mother, “one question at a time. What do you want to know?”

“Is anything going to change about how I create magic power?”

“No. Your bone marrow will still produce magic power. You will also gain magic power within your soul realm as your Origin Spark creates origin power, which will decay into magic power if not used.”

“Origin power comes with a time limit?”

“Yes, but in practice, there’s little difference to how you store magic power, especially since origin power will become magic power. In effect, instead of having the size of your soul realm determine your maximum possible storage for this power, it will instead be determined by the threshold between its rate of decay and rate of generation.”

Leon frowned but understood. “How potent is origin power?”

“Extremely. It’s a power that can create matter and life, though on a relatively small scale. The amount of magic power that you generate, however, will increase immensely as your unused origin power decays into magic power. It’s usually post-Apotheosis mages that power arks that can traverse the Void since they generate so much magic power.”

Leon’s frown lessened slightly at that reassurance, but a previous thought he’d asked about had his frown growing again. “Does the Origin Spark decay as well, like origin power?”

“No. The Origin Spark is eternal, assuming your soul realm remains intact. It will burn indefinitely, providing you with a never-ending stream of origin and magic power.”

“You know, origin power reminds me a lot of ancient runes. Both seem to require exerting will upon the universe in order to work...”

“You’re not the first to make that connection, but so far, I’ve not seen any actual connections between the two. A Divine Beast, Primal God, or Primal Devil might know more, but none have ever spoken on the subject that I know of, and the only one I could talk to now certainly won’t speak on the subject now.”

“Fuck him,” Leon growled, glaring out at the Mists of Chaos. Without missing a beat, he asked, “On a different topic, I was hoping you could help me understand as much as possible about my transformation enchantment. My people recently had a breakthrough in blood magic otherwise unrelated to the transformation enchantment, enough that I put some people on researching a small part of it. They’ve made enough progress that they believe it’s possible to adapt it for other bloodlines...”

“Oh? Have they?” the Thunderbird asked, sounding rather surprised. “I’ll admit that I’m not enchanter, and much of the work I did adapting Krith’s enchantment was based on what the Great Black Dragon and I spoke about—back when he still broke words with me. I won’t be able to do much to help you

understand the enchantment as I don't entirely understand it myself, I've merely copied much of what I was told works."

Leon frowned again, almost feeling like his face was going to get stuck in the expression.

The Thunderbird leaned downward, locking Leon in her gleaming golden gaze. "Share with me what your researchers shared with you."

"Have you an hour or two?"

"I have nothing but time."

Leon nodded, finally letting his lips turn upward into a shallow smile, and summoned the reports and reference materials that he'd been given from Valentina's new research team and launched into his explanation. He knew it would take a while, but to further his knowledge of enchantment, he didn't care.

"This will be our last meeting for a while," the Jaguar said as he and Leon sat down in the villa Leon had set aside. It had only been a week or so since Leon had revealed to him the possibilities that lay in their blood, and he'd needed some time to think. As a result, Leon hadn't managed to speak with him at much length and had been hoping for more in this meeting.

"Something happen?" Leon asked with concern.

"No," the Jaguar replied before thinking for a moment and added, "At least, not that I know of. But what you revealed to me... Your ability to transform was already a curiosity, but I'd thought it some kind of illusion or some other magical creation. That it's a result of your bloodline... I've... I don't know how to take this. I've never heard of something like this in my lifetime. I require the guidance of the rest of my Tribe's elders to know how to proceed. My invitation to you has been given and accepted; I do not need to stay. I should not stay. I have informed you that I will not stay, and will leave in a day's time, bound for home."

With disappointment rising in his heart, Leon slowly nodded. "You are not a prisoner here, though it would be best to allow me to attempt to prepare an escort if you don't wish any of the Empires to make you one."

"That will be unnecessary," the Jaguar replied. "My warriors and I are small in number and possess our own ways of travel. We will move quickly, quietly, and without detection. A ninth-tier mage and his clanmates are not easily detected."

"I suppose that's fair. But before we part ways, might I ask for your thoughts on what we've discussed? What you've offered me, and how that might've changed based on what I've offered you?"

The Jaguar stared at the wall for a long moment, his eyes unfocused like he was seeing something else entirely. "I... My offer came without condition. The Ten Tribes... need leadership. Proper leadership of King's blood. Our Ancestors were wiser than we are now, and to shun their line of leaders will only serve to turn them from us. My offer to you was only to right this wrong, honor our Ancestors, and see my people prosper."

"That's it?" Leon asked incredulously. "You offer me a throne and a crown, and then we all live happily ever after? What does this happily ever after even look like? Is it just me sitting on a throne while the Ten Tribes otherwise continue as they have been? Might as well put a damned statue in a chair and call the job done."

"Such would only serve to enrage our Ancestors further."

"You speak as if you know their mind."

"The past eighty-thousand years have given me enough proof to know that we are not walking with the blessings of our Ancestors. But you need not do anything in return for my offer."

"If I don't do anything, then what's even the point of making me King? Would it not be my job to ensure the prosperity of the people I'm at least ostensibly King of? Why would new knowledge and capabilities of our bloodlines be 'unnecessary'?"

"Welcomed. But not needed," the Jaguar flatly stated.

Leon shrugged. "If you're leaving, then we ought to arrange another meeting. I must remain until after my wedding. Then I will head south..."

While Leon didn't have a complete schedule yet, the date of his and Cassandra's wedding not yet having been settled on, he did outline a general strategy for getting to the Sky Devil's Hell with the Jaguar and even gave the man one of Tikos' comm lotuses, which he was almost as interested in as he was in the transformation enchantment. They would be able to use that to coordinate further once Leon had hammered out his schedule into a more definable shape.

Leon found it rather curious, though, that not once in their discussion on the topic did the Jaguar ask for the enchantment. Leon would've refused anyway, not wanting to just give it out to people he didn't know yet, but he figured the Jaguar might've wanted to secure it sooner rather than later.

"What are your thoughts on the enchantment?" Leon asked after a long pause once their brief discussion on heading south was over. "Are you interested at all in changing shape?"

The Jaguar didn't immediately answer, but he glanced down at his hands, flexing them slowly, breathing steadily and deliberately, and closing his eyes.

"I... such a prospect is enticing, that much I can't deny. To grow stronger, to unlock even greater strength in my blood... But I am human. And for hundreds of years, I have lived with a static shape. The possibility of changing that shape is... off-putting, even if I know it would only be temporary."

Leon cocked his head in surprise. "I was elated when I gained this power," he admitted. "It felt like freedom to me. I could go anywhere, do anything. Sure, I wound up doing something fairly conventional, but the possibility remains that I could transform into something that looks like the Thunderbird and just fly away.

"What's more, the wind in my feathers and beneath my wings will never stop being one of the best feelings I have ever had. My blood sings when in that form. I still consider myself human, but I can't deny that part of myself, either. And it bears mentioning that those in the Nexus will not see us as

completely human, either. Should you ever manage to reach the Nexus of our universe, that would have to be something to keep in mind.”

The Jaguar listened, not openly questioning how Leon knew this, but not exactly agreeing with him, either.

“I will... consider your words. But your transformation unsettles me, now that I know more. I will consult with my Tribe upon my return home, and we will have more to say then. Until then, our invitation remains open. Regardless of this transformation, we would see the restoration of your Clan as true and proper Storm Kings.”

“Your faith is well-received,” Leon honestly stated. “Well then, Jaguar. It seems we still not see each other for a while. Take care of yourself.”

“And you, Raptor,” the Jaguar replied, smiling for the first time since their meeting started.

Leon left not long after, some sense of unease settling into his stomach as he turned over the Jaguar’s words. To turn down the transformation enchantment wasn’t something he ever thought would’ve been considered, and he couldn’t help but wonder just what the rest of those on the Sky Devil’s Hell—or Kataigida, as they called it—would choose to do.

Chapter 845 - More Thunder Wood

Leon quietly regarded his retainers as they trained. Magic training was over, so they were mostly brushing up on their martial skills, having largely paired up to spar. Tikos and Helen were the only two exceptions, the two having other business to attend to.

Of particular interest to him was Anzu, as the young griffin was still learning the ropes of fighting whilst in human form. He’d paired Anzu up with Gaius, trusting in the older man to give Anzu a good foundation for Leon to later refine, and so far, he hadn’t been disappointed. Anzu, while strong and quite the tough opponent in griffin form, was something of a pushover in his human form if he wasn’t using magic.

Of only slightly less concern for Leon was the fact that Valeria had paired off with Cassandra. The two weren’t sparring with anything close to their usual level of intensity, but as far as Leon could tell, they were still saying much to each other just through the movements of their blades. What they were saying to each other, though, he could only guess at. Regardless, they seemed largely at ease with each other, which Leon found encouraging.

The rest of Cassandra’s guards hadn’t quite integrated with Leon’s retinue, and he was fine with that. Cassandra wasn’t exactly in his retinue, either, and he wasn’t going to ask her sworn protectors to answer to him when he had his own subordinates to handle his business.

Anna was one he spared some attention for, as well. As far as he could tell, she was doing better after their trip back to the Sacred Golden Empire. Not back to how she’d been before the operation that saw Narses the Black killed by her own hand, but better than she’d been in that operation’s direct aftermath.

His comrades from the Bull Kingdom were right as rain to his eyes. Gaius was enjoying his time with Anzu, Alix was as energetic as she always was, Marcus was quiet and contemplative—though that was no different from his usual state—and Alcander was sparring with his wife, Sofie.

Sofie wasn't in Leon's retinue either, but she occasionally participated, Leon allowing her to do so as a favor to her, Alcander, and to Narses the White. She wasn't getting any Hesperidic Apples, but neither did she have to answer to him in any capacity.

Red was the only one who was training alone. She had no interest at all in learning martial skills and so devoted her time entirely to sharpening her fire magic, and even heaping a little bit of wind magic on top as well.

And Leon wondered who among them he would bring to the Sky Devil's Hell. He didn't want to bring everyone with him, especially since some of his retainers had their own jobs to do—in other words, Tikos and Helen at the very least were likely being left behind to continue their work. He was even considering leaving Nestor behind if the dead man didn't insist on accompanying him.

Anna... he wondered if he ought to leave her with her sister. While she was doing better, he didn't want to take her away from her sister or her girlfriend just yet. Besides, while her Attican Snapper and, to a lesser extent, her two wyverns were old and big enough to fight, her manticore was still a cub and needed plenty of attention.

'Yeah, need to leave her behind...' Leon thought to himself.

As for the four that had followed him from the Bull Kingdom, he struggled to think of any reason to leave them behind. In fact, the only reason that was stopping him was the possibility of having to leave them back in the Sky Devil's Hell for any reason, for with his avian form and corresponding invisibility ring, he felt like he could pretty easily travel to and from Kataigida with relative ease compared to them.

But, after a lot of thought, he realized that he couldn't leave any of them behind. He needed backup down there that wasn't tied to any of the Ten Tribes, and Alix, Marcus, Alcander, and Gaius were restless anyway without having official positions in Heaven's Eye. The only real concern was how Alcander was going to do when separated from Sofie for an indeterminate time.

As for Red, she was one that Leon had decided to bring along almost from the very beginning. An eighth-tier wyvern was a powerful ally to have.

'She needs to earn her keep anyway,' Leon thought with a light, sarcastic smile as he watched the wyvern-in-human-form sway around like she was dancing, several rivers of fire flowing about her at the same time. The sheer destructive potential contained in those rivers was belied by the grace and elegance with which Red wielded them.

Anzu... Leon grinned, knowing he wasn't going to be leaving Anzu behind on this one.

Leon sighed. Anshu, as his resident retainer of less than legal means, was going to be coming with him whether he wanted the man to or not—and Leon had to admit that he rather wanted the Indradian with him this time. But with all that, now he had to decide on his ladies.

As it was, he was thinking Valeria and Maia would come with him, while Elise and Cassandra would stay behind, at least for the time being. He had a bad feeling that his time on Kataigida wouldn't be without violence, and he didn't want to leave Elise vulnerable around a bunch of unknowns. Cassandra, on the other hand, was an Imperial Princess. Given the state of war that was raging between technically all four Empires and the Ten Tribes, bringing Cassandra to Kataigida was too obvious of a mistake to make.

He just felt terrible about it. He'd be marrying Cassandra soon, and then only a matter of weeks later, he'd be leaving for the Ten Tribes, and he didn't know when he might be back. While he was already set on the decision to leave her on the continent, the thought of telling her his decision sent a shiver running down his spine.

So, all told, he'd be taking a fairly substantial group with him, by his standards: Alix, Gaius, Alcander, Marcus, Red, Anshu, Anzu, Valeria, and Maia. To a large extent, it was a bigger group than he wanted, even though he knew that for a retinue to accompany their Lord in a dangerous situation was the point of their employment. His instinct to take care of the Sky Devils on his own was clashing with his knowledge that he should be using his retinue more than he was and that not bringing anyone with him on his journey to Kataigida would be a terrible insult to all of their abilities, and their dedication to him.

He sighed, supposing that this was going to be his team for the upcoming mission. With that settled, he supposed the only thing left to do was to make sure his more critical projects were finished on time.

The air filled with a sweet smell and the leaves of Tikos' hair fluttered despite the lack of wind.

"Ready are these," Tikos whispered through its voice-amber as it indicated the row of twelve oak trees in front of it. It turned its enormous black eyes in Leon's direction and added, "None magics have made different trees; only controls for testing."

Leon nodded in understanding. They were only running one quick test to establish a baseline; experimentation would come later after Tikos could examine what was left of the trees.

They were in another private grove that Leon had purchased and set aside for the creation of thunder wood. It was a fairly magic-intensive process, and one that required Tikos to raise trees for at least several months; even then, they'd be left with significantly less thunder wood than Leon could hope for. To try and increase their yield, Leon and Tikos had decided to try and take the Iron Needle out and see if the Universe Fragment could help in that respect.

The only problem was that it would require testing on some of the oak trees that Tikos had spent months raising, but that wasn't that great of a loss given the sheer number of trees that Leon had the tree sprite growing in this grove. Losing a few dozen trees to test a potential new process for thunder wood creation was more than worth it in Leon's mind.

So, Leon prepared himself and began retrieving several standing stones from his soul realm. Numbering only six, none were taller than he was, though all of them were slightly wider than his shoulders. Their smooth, polished surfaces had been covered in runic carvings with most of the glyphs including at least a few lightning runes.

Leon placed all but one of these standing stones around the first of the trees they were going to experiment upon. Then, he assumed his position next to one of the standing stones. He reached out with his magic power and began feeding it into the stones, steadily activating their many enchantments. Directed and empowered by the enchantments, his power rose into the air and settled around the uppermost branches of the tall single-trunk oak.

At the same time, Tikos had been tending to the oak, its power inundating the trunk as it placed a lotus upon it, the lotus' roots wrapping tightly around the tree and anchoring it to the larger plant.

Once Tikos stepped back, Leon's power coalesced around the tree, forming tiny, yet thick and dark storm clouds that wound around the tree's leaves. Since his power was contained by the standing stones, wind started whipping about the tree in a tight and rapidly-accelerating cyclone. Rain began spilling from these storm clouds, flooding the tree's roots but not escaping past the boundary set by the standing stones.

Leon waited only a moment longer before a bright purple lightning bolt arced out from one swirling cloud and into another, singing a few leaves but not touching any of the tree's branches.

'It's ready,' he thought as he moved into his final position, where the final standing stone would've been placed under normal circumstances. Were he acting under those normal circumstances though, this process might've taken half an hour or more to create just to render less than one-tenth of the oak tree's wood into thunder wood, the rest burning away into ash.

But now, he had the Iron Needle, and with it, he theoretically had absolute control over all lightning, though putting theory into practice was proving harder than he'd hoped.

He conjured the Iron Needle from its gold tube within his soul realm and held it between the fingers of his right hand. Then, he extended his hand and began to use his magic to will all of the lightning within the clouds to converge upon the oak tree. His magic raced along his arm, into his hand and fingers, through the Iron Needle, and then out into the world.

This particular grove had been warded quite heavily against outside observation, Leon having devoted many days and hundreds of talents of silver to its construction, let alone the months he'd spent on its design. Yet, for all that protection, Leon felt for the first time that it was inadequate as the brightest and biggest bolt of purple lightning erupted from his contained storm and slammed into the oak tree.

The tree was immediately cut in half, most of its leaves and outer branches disintegrating into black ash. The bolt continued downward, splitting the earth and carving a small trench half Leon's height into the ground, the trench walls being dyed black by the heat of the bolt. What little remained of the tree fell apart, almost shaken to pieces by the thunder that accompanied the lightning bolt. Even Tikos, behind the circle of standing stones and thus behind the protective wards Leon had placed upon them, was knocked off its feet and hissed in pain. The air was tinged with the comforting stench of ozone and the worrying stink of corpse rot, the former from the lightning and the latter from Tikos' displeasure.

"Shit..." Leon said in awe as he stared at the purple lightning that momentarily danced about his fingers. He didn't spare the oak tree one look as he turned toward Tikos, abandoning his position as he ran toward the tree sprite. "You all right?" he asked.

"Better will be," Tikos stated as it rose to its feet, its leafy hair looking a little less animated than usual, though the corpse-y smell dissipated.

Leon grimly smiled and clapped Tikos on the shoulder before they both turned to the obliterated oak tree.

"Intending on power such, were you?" Tikos asked.

"No..." Leon murmured as he glanced back down at the Iron Needle. It sparked with what to Leon seemed like the equivalent of nonchalant whistling, but how he arrived at that impression he couldn't say.

The tree had been quite thoroughly savaged, but with bolts of golden lightning almost lazily reaching up into the clouds of the contained storm, Leon knew that they'd succeeded in creating at least some thunder wood.

"That was... fast," he observed.

"Needle has cut many minutes from process," Tikos said more clinically.

Leon nodded in appreciation at not needing half an hour anymore, assuming their yield was good. He cut off his power to the standing stones and the storm quickly dissipated. At the same time, Tikos' power entered the ground, and the soil around the tree's remains shifted about like quicksand, closing the scorched rift and elevating the blackened wood. A moment later, the burned wood crumbled under pressure from Tikos, leaving several long, thin, lightning-bolt-shaped branches of thunder wood, perhaps as much as Leon and Tikos had ever managed to make in a single batch.

"Yield has increased," Tikos said as the sweet scent of happy satisfaction filled the air once more.

"By a significant amount," Leon said. "I think... Let's try that again, but without the stones."

"Is wise that?" Tikos inquired.

"I'd... recommend finding some cover, but I think... I think the Iron Needle can replicate that purple lightning. The stones do most of the heavy lifting with containment, but if it's only lightning then I should be enough to keep it contained even without them. And with just the Iron Needle, then we may not need the storm..."

"Willing to try," Tikos whispered as it backed way up.

Leon waited for it to prepare itself as he pulled their newly-made thunder wood into his soul realm. Then, he faced the next tree.

Once Tikos was ready, having stepped into a massive tree at the center of the grove, Leon aimed his hand again and closed his eyes. He sent his magic power rushing down his arm again, this time willing the Iron Needle to fire off the same purple lightning it had just summoned. He barely got the thought fully formed in his head when the Iron Needle sparked and another tremendous bolt of purple lightning shot out, not only cleaving through the tree Leon had meant to hit, but also shattering the three closest trees around it from its accompanying thunderclap.

Tikos was fine, to his relief, and as the cherry on top, nearly half of the intended tree had been turned into thunder wood.

"Bit much, maybe?" Tikos asked as it left its tree.

"Maybe," Leon agreed as he stared at the Needle in his hand. While it was extremely convenient that he could create the purple thunder wood-making lightning with it without any setup, showcasing the fact that the Iron Needle was responding to his will, fine control was still beyond him.

He and Tikos quickly secured the recently-created thunder wood and turned their attention back to the remaining trees. However, Leon ruminated on his lack of control the entire time, and not even the veritable hill of thunder wood they made that day was able to lift that particular weight on his spirits.

It was clear that he needed to put more emphasis on his new sword than he had been, especially given the Iron Needle's clear willingness to follow his will...

Leon hovered in the sky, the coast of the Ilian Empire far below him.

He was alone, his body buffeted by strong wind and swept by freezing rain. The great Central Sea was rough and prone to storms, but where anyone else might see that as a bad thing, in these storms, Leon's blood sang. He was long past the point of natural storms putting him into a fugue state, but he still felt most relaxed and at peace when hovering just above a cloud, rain and wind and lightning and thunder raging all about him.

But right now, despite the strength of the storm—and the proportional power that flooded through him—he had to focus on his task, for he didn't fly a couple hundred miles from home just to immerse himself in a storm.

No, he'd come here to see to the hunk of enchanted iron and other trace metals that were lying in a large crucible he was telekinetically holding in front of him transformed into something greater than the sum of all its parts. He was warding off lightning attempting to strike the crucible, but with the enchantments he'd laid upon it, it was tiring work, for the crucible had been specifically designed to attract natural lightning.

[Are you ready, Leon?] the Thunderbird asked. [The storm is reaching its peak, your window will be narrow.]

[I am,] Leon replied. His education with the Thunderbird had long since included the process for forging Adamant—or, he supposed, the processes for its forging, for there were many—but the one his Ancestor was most familiar with was sky forging. Leon's armor, though infused with his blood, wasn't Adamant, merely a pale imitation and unable to seamlessly channel his power and will. True, sky-forged Adamant would be like his own body, responding only to his will and that of his blood descendants.

With a deep breath, Leon prepared himself for his first attempt at forging true Adamant.

Chapter 846 - Natural Transformation

Lightning raged around Leon as the storm reached its peak, his power the only thing keeping it from striking his crucible filled with metal. He had his extracted blood ready, but this wasn't quite the time for that, yet.

Instead, he pushed the crucible he was telekinetically holding up away from him, then conjured several long sheets of silver, upon which he'd inscribed several enchantments according to the Thunderbird's guidance. As soon as his power shot from his body and into these silver sheets, the hundreds of runes laid upon them began glowing in various colors according to their elemental runes, the three most prominent being gold for lightning runes, green for wind, and blue for water. With these spells in place,

hovering in a circle all equidistant from the crucible, the storm began to form a tight cyclone around the formation, and Leon knew that he was finally ready.

He stopped holding back the storm's lightning from the crucible, and almost immediately, a bright golden bolt struck it with such force that Leon knew if he hadn't enchanted the thing to be nearly indestructible from lightning strikes, it would've shattered. Instead, all the power and heat of the bolt transferred into the crucible and the various metals within almost immediately liquified.

The enchantments on the crucible attracted lightning—the iron within it helping in that respect, also—and more bolts fell upon it, filling the crucible with their heat and power. Leon, being a ninth-tier lightning mage, was effectively immune to natural lightning and thunder, so he had no trouble approaching and looking into the crucible.

After a few dozen strikes, the metal within had been rendered into molten slag, and Leon began pouring his mana into the crucible, his magic-infused blood glowing like a bright red lamp in the darkness of the storm.

As soon as his blood hit the molten steel in the crucible, a torrent of silver-blue lightning erupted from it, and Leon swore in frustration. He poured more of his power into the crucible just as he poured more of his blood into the steel. More of his power remained trapped within the metal, but he could feel the metal straining to contain it. The enchantments upon the crucible weren't holding as well as he would've liked, either, as he could sense his magic power leaking out of them in a few places.

And then he sensed another leak, and then another. And then, even as lightning raged around him and thunder rolled across the sea beneath him, he heard the crucible crack. He barely had time to raise his eyebrows in surprise and panic before the crucible was struck by one more lightning bolt and split in half, the steel within it immediately spilling out into the storm, where it flash-cooled in the storm into a rain of steel pellets.

Leon hovered there in the air, dumbstruck at just how quickly he'd failed. He had put quite a few resources into the creation of that crucible, and he'd been in such a hurry that he hadn't even made a spare. This was his one chance—during this storm, anyway—and it hadn't worked. He could only stare in dejection at his work vanishing into the waves far below.

He recovered quickly, though. As disappointing as this failure was, it was hardly unexpected. Adamant was a material prized even in the Nexus, and a ninth-tier mage failing in their attempt to make some was more likely than success.

But he was still disappointed, for all that he wasn't crushed. He retrieved his silver sheets and stared out into the storm for a few more minutes, only leaving once the storm's peak had passed. Though his blood sang with the wind, rain, and lightning, he quickly transformed into his Thunderbird form, pulled out his avian invisibility ring, and, unseen, made for home.

[A good first try,] the Thunderbird said encouragingly. [You'll do better next time.]

[Thanks,] Leon replied, even though with his mood, the words felt just a little condescending.

This was one failure, but there would be other attempts, and he would use what he learned here to prepare for the next time.

"What was the problem?" Nestor asked as Leon collapsed on a chair in his workshop.

"The crucible broke," Leon stated. "My best enchantments, and it still broke."

Nestor grunted in acknowledgment, sounding about as far from surprised as he could.

"Did you know this was going to happen, Nestor?" Leon asked.

Nestor shrugged. "I suspected. That work, while passable for an apprentice, had a few flaws in it." He turned away slightly and softly added as if speaking only to himself, "I wouldn't have used those enchantments myself, but to each their own, I suppose. So long as it works, right?"

Leon sat up a bit, his patience mildly frayed at his failure. "Pray tell me, dead man, if you're so wise and knowledgeable about the creation of Adamant, how would you have enchanted the crucible? I would remind you that our Ancestor herself aided me in creating that enchantment scheme."

"I can tell that our Honored Ancestor didn't have a direct hand in creating that thing," Nestor dismissively stated, "for if she had, it would've been much more effective. However, I would contest that the entire underlying technique you used was flawed for one big reason—and many small. Can you guess?"

Leon glared at the man for a moment before turning his mind back to the problem at hand. He'd had a few hours to think on the failure by now, and he had a few ideas on how to improve, but with Nestor's push, one of his more harebrained ideas came to the fore.

"I used modern runes," Leon said. "You're suggesting I attempt the creation of Adamant with ancient runes?"

"Yes," Nestor confirmed with a nod of his featureless metal head.

"Ancient runes are entirely unique for their purpose, they number as many as the ideas that humanity can express, and more. I don't doubt that there's an ancient rune to solve specifically my problem, doing exactly what I need it to do, but such a specific rune would be horrifically complex, and more importantly: I don't know it. Do you happen to know of an ancient rune or two that can help with the creation of Adamant?"

"I don't know any with such great specificity that you'd be able to create Adamant with ease, but there are a few runes that can help."

Nestor began writing on a few sheets of spell paper, and Leon couldn't help but watch. Nestor was a master of enchanting that so eclipsed him in skill that on the few occasions Leon was able to see him work only with paper and ink, he was always mesmerized. Nestor worked with the speed and elegance of a hand so practiced that if he were to brag that he could write out his runes in his sleep, Leon would believe him.

A few minutes later, Nestor had finished drawing out a couple ancient runes, both more complex than any single rune Leon had ever drawn.

“There,” Nestor said. “These ought to help. This one,” he began as he drew Leon’s attention to the first of the two he’d drawn, “will make a container nearly indestructible to all forces. As it’s an ancient rune, how indestructible the container will be will entirely depend on your will at the time of inscription. The more will you use, the more focused you are on your intended purpose, and the more powerful the rune will be.”

He then drew Leon’s attention to the other rune. “And this one is designed to keep magic power contained within something. Again, the usual caveats of ancient runes apply: they’re focus and willpower dependent. These two runes acting in concert are what I typically use to enchant magical batteries, ensuring greater efficiency and safety for my golems’ power sources.”

“Those sound... incredibly useful,” Leon whispered as he stared at the ancient runes, wondering what their simpler and more complex versions could do—as was the wont of ancient runes, there would have to be runes that just made anything indestructible, and more specific things indestructible. The more specific an ancient rune was, the easier it was for the mage to focus on its intended purpose, and the more powerful the rune was.

“Keep those caveats in mind, Leon,” Nestor reminded him. “Just because there’s an ‘indestructible’ ancient rune doesn’t mean that it does what it claims. Anything can be destroyed, especially if going up against other ancient runes. Inscribe this upon a crucible and it will be much harder to destroy than I think you can make it with a modern enchantment scheme, but that doesn’t mean the crucible will actually be indestructible.”

“Yes, yes,” Leon said with a tired head nod. “Thanks, Nestor. These will come in handy.”

“Good. Just be ready for the next time you need it.”

Leon nodded. He had to wait for natural storms to try his hand at creating Adamant, and storms of sufficient wrath for his purposes were rare, even in the rough Central Sea. But that just meant that he had some time to prepare before he tried again.

Leon’s failure to create true Adamant on his first try had him feeling just a little down for the next few days, but his mood was soon brightened when Valentina brought him another report on blood magic and how it related to his transformation enchantment. With the team he’d assembled for the project, he’d expected rapid progress, but the rapidity with which Valentina moved took even him by surprise.

Upon receiving the report, Leon ravenously read through all sixty pages, and then read through it a few more times to absorb all that it had to say. Unlike the last report when Valentina’s team had only parsed through the section of the transformation enchantment that he’d shared with them, this time, there was actually some additional theory work done.

By their accounts, their work had concluded that the transformation enchantment had some inefficiencies when targeting an individual’s bloodline. Though they didn’t know the reason why, Leon having never given them the complete enchantment, the way that that particular section worked was to brute force an interaction with an individual’s bloodline, forcing power to behave in certain ways rather than stimulating it to act in a desired fashion.

Leon had to take it entirely on faith that they knew what they were talking about, blood magic being far outside of his specialty. But he couldn't help but salivate at the team's conclusion: if they made some changes, then the way that Leon's transformation enchantment worked could be improved, making his Thunderbird form potentially stronger.

Unfortunately for them, without many test subjects that they could test their theories on, they weren't going to move beyond theory—at least, as far as they would know. They were in the Empires, and with a correlation between the Sky Devils and Inherited Bloodlines, there weren't many people in Imperial Territory with the power of an Ascended Beast—not to mention most beasts were hunted down before growing strong enough to assume human form so they couldn't threaten human society, and those in captivity were usually never raised to that point by their beastmasters to keep them relatively pliant and docile.

Leon couldn't help but see the Sky Devils in that, too, as he'd noted that they used war beasts on a significantly more frequent basis.

Regardless, he was the only person around who could possibly put what his team had theorized into practice, and while he was eager to try, he was more than a little apprehensive about messing around with his transformation enchantment.

Still, he ventured down into the long tunnel in his soul realm, the report in hand. He stayed down there for a couple hours alone, tracing and tracking lines of magic and working out a plan for exactly what he'd need to do if he ever decided to do it.

It was here that the Thunderbird found him, lost in thought.

"What are you doing, Leon?" she asked as she floated down to join him, having assumed human form.

Leon didn't answer verbally but handed her the report. He didn't expect her to read the entire thing immediately but was pleasantly surprised when she began flipping through the pages, humming in appreciation.

It only took her about twenty minutes to work her way through it one time, but that seemed enough as she looked up at him, a rather manic look in her eyes.

"Leon," she breathed, "I think there's something to this."

"What kind of 'something'?" he asked.

"That kind that'll make you stronger," she responded. "Or, something that'll change you, anyway. Would you like to try?"

"Is this something that would make some kind of permanent change to me?" Leon asked. "I'll admit that I'm not too thrilled at the idea of messing around with this enchantment. I don't want to activate it and find myself turned inside out..."

"Leon, the fact that you used the thing at all carried similar risk. Now, do you trust me?"

"Yes," Leon honestly answered, not hesitating for a second.

"This has potential, and even if it doesn't work out, you'll be fine, and I'll be able to revert this enchantment to its original state. Would you like to try?"

Leon stared at her for a long moment, not reading any deceit in her, but narrowing his eyes anyway. "I trust you," he said. "I trust you."

"Is that a 'yes'?" she asked.

Leon nodded.

"Good! Then let's get started!"

Following the Thunderbird's directions, Leon made the necessary adjustments to the enchantment, the entire process taking nearly an hour. Once it was done, the enchantment as a whole had hardly changed, but the specific section about how it interacted with Leon's bloodline to produce its effect had.

It was a precise enchantment, targeting only Leon's Thunderbird bloodline and excluding the power of the Great Black Dragon, but since the Thunderbird herself was confident that everything was fine, Leon forced himself to remain calm even as his heart began to race.

Once the enchantment had been adjusted, Leon left his remaining duties in Talal's capable hands and went home a little early, a large part of him eager to try this out despite his apprehension.

When he got home, he immediately made for the most private wing of his home. There were a few large meditation rooms that would suit his purpose nicely, allowing him to transform in total isolation, as far from prying eyes as he could get without leaving Occulara entirely.

There, he stripped down and, after a few more encouraging words from the Thunderbird, shut his eyes, clenched his teeth, and activate his transformation enchantment.

What followed was nothing unusual at all. His body shifted and bent, expanded and grew, sprouted feathers and scales along his legs as they turned into talons. His mouth pushed forward and merged with his nose, both hardening into a beak. His eyesight grew immeasurably sharper even as his sense of smell declined. Once it was all done, he hardly felt any different from when he usually transformed.

However, the moment he projected his magic senses and got a better look at himself, it was made immediately clear that something had, in fact, changed: he looked completely different.

He wasn't any larger than he'd have been if he'd transformed that morning, but his feathers had mostly changed color. Along with that, his tail feathers seemed a little longer, while a large feathered crest had sprouted from his forehead, brushed back and falling down his back like a long ponytail.

Before, he'd been a near-copy of the Thunderbird, sharing her warm brown primary feather color, sparkling with flecks of gold throughout. Now, however, his feathers had changed to a cloudy silver with undercurrents of pale blue streaked through his wings. His crest, likewise, was a deep blue, the same color as the sky just before sunrise. His feathers darkened as they neared his tail, his tail feathers now dark as storm clouds and his butt only a little lighter. His tail was flecked with silver that shone like stars.

'What the hells?' he thought to himself, his beak preventing him from vocalizing aloud.

[Look at you, Leon,] the Thunderbird breathed. [Quite the handsome boy, if I do say so myself.]

[What is this?] Leon asked her. [Why... what is this?]

[Heh. Having a hard time putting it into words? Well, it seems like the transformation enchantment had originally been designed to turn one into a copy of their ancestor. You essentially became me. But now, you've assumed a form more akin to a male of my species, rather than simply copying me. Seems far more natural, I'd say.]

[Wait, so all this time, I've been running around in a female form?]

[Flying around, and yes. Now you're looking more like the males of the species I was when yet lived.]

Leon blinked a few times, but after a moment, disregarded the thought as relatively unimportant.

[Is there... anything else that might've changed about this other than the color of my feathers?]

[This seems like a more natural transformation. To paraphrase your team's words, it's no longer forcing your blood to work with it, but instead convincing it to do what you want. It's a more natural way to activate your transformation, one that's more in harmony with your body.]

[I'll... I'll just assume you're right. Please don't be fucking with me.]

[You're the one standing there, admiring yourself like a narcissist. It should be obvious to you that the transformation is now different. Why don't you try and call upon your power?]

Leon complied, and to his surprise, his power was more responsive. He wasn't going to tear his villa apart to test it, but he could already tell that his power was, not greater, but at least more in control. It was like he'd had ropes tied around his wings and he'd only noticed now that they'd been taken off.

[I think... This is hard to quantify, but I'm feeling better. Fifteen percent? Eh, I hate odd numbers. Twenty percent seems about right, I'd say I'm about twenty percent stronger now.]

[Great precision there, Leon. By the way, Leon, there's something else here, too...]

[Oh?] Leon asked. [Something better than this new change?]

[Very much so. Much more promising for your future, I think.]

[Well you have my attention, Ancestor, what is it?]

[This research... I believe I can use it to create a more generic transformation enchantment. Something that would be weaker than what you're now using, but one that can work for anyone else with an Inherited Bloodline.]

If Leon's beak were capable of it, he'd have smiled. He'd have smiled so widely that his jaw would've been in danger of falling off. While the Jaguar's reaction had been concerning, Leon was more than confident that he could win over many in the Ten Tribes with the promise of such power.

Until now, it had only been a promise. Now, if the Thunderbird was correct, Leon might be able to make it a reality.

However, a moment later, that elation was dampened as another thought rose in his mind.

'If I no longer look like the Thunderbird, will that change how the Ten Tribes see me? Will I have to choose between the more powerful transformation or the one that looks more like my Ancestor?'

Chapter 847 - The Fourth, and Last

The time had come. Leon shifted uneasily as he pulled at his collar, the fine material digging into his skin far more than it should have.

Or perhaps that was just his imagination, he couldn't imagine how else silkgrass could be so uncomfortable to a ninth-tier mage. He hoped his discomfort was understandable, though, for in he was about to marry an Imperial Princess.

The ceremony would be relatively quiet, though by Imperial standards that still meant that there were hundreds of people congregating on his villa. He and Cassandra had opted not to do some kind of destination wedding, nor would it be all that politically correct to hold the ceremony within the Sacred Golden Empire, given Leon's own status. Already, the Director had had to field several requests for clarification on the proceedings and their implications from the Sunlit Empire.

Interestingly, they had received no such requests from the Sentinels, though Leon supposed after Heaven's Eye largely pulled out of the region, they didn't care so much about what Heaven's Eye did.

As it was, Leon was glad that his wedding was receiving so little attention, relatively speaking—it was an Imperial wedding, but Cassandra wasn't her mother's heir. Still, on an objective scale, Leon knew that his was now practically a household name within the Sacred Golden Empire, and likely in the Ilian Empire as well.

On this day, Elise and Valeria made sure that he was dressed as well as he possibly could be. A dark blue doublet, nearly black, inspired by the crest of his new avian form, and flecked with silver like the sky just after dusk, was the main centerpiece of his outfit. Tight, cloudy-gray pants that hugged his legs more than he'd have preferred, and a pair of black boots trimmed in lion's fur completed his outfit.

Elise had wanted him to wear a cloak of silver thread lined with eagle feathers and studded with sapphires, but Leon had put his foot down; it was just too ostentatious for his tastes. As it was, this outfit was already more than he'd wear on a normal day, but he knew that to wear any less would insult Cassandra, and by extension, her entire family. Even if he didn't have the Grand Druid breathing down his neck making sure that he would be a worthy husband to Cassandra, he wouldn't have made such an uncouth move. He'd learned a great deal since the days when he'd resisted as much as he'd been able Elise's attempts to get him to at least own some nicer clothes than the plain, functional fare he usually dressed in.

As he stared at himself in the mirror, Elise rested her head on his shoulder, looking at his reflection with nothing but undisguised pride. She was glowing so brightly and dressed so well herself that Leon would've forgiven someone for thinking that she was the one about to be married, not him.

"Ready for this, husband?" she asked with a radiant smile.

Leon stared back at his first wife, dressed in a low-cut dress that swept out around her legs like rose petals. She prominently wore the bracelet that Leon had commissioned for her back in Ironford years ago, during the Bull Kingdom's civil war, and around her neck rested the emerald necklace that she'd

taken from the black wyvern's lair almost six years ago. Her snow lion's coat was nearby, but she wouldn't put that on until later.

"Are you ready for this?" Leon countered. "I'm about to marry another woman."

She playfully slapped his shoulder. "I've been waiting for this for years!" she exclaimed. "Don't worry about me, husband, and go make our family bigger!"

Leon resisted the urge to snort. Instead, he pulled Elise closer and gently kissed her.

When he pulled away, her emerald eyes practically glowing with delight, from behind them Valeria said, "When's our turn?"

Leon turned and locked eyes with her. She and Maia were standing side-by-side, each looking just as gorgeous as Elise. They were largely dressed the same, their own snow lion coats hanging nearby, except Maia was dressed in sea green and Valeria in ice blue. Maia seemed somewhat impassive, but Leon could feel her excitement through their connection. Not, perhaps, as intense as Elise seemed to be, but she was happy for him. Valeria, meanwhile, seemed the most excited of them all, strangely enough.

Without hesitation, Leon took Valeria into his arms and gave her a long kiss, and then did the same for Maia.

"You sure you two don't want a marriage ceremony of your own?" he whispered as he held them both close.

Maia's answer was simple and to the point. [We are already mates.]

Valeria, sharing Maia's sentiment, expounded slightly. "We need no grand ceremonies. We are what we are already. Commitments have been made, and we don't need to make any complex announcements to the world. What we have is for us, not for them."

Maia nodded in agreement, smiling for a moment until Elise asked, "Is that an indictment of grand ceremonies I hear?"

"No offense intended, Eli," Valeria hurriedly added. "No knocks against ceremonies and those who prefer them! They're just not for me or Maia. That's all."

Elise made a brief show of looking angry, but the façade quickly cracked as Leon pulled into the shared embrace.

To him, it didn't matter that he, Maia, and Valeria hadn't had their own great marriage ceremonies. As Valeria said, they were what they were, and no ceremony would change that. If that ever changed, he be more than happy to comply with any marriage ceremony they might ask for, but whatever happened, he loved them all the same.

He stayed there with his three ladies for a little while longer. It was the last time the four of them would just be the four of them, and as much as Leon was looking forward to marrying Cassandra, it still felt like the ending of something as much as it was a beginning, so he took as much time as he could spare to be with Elise, Maia, and Valeria.

But none of them could stay there for too long. Soon enough, a knock came at the door, and Leon's head of the villa staff informed all four of them that it was time for the ceremony to begin.

The outside of Leon's villa had been transformed quite substantially to be worthy of an Imperial wedding. Since Cassandra was of the Sacred Golden Empire, Evergolden décor was the standard. Golden trees filled Leon's largest courtyard, bathing the white marble in golden light. Exotic flowers and fountains had been brought in to line the villa's corridors and the courtyard itself.

The marriage altar was in the center of the courtyard, surrounded by seats of rough-cut stone radiating outward in a circle. There were enough seats only for about a hundred and fifty people, despite the sheer number of attendees—those who had no assigned seats would have to watch the ceremony from the peristyle or the gallery above.

Many of the most important people on the entire plane were already present, pleasantly chatting amongst themselves—it occurred to Leon that it was practically a repeat of his birthday party given just who was in attendance, though given it was a wedding, even his birthday rather paled in comparison to who had come.

Anastasios, the Grand Druid, and the Director were all present, but this time, they were joined by dozens of eighth and ninth-tier mages, all of whom Leon guessed were diplomats and senior functionaries within their respective Imperial or guild bureaucracies. Sunlit diplomats were in attendance as well, looking no less happy than anyone else. Not a single Sentinel had shown up, though Leon was sure that had more to do with their lack of interest in arriving than in their lack of invitation.

The Sacred Golden Empress and the Ilian Emperor had also arrived, turning Leon's marriage ceremony into quite possibly the single most important diplomatic summit in hundreds of years—he knew that the respective Emperors, though they were frequently in contact with each other, rarely ever met in person. This was quite possibly the first time that the Ilian Emperor and the Sacred Golden Empress had ever met face-to-face.

He was just glad that most of the politicking wasn't being handled in his home, though since both Imperial processions had arrived weeks ago, he knew that both sides had been holding dozens of meetings not just with themselves, but also with the Sunlit delegation and Heaven's Eye representatives.

There was a part of Leon that was quite curious as to how those meetings had gone and what had been discussed, but he put it out of his mind. Given the Director's uncharacteristic smile, he supposed that things were fine right now, anyway.

Everyone looked at him as he entered with his ladies on his arm. His first instinct might've been to have his ladies come in before him and mingle a bit, out of some desire not to insult Cassandra or her family by flaunting his other lovers. However, he'd learned from both Cassandra and the Grand Druid herself that it was customary in their Empire for the head of a household to have their entire family prominently displayed during a marriage ceremony, to make sure that everyone knows what's happening and to symbolize that the person joining the family was being welcomed by said family.

Leon was fine with that, and he and his resplendent ladies made a quick round, welcoming everyone to the ceremony.

The Lord Protector was one of the first Leon spoke with, being the closest person of consequence to the door.

“Congratulations, Leon,” he said with as much sincerity in his voice as Leon had ever heard. He extended a hand, and Leon, a smile on his face, grasped it warmly. “I look forward to all that you go on to accomplish, and wish you luck in all your future endeavors.”

Leon smiled a little wider and accepted his wishes.

The Director was next, and he was all business, even as they clasped wrists.

“We’re as stable and secure as we’re going to be,” the old ninth-tier mage said. “It’s taken a lot of work to make sure that this can be accepted. Let’s not waste all of it.”

“You’re setting the mood wonderfully,” Leon quipped, and the Director smiled.

“Focus on what’s to come,” the Director replied. “Leave the rest to me.” His yellow eyes glimmered with ambition, Leon recognizing the look as the one that crossed his face whenever they discussed leaving Aeterna.

Leon clapped the man on the shoulder before moving on.

After the Director was the Grand Druid, who, despite being surrounded by gorgeous Evergolden attendants, outshone them all through sheer smug joy.

“Leon,” she said as he drew close. “You’re finally here.”

“Good to see you,” he said as she pulled him into a tight hug. Leon gave their surroundings a meaningful look as they separated, the Grand Druid having taken some part in preparing his home for the wedding. “How have things been today?”

“The day seems blessed,” the Grand Druid replied. “The sun is shining, a fair wind blows, and the trees sing their songs with every gust. There could be no more auspicious day than this for my granddaughter’s wedding. We’ll be family after this, Leon, sharing in each other’s triumphs and hardships.”

“I suppose we will,” Leon said, his smile faltering only for a moment. “Let’s hope the former outnumber the latter.”

The Grand Druid nodded, and Leon moved on. It took a while, but he greeted all of the important guests—which was to say, those who’d actually been invited rather than brought along as an attendant or retainer. He spoke with the Sacred Golden Empress, who while not as friendly and eager as the Grand Druid, her own mother, the Empress was polite and outwardly happy, her mood only apparently souring slightly when mentioning that neither of Cassandra’s siblings could attend, their official duties keeping them back in their Empire. The Ilian Emperor, meanwhile, spoke so long and with such youthful enthusiasm that Leon struggled to get away from the man, only extricating himself once Anastasios himself came over and ran some interference.

But despite breaking words with Imperial personages, Leon found that the most interesting guest was the leading figure of the Sunlit delegation. The man had been speaking with Narses the White when

Leon made his way over to them, and the blond man practically pulled Leon off his feet with a forceful hug when he joined them.

“What a day, Leon!” he exclaimed. “What a day!”

“Have you been drinking, Narses?” Leon asked as the larger man pulled back.

“Is the sun shining?” Narses shot back as he gestured at the clear sky with his mostly-empty cup.

“Speaking of which, I need to offer you my congratulations on this marriage, Leon. So, congratulations. For now, I need to fill my cup.” Narses slunk away, leaving Leon along with the Sunlit delegate.

“Leon Raime, a pleasure to make your acquaintance,” the man intoned, his voice soft and deliberate.

“Richard, of the Sunlit Empire,” he introduced himself.

Leon smiled, not having needed that latter part of the introduction, the man’s attire having spoken that much already. Richard was a ninth-tier mage, and his long, flowing robes were gilded and adorned with sapphire lightning bolts raining down from an image of the sun on his chest—a fairly typical Sunlit design, as far as Leon knew.

“Wonderful to meet you, as well,” Leon replied, clasping the man’s hand for a moment. “How is your Emperor doing? I regret that he wasn’t able to come in person...”

‘... Not that I sent him an invite,’ Leon silently finished.

“His Imperial Majesty is well,” the delegate said. “His attention is taken with other matters, such as the war with the Sky Devils. Unfortunately, while we have been prosecuting the war with strength and courage, that hasn’t stopped the occasional raid from reaching the coast. Or worse, collaborators throwing their lot in with our savage neighbors across the sea.”

“Collaborators?” Leon asked in only slightly-feigned shock.

“Indeed, though it shames me to admit,” Richard replied. “Almost fifty men have been hanged or been immolated for aiding and abetting Sky Devil raids, despite being citizens of our fair Empire, or of the Pegasi States. It’s unfortunate, but collaborators with those monsters simply can’t be allowed to live.”

Leon smiled and nodded.

“While I have you, Leon Raime,” Richard continued, “My great Emperor has asked me to pass along an invitation. He would greatly appreciate it if you and your lady wives could visit our fair Empire at your convenience.”

Leon almost asked why but managed to hold his tongue. For an Emperor like Sunlit, he doubted any reason was even necessary. “Please be sure to tell him that his invitation is gladly received. Our family’s business keeps us close to Occulara, but we’ll see if we can make some time to take His Imperial Majesty up on his offer.”

Richard smiled pleasantly, but his eyes took on a slightly harder edge as he replied, “His Imperial Majesty will be thrilled to hear that. I shall tell him to expect you as soon as I get back.”

With that, Leon’s quick exchange with the Sunlit delegate ended.

By this time, essentially all of Leon's guests had gathered in the courtyard, though were mostly still milling about talking to one another. Perhaps most notable for the fact that they weren't mingling as much as everyone else was Leon's retinue, who'd mostly already sat down in their seats in the front rows. All of his people, save Anshu, were present, including Tikos and Red, though the latter was in her human form—and drawing quite a bit of male attention, Leon noted, though she seemed to not care a whit for any of it.

But the other seats were also being slowly filled, and as he made his way back to the central altar, everyone else began to find their seats. Leon, his ladies, the Grand Druid, and the Sacred Golden Empress herself were the only people remaining on their feet as they stood around the altar, Leon and his ladies off to one side, while the Empress and the Grand Druid stood to the other.

They'd rehearsed this several times, and there was a large part of Leon that wasn't looking forward to this at all. All the ceremony and pageantry was wearing his patience down already, but he forced himself to ignore it and wear as pleasant a smile as he could muster.

And then, the ceremony was signaled to start with the dimming of the golden leaves, and, accompanied by at least fifty ladies-in-waiting, Cassandra herself finally arrived, and Leon found himself staring at her, speechless.

She was a breathtakingly beautiful woman even on her worst day, and now she'd had the best designers her Empire had to offer preparing her for hours.

Her long blond hair had been magically grown, the sides now matching the rest of her hair and brushed into cascading waves. Woven throughout her golden locks with equally golden thread were hundreds of tiny rubies that glittered as she walked.

Her body was clad in a long red dress, strapless and backless, though the latter was somewhat obscured by her hair. Her dress had been decorated with golden lightning embroidery rather than the usual floral motif that was the usual Evergolden fare, and as she approached, Leon was pleased to see that faint avian outlines had also been included.

She wore less gold than she had when arriving in Occulara, though what she did wear was magnificent: a golden diadem around her brow set with a monstrous red diamond and dozens more sapphires; golden bracelets on each wrist studded with rubies; and a prominent amulet around her neck that stood out for being only a single brown feather held by a thin gold chain.

Cassandra stopped in front of him, clearly enjoying the effect her arrival had on him. Her ruby eyes had narrowed with a mirthful smile, and she asked him, "Ready for this?"

Leon answered without hesitation. "Yes." It was finally time for Cassandra to join his family.

Chapter 848 - Divine Request

Leon smiled as he awoke. He hadn't been sleeping long, perhaps only an hour or two, but the exertions he'd gone through had warranted the rest. As he returned to awareness, he heard the breathing of his bedmate quicken, and she began to stir. Smooth naked skin cuddled about him began to slide over his own rougher features, and when he looked down at the head resting on his chest, he found two thin slits of red peering back at him set in one of the most beautiful faces he'd ever seen.

Cassandra groaned, her ruby eyes barely open wide enough to be seen through her eyelashes. After a moment of blariness, however, her eyes slammed open and she pushed herself up until she was on all fours, staring down at Leon beneath her.

As a familiar look that he'd seen many times in his other ladies began spreading across her face, Leon asked, "How was your night, wife?"

"It was... satisfactory," she playfully answered with a coy smile. "I'd like to sample your morning services, to see how they compare."

"My 'morning services' will leave you just as satisfied as you were just a few hours ago," Leon said, his tone hungry as he rose to the Princess' challenge. Without another word, he grabbed her toned waist and tossed her down next to him. In an instant, he was upon her, lavishing her body with all the attention that he'd had to hold himself back from during their ceremony.

They'd just married the day before, but with so many guests of such tremendous standing, they had to hold another party afterward to allow everyone their chance to network as they pleased. With the Director helping him to keep the Empires from making too big of a fuss if he were to disappear for a while—which was to say, head to the Sky Devil's Hell—Leon was more than happy to play host for as long as needed.

The reception was done in the Evergolden fashion with a couple small religious ceremonies conducted, such as the Empress planting a palace-tree in Leon's fields that would never grow—leaving it as an unspoken threat to the family her daughter was joining that Cassandra was not under their power and would have a sanctuary even if their relationship fell apart. The spirits of the land were venerated and appeased, and then the party itself could begin. Several hours of dancing and feasting followed, with Leon and Cassandra themselves expected to take full part.

That wasn't even close to his favorite part of the ceremony—even the wedding ceremony itself, where Leon and Cassandra had stood in front of all their guests for a few minutes and spoke words of love, devotion, and commitment, and when Leon's other ladies spoke words of welcome to Cassandra—had embarrassed him less than having to be the first on a dance floor.

Fortunately, both Elise and Emilie had, over the course of a couple decades, made Leon a reasonably competent dancer, so while he felt he'd made a fool of himself, Cassandra had seemed joyous enough, and Elise had done nothing but beam at him the entire time, he assumed he hadn't performed too poorly.

The performance, however, that he'd most looked forward to came at the end of the night when the party finally ended and their guests—and even his retainers—took their turns saying their goodbyes. Immediately after that, once Leon was left alone with only his ladies, Leon waited for hardly a second. Elise, Maia, and Valeria had all shared a few meaningful looks before Leon grabbed Cassandra and took her to bed.

Their joining, while starting a little slower than Leon was used to thanks to Cassandra's nervousness—despite her insistence to the contrary—had lasted hours. Both of them were flush with magic power and physical energy, and they used it as any couple would on their wedding night.

Now that it was the morning, as Leon went in for round he'd-lost-count-after-twenty, he was quietly surprised that all of his furniture was still intact, despite how adventurous Cassandra had proven herself to be, demanding that he take her on just about every available surface in his room.

Thankfully, while he mostly slept with one of his ladies whenever he did sleep, he did have his own private room as well, and that's where he'd taken Cassandra, so he didn't have to worry about answering to his ladies after trashing the room.

Of course, that didn't stop them from gathering outside of the door and rather blatantly listening in, as Leon discovered as he finally pulled away from Cassandra, the gorgeous blond left panting, her skin flushed, her body quivering, once they'd both finally sated their morning desires.

Without bothering to dress, Leon got out of bed, a moan of disappointment the only protest from Cassandra as he disentangled his body from hers and covered her with the bed's horribly wrinkled and rather damp sheets. After a moment of searching, he found the comforter, too, crumpled up behind his desk where it had been thrown in a fit of passion the night before—by whom, he couldn't remember—and threw that back over his new wife, too.

Only then did he go to the door and open it, revealing both Elise and Valeria. Elise almost fell into the room since she'd been leaning against the door, and Valeria had only been a step behind her. Leon caught his first wife and pulled her into the room, then took Valeria's hand and did likewise for her.

"No Maia?" he asked as he glanced back into the hallway.

"She's waiting for you to come to her," Elise replied, almost talking into his chest from how tightly he was holding her.

Leon frowned lightly, but closed the door, leaving the four in the room alone.

"Wha... are you doin...?" Cassandra slurred as she turned to face upward, the noise Leon and the other two had made pulling her out of the fugue state Leon had left her in.

Once she saw Elise and Valeria, she jumped a bit, but then relaxed, even sitting up and not caring at all when the blanket dropped, revealing all of herself above the waist.

Leon heard Elise's breath hitch at the sight, and a quick laugh from Cassandra in response.

"Do you two need something?" Cassandra asked, now fully awake and articulate. "I am a newlywed, and I'd like to spend as much time with my husband as possible."

"And what are you going to be doing with your husband, hm?" Valeria pointedly wondered, a teasing smile playing at her lips.

Without hesitation, Cassandra rose to Valeria's challenge. "We're going to be fucking, Val. I would have his penis inside of my vagina for as long as we can make it last. Would you like any more obvious questions answered?"

Valeria laughed and didn't say another word, but Leon noted that she glanced in his direction, a little color in her fair cheeks and heat in her sapphire eyes.

"There are other things that require attention, Princess," Valeria countered. "It's unfortunate, for sure, that you won't have the time to get as stuffed as you'd like."

"Hmm?" Leon asked, interjecting before Cassandra and Valeria could continue their sniping. "What requires attention?"

"We have a visitor, husband," Elise told him. "He made it clear that he's willing to wait, but given who he is..."

"It's Ambrose," Valeria quickly stated, and Leon's eyebrows about shot up into his hair from his surprise, and a moment later, deep concern and a little bit of fear entered his heart.

'What does he want? Does he know about my plans? Does he not want me to treat with the Ten Tribes? Or is this about that request he almost made during my birthday?'

With a look of sorrow, Leon said, "I have to deal with this. Whatever he wants can't be good."

"Who is this 'Ambrose' that he could pry you away from me so easily?" Cassandra asked in a huff.

"That's the name the Grave Warden introduced himself as to Leon," Valeria explained.

Leon had told Cassandra essentially all of his life story, with very few exceptions, and the Grave Warden was not one of them. She paled slightly when he was brought up, and any argument within her died.

"I'll get cleaned up and dressed. Where is he?" Leon asked.

"He asked for one of our smaller courtyards," Elise replied. "He's being seen to as befits his station, but keep an eye out for the Lord Protector or the Grand Druid, I think both of them were looking to spend some time with you, as well, but neither seemed like they had any real business. I'm sure they just want to chat about your marriage."

Leon scowled and hurriedly began getting ready.

'Not even one day,' he silently bemoaned. 'Just one day to enjoy my time with Cassie, damnit. One fucking day.'

When Leon walked into the courtyard where Ambrose was waiting for him, his irritation left him almost immediately. He knew Ambrose as a fairly lackadaisical man, not taking too many things seriously, speaking slowly, repeating himself often, and generally giving off the impression that he was so far above everything and everyone around him that life itself was little more than a game.

Which, Leon supposed, wasn't too far from the truth. Even Jason Keraunos challenged him, and the Storm King lost. If anyone could treat the universe like their own personal stage play, then Ambrose could.

However, when Leon first laid his eyes upon the man, he found not a man patiently waiting with a pleasant smile upon his lips, but someone more akin to a caged tiger, pacing about the peristyle with an expression of complete stoic seriousness.

"Leon," he whispered as Leon shut the door behind him.

"Ambrose," he replied. "I wasn't expecting you."

"I've had a busy few months," he answered. "First of all, my friend, I ought to apologize to you. When last we spoke, I told you that you were in my debt. Upon further reflection, this was improper of me. I will not do so again unless I have done something that does incur a debt."

"Mighty generous of you," Leon sarcastically responded, though he was surprised and grateful for the admission, at least.

"The people of the universe might take a different tack," the Grave Warden continued. "When I told you that I had something I wanted you to do, a service that you could 'repay' the debt with, I was serious. There is a matter of universal importance that requires attention, and I am not at liberty to take care of it myself. That is why I require your assistance."

Leon grimly smiled and took a seat in one of the sofas in the center of the courtyard and silently gestured to the one opposite him. The Grave Warden frowned slightly but took the invitation to sit.

"It seems that everyone wants something from me," he stated, "there's no harm in me at least hearing you out, is there?"

Ambrose's frown deepened for a moment. "I am... confused as to the implication behind your words. But I will again apologize if this is an imposition. I simply have few avenues left open to me at the moment. I do have some time, though, perhaps a few decades, or even a century, before matters grow dire, so if you wish to air some grievance with me..."

"No, no," Leon responded with a wave. "It's just that the Ilian and Sacred Golden Empires have been doing their best to wring every bit of old Thunderbird Clan juice out of me that they possibly can before I leave the plane. It buys me security, so I'm happy enough to play along, but it can feel like it's all take and no give with them, which can be frustrating."

Ambrose nodded in agreement. "Such arrangements are known to me. Known to me. But good security is invisible. It is always better to have unneeded security than to have need of it and not have it."

It was Leon's turn to tip his head in agreement, and he took it. "So, what's this thing you need of?"

"As a bit of background, you understand what the Divine Graveyard is and why it exists, yes?"

"It's a series of planes that are used as the graves for the Primal Gods and Devils, and as prisons for few that yet live. Like Krith'is."

"Yes," the Grave Warden replied before he got a look of great intrigue in his eye. He leaned forward and added, "Had you ever actually taken me up on my invitation to visit my home in Ilion, then I would've had you explain to me exactly what happened to cause Krith'is' death."

Leon smiled and shrugged, not answering the indirect question.

"As it is," the Grave Warden said as he leaned back, "that Krith'is is dead at all is enough. I'll allow you to keep your secret. This time. This time."

"Moving on, it's good that you have this understanding. Allow me to explain a few more things. Each of the planes of the Divine Graveyard has its own Warden. My counterparts ensure that their wards are

never released. Our duty was entrusted to us by Khosrow himself, the greatest of all mankind's heroes, and is one that will never end, for our charges are those Primal beings that could not, for one reason or another, die. Or given Krith'is' death, they were not beings we were capable of killing."

There was a sparkle in the Grave Warden's eye as he said that, and Leon felt that Krith'is' demise was not one he was going to just get away with not explaining at some point, but that the Grave Warden had some request to make of him was the only reason he wasn't pressing Leon right now.

"We have done our duty for a very long time," the Grave Warden continued. "So much time that I can hardly even say myself how long it's been. Early in the performance of our duties, my fellows were close. We were all friends, our friendship forged in the fires of the war that ended the Primal Age. But it's been so very long, and none of us have ever had the freedom to leave our planes—our duties were too important to leave, after all. We have kept in touch, making sure that all of us know that we're still all right, that we're still performing our duty and ensuring that the most dangerous beings to human civilization that exist in the universe remain locked away."

"Has something changed?" Leon asked.

The Grave Warden was silent for a long moment, his eyes turned away from Leon to stare at the wall of the courtyard, his eyes unfocused. When his mind returned nearly ten whole seconds later, he said, "When the incident with that pirate showed just how... lax I had been in the performance of my duty, I reached out to my old friends. While we have kept in touch, that communication has grown more and more infrequent over the millennia. Where once we spoke with each other every year, we began speaking only every other year, and then only once a decade, then only once a century.

"These days, we hold one conversation with each other every cycle of the Nexus. It has been more than thirty thousand years since I last spoke with my counterparts in the other planes of the Divine Graveyard. A lot can happen in that time, even to immortals such as us.

"I have managed to get back in contact with ten of my comrades. I have not been able to contact the last of our number. I am stuck on this plane, and I am running out of options for investigating my friend's apparent disappearance."

"That is where I come in, then?" Leon asked with a sigh.

"That is where you come in," Ambrose confirmed. After a moment, he added, "I am not asking you to drop everything and head to my friend's plane; I still have a few options left to me, but at this point, I'm not hopeful. What I am saying is that someone will need to venture over there and see what's going on. Deliver a message for me if my friend can be contacted."

"Why me?" Leon asked. "You're a Grave Warden with power I can't even yet comprehend. Why are you asking this favor of me?"

The Grave Warden's countenance soured. "I do not relish this," he admitted. "I am even more averse to it given your obvious reticence. I sympathize with your feelings regarding the heritage of your Clan, but your blood is not why I'm speaking to you now. It is your relative strength and combat experience compared to others of your tier, and your experience in dealing with Krith'is that has brought me to your home today. I need someone I can trust, and right now, that someone is you."

Leon had to fight the urge to smile. It was a small thing, but he greatly appreciated what Ambrose just said. It felt good to be wanted for reasons other than the benefits his blood could bring someone.

“Surely you have others, though?” Leon asked. “Others who are stronger and more capable?”

“I do, but this is not a job for them,” Ambrose replied. “Sending a resident of our plane to another in the Divine Graveyard is a delicate matter. It can be seen as a provocation, the start of a feud. Such arguments have happened between us before, despite our friendship. Since those uglier days, my fellow Wardens and I decided that if we had to, for any reason, send someone to another’s plane, we first had to ask permission, or exhaust all other reasonable options to make contact. Since I’m nearing exhaustion with those options, I am now speaking with you. There are others—post-Apotheosis mages I have at my disposal—but in this one task, they cannot help me. I cannot send them. I cannot send them.”

Leon sighed again. “What is it, specifically, that would want me to do, should I accept?”

“As I said, there is time, so take what you need. But I need you to give me an answer before you attempt Apotheosis. Then, if you were to accept, I would send you to my friend’s plane and investigate matters. If everything is all right, then I will bring you back. If you encounter difficulties, I would ask that you make all reasonable efforts to make contact with my friend. If there is something that imperils his duty, I and the rest of the Wardens must know.”

Leon thought of the invasion Krith’is made into his soul realm. The power and strength of a Primal being was a terrifying thing and not one that he would unleash upon the universe. While he would take his time to contemplate the problem, he supposed he was inclined to agree, at least right now.

“I’ll make my ask sweeter,” the Grave Warden stated. “I would not ask such a favor of you without promising reward. So, I offer you this: should you accept my task, I would arrange for you and any you decide upon to move to the Nexus.”

Leon’s eyes widened in surprise. “You... might have to temper that offer, I can think of quite a few people.”

“I can move every resident of my plane just about anywhere in the universe I wish,” Ambrose said with a somewhat smug look. “Think not of any limitation, for there is none. If you perform this task for me, I would aid you in moving an entire Empire to the Nexus, should you wish me to, whether by magical means or by supplying you with a fleet of transportation arks.”

“That’s... quite the offer,” Leon whispered. “I will give it all due consideration.”

“That is all I ask. Now, I will take my leave.”

The Grave Warden stood, and as Leon jumped to his own feet, Ambrose simply smiled and nodded to him before vanishing into thin air.

“Huh,” Leon grunted.

‘Well, looks like I have something new to think over...’

Chapter 849 - Finishing Preparations

The weeks following Leon's marriage to Cassandra were packed, and his attention was pulled in many directions. Anastasios and the Grand Druid were busy finalizing their alliances with him, with Leon passing off a few notes he'd taken from the Thunderbird on achieving Apotheosis to them. He technically never promised to do so for the Grand Druid, but he figured he'd fulfill the unspoken request for that information since it would make Cassandra happy, undoubtedly.

His guess on that front was right, and Cassandra had been particularly vigorous in bed that night—not that she hadn't been vigorous on any other night. Much like his other ladies, Cassandra was utterly voracious between the sheets and were he a weaker mage, he felt he would've been literally fucked to death within a week of his marriage.

Despite her new appetites, Leon managed to get away from Cassandra enough to be with his other ladies. He'd finalized his trip to Kataigida for two months after his marriage to Cassandra, and he wanted to spend as much time with his family as he could since he was going to be leaving half of them behind.

Of great importance, as well, was preparing for the journey. Not simply provisions, for his people were by and large strong enough to not need much in the way of food or drink, but weapons, armor, and other gear. He'd had a few small modifications done to his MALL design and then had three new prototypes built and tested, just in case. Getting his people trained on using the mobile Lances took a fair couple weeks, as well.

In addition, he'd be bringing the Iron Needle with him, not wanting to leave it behind even with Nestor keeping watch over the thing.

The last thing of paramount importance, however, was the finalized designs for his modified transformation enchantment. It had been modified to work with any Inherited Bloodline that used it, he'd been told, and while he had no reason not to trust what he'd been told, it also brought up a question that had him feeling some type of way.

'Wouldn't such an enchantment work for both of my bloodlines?'

The question was one he only silently pondered. He'd spent a great deal of time frustrating the Thunderbird with his striving for the Great Black Dragon's power while taking hers for granted, and while that attitude was one he was trying to correct, he couldn't help but grow excited at the thought of transforming into a massive dragon at will.

Whenever he used the enchantment, though, he only ever turned into the silver and blue Thunderbird. He could still turn into the copy of the Thunderbird herself using the original enchantment she'd given him, of course, and for that, he was grateful, for he couldn't imagine how useful it would be to win over support within the Ten Tribes if he were the actual image of the Thunderbird in the flesh.

However, he also couldn't help but wonder just how far this new enchantment could take him. Unfortunately, the new enchantment had never once brought out any sign of draconic features. He wasn't sure why, and he had to admit that he was almost afraid to ask.

For the time being, he decided to simply accept that it wasn't working with his draconic bloodline for some reason, and focus instead on his Thunderbird bloodline. That was what would win him followers in the Ten Tribes. That was the basis for the Jaguar's offer of a crown. He was claiming the mantle of the old Storm Kings and the power of the Thunderbird.

The dragon would wait for the Thunderbird, in this case.

What would also wait, it seemed, would be his new sword. While there had been a few storms in the weeks following his marriage to Cassandra, none of the power and ferocity had appeared that would be conducive to another attempt at sky forging. He'd just have to practice using the Iron Needle without the weapon or contemplate attempting to return it to his family's current blade and just making do if he had to. Neither prospect was particularly appealing, but he didn't always find himself in the position to be so choosy with his methods.

He'd gotten all of these ducks in a row fairly quickly, leaving the remaining weeks before he departed to be filled more with coordinating with his allies and spending time with his family than preparing. At least when it came to physical materials, he figured that he was about as prepared as he possibly could be.

"The Keeper won't attack again," the Director declared. "The Lord Protector has, despite your frustrations with him, Leon, fulfilled his bargain and ensured his border is protected from such breaches. If the Keeper were to move against you while you're gone, the Lord Protector would know immediately and be able to move against him almost immediately. You can rest easy with that knowledge, at least."

"Yes. Reliance upon Anastasios. Very comforting," Leon sarcastically replied. "I'm more comfortable with the Grand Druid's protection, honestly. I can't see her ever letting the Keeper do so much as spit in Cassandra's direction, let alone attempt some kind of violence against her."

The Director hummed in agreement.

"What of the Sunlit Emperor?" Leon asked. "His diplomats at my wedding passed along an invitation he extended to me to visit his Empire. It's... I don't much want to. Getting my hands dirty in Imperial politics isn't something I want to do at this stage of the game."

"I don't blame you. These things can be messy. What I do know, though, is that apart from the bare minimum the Emperor has done to prosecute the war against the Sky Devils, he's been most taken with his own personal project, something that not even I have been able to uncover any details about. Whatever he's doing is important to him, and he doesn't want anyone else to know about it."

"And he just sends me an invitation when he's so taken with other things?"

"It's possible he was just being polite, he didn't hide that he was trying to poach you from Occulara, did he?"

Leon shrugged. "No, he did make it clear that he would welcome me in his Empire if I decided to move there."

"Then I wouldn't worry too much about it. The Sunlit Emperor has other things on his mind and likely just wanted to remind you of his position on the matter of your residence."

"My answer to him hasn't changed."

"That's encouraging to hear."

“As for invitations...” Leon murmured, hesitating for a moment before he began to get into the Grave Warden’s offer. It took some hefty tangents that turned into long conversations on their own since Leon realized that he’d never actually told the Director about the Divine Graveyard and what might be buried here on Aeterna or the other planes in this planar cluster, but he eventually managed to get around to the Grave Warden’s offer. By the time he did, though, the Director looked like the two of them had just finished going twelve rounds against each other, no holds barred and no magic forbidden.

“That... is quite the story,” the Director whispered. “You’ve touched on some of this before, but... I’ll need some time to process this.”

“Then, for now, tell me what you think of the Grave Warden’s proposal.”

The Director sat in silence for a short moment, his eyes vacant as what Leon had just told him bounced around his mind. Eventually, he said, “It’s... not one easily refused. You’ve said that you would bring every Sky Devil with you to the Nexus if you could. This could be your chance to do that.”

“Indeed. But how much it’s worth this mission that Ambrose gave me... I can’t say. I don’t know what the Sky Devils might have to contribute in that respect—I may not even need the Grave Warden’s help, in that case. And yet...”

Leon trailed off, and after a moment of silence, the Director nudged him and gave him a prodding look.

With a grimace, Leon said, “I wouldn’t say I’m an expert on ‘Primal Beings’. But I have some meager experience with one. There are few things I desire less than to see one freed. They are reportedly hostile to human civilization and were locked away for damned good reasons. Knowing that one of those responsible for keeping them sealed has gone missing... weighs heavily on my mind. Some might say that this is not my business, but when it comes to the universe itself, I’d rather say that this is everyone’s business and that we all have a vested interest in seeing these beings of a bygone era remain imprisoned.”

“In that, we can agree,” the Director whispered, to Leon’s surprise. The Director apparently noticed his surprise, and added, “I hope you’re not thinking that I’d seek these creatures out! I worked with vampires because I thought I had no other choice! Such immensely powerful things as ‘Primal Gods’ is so far beyond my ability to control that seeking out such creatures will never be on my list of priorities!”

He was emphatic, more so than Leon usually saw him. But he didn’t detect any deceit in the old man’s voice, despite this.

“Please, forgive me,” Leon whispered. “My surprise was uncharitable.”

“Your surprise was justified,” the Director grudgingly conceded. After another moment of silence, the Director said, “I have business to see to. So do you. Focus on what’s in front of you. ascend to the tenth-tier. Then decide on the ‘Grave Warden’s’ request.”

“You make it sound so simple.”

“I’ve long had to learn how to compartmentalize, being in my position. One can’t focus on everything, so focus only on what’s in front of you and work through it as best as you can. Solve one problem at a time.”

"You're right. You're right. I'll leave you to your work. I have a few weeks left until I leave for the south. I'll be spending those weeks with my family. Talal will have my duties until... well, I don't know what might happen after this. I can hardly take up my old post if I'm King of the Sky Devils, now, can I?"

"For now, you'll remain officially in that position. You won't be King just yet, and you'll return now and then, to maintain appearances. You're not leaving permanently, so don't act like you are."

"Look at that, you're right again."

"Spare me the sarcasm, kid, get out of here. I'm not the one you should be spending your time with."

Leon gave him one last grateful nod and then departed. Even if he was planning on returning frequently, he didn't know how long he would have once he arrived at Kataigida. Or if he even would arrive there at all.

"... and what did it turn out to be? A giant fucking serpent statue! Identical to the other dozen we'd found by then! All that work for just another damned snake!" Cassandra cried, her obvious frustration undercut just a little bit by the wide smile she wore, and the laugh she let out once she'd finished.

Leon was sitting next to his new wife in one of his villa's private living rooms. Elise was with them, too. He'd decided that, since Maia and Valeria were going to be accompanying him south, he would spend as much time as he could with those who weren't rather than those who were. Valeria and Maia weren't exactly happy about that, but they understood.

"That must have been disappointing," Elise said. "I can't imagine spending that long at a dig site only to find what amounted to statues."

"It was fine and quite worth the effort, looking at it from a more objective standpoint," Cassandra said with a sigh. "It's just that nearly every place I've found that predates the arrival of the Thunderbird Clan has had some kind of link to what I and my people call, 'the Serpent Cult'. It's strangely widespread."

"That it is," Leon agreed. "Horned serpents were viewed as demonic figures to the Valem north of the Bull Kingdom, but were worshipped in the Serpentine Isles. I've even heard stories that Great Horned Serpents used to ply our plane's oceans, and that the skull of one such creature can be found at Serpent's Fall."

"Blech. Ew. Gross. I hate snakes," Cassandra exclaimed.

"After everything that happened with Jormun, I don't have fond opinions of the creatures, myself," Leon agreed.

"They're fine, so long as they're small," Elise pouted. "They keep vermin away from crops."

"They also scare the living shit out of workers responsible for those crops," Leon countered.

Elise shrugged but didn't argue her point.

"I... still have some mixed feelings about your dealings with the Sky Devils, Leon," Cassandra said, "but at least they're better than snakes."

Leon made an awkward face and replied, "You know, I think there might actually be a Serpent Tribe amidst the Ten Tribes... Maybe I'm wrong but I wouldn't be surprised if there is."

"Wipe them out, women and children too," Cassandra immediately said, though nothing in her tone indicated seriousness.

"I'm not wiping them out," Leon responded as he playfully pushed Cassandra away from him. She bounced right back into the crook of his arm as he added, "Not for no reason, anyway."

Cassandra brought a hand to his face and brought his face down to meet hers. "I don't want you to leave."

"I'm not fond of the idea of leaving, either. But this is an opportunity that I can't pass up. To reclaim some of my Clan's old vassals and build a proper network of support... Besides, they've kept the Empires at bay for so long, their magical expertise and skill at arms can't be ignored."

Cassandra crossed her arms and looked away in a huff, but again, Leon sensed no actual seriousness in her demeanor.

"I don't want you to go, either, husband," Elise said, drawing his attention. "I want to stay with you as much as I can. It... It doesn't feel good to always be left behind like this. I know that my skills don't lend themselves well to violence, but I do sometimes wish you had less of an adventurous streak."

Leon warmly smiled as he pulled her closer. "I would not have myself far from your arms, either. But I would rather have all my limbs chopped off than allow you to so much as chip a nail."

"My nails are hardly so valuable," Elise said with a dismissive wave. In an objective sense, Leon knew that to be true, but he also knew that Elise spent quite a bit of silver on making sure that her nails were perfect at all times. "Besides," she added, "I'd rather not make a habit of regrowing your limbs."

Leon's left arm twinged, and he felt Cassandra twitch slightly under his arm.

"I'll be careful," he said.

"And we can spar while Leon's gone!" Cassandra declared.

"Uh, what?" Elise asked as Cassandra sprang to her feet and moved around Leon to kneel before Elise and pull her into an embrace.

"If one is being left behind for not being a good warrior, then the only thing to do is become a good warrior!"

"I... I... that's not... I've tried, but I just don't have the knack for it..."

"Nonsense! I'm sure you've just been too busy running this house while Leon spends all his free time in his workshop with that dead-man-in-a-golem! If you spent a little more time in the training room, you'd be a great warrior in no time! I guarantee it!"

Leon laughed as Elise struggled to turn the Princess down. Technically speaking, Cassandra outranked Elise, socially. But they were still in Leon's family, and in that respect, they were completely equal.

"I would... I don't think that's... the worst idea ever," Elise sputtered, and while Cassandra smiled and hugged Elise a little tighter, Leon knew that Elise likely wasn't going to become a great warrior just because she trained with Cassandra. Elise was a city girl through and through, lacking the quality that allowed Leon to kill easily.

Hardly a bad thing, in his opinion, having only the barest hint of killing intent, and it was even quite good that she understood both what she wanted to do with her life and what her limitations were. Fighting and killing were not going to be skills in her wheelhouse, and that didn't make Leon love her any less.

"Leon," Cassandra said, pulling his attention away from Elise, "you believe in multiple bad afterlives, don't you? 'Hells'?"

"Not really," Leon replied. "The people of the Bull Kingdoms do, and I just talk like them, I suppose."

"There are unlimited hells in Bullish tradition," Elise explained. "One tailor-made for every person who deserves one. Those who deserve better and greater go to join their Ancestors, watching over their still-living kin."

Cassandra frowned slightly before looking Leon in the eye. "If you head south," she said, "and wind up dead. I will force open your personal hell—or whatever afterlife you end up in—and personally kill you for leaving me like that. Do you understand?"

Leon burst out laughing. She said it so seriously, so earnestly, but he found that he couldn't take her words nearly as seriously as she did. However, as she rained light, painless blows down upon him in retaliation for his laughter, he said, "I won't be leaving anyone like that."

"You'd better fucking not," she growled. "I'm a newlywed wife, I'm too young to be widowed."

Leon felt a pinch in his other arm, and when he turned he found Elise glaring at him with a similarly smoldering glare. He kissed her on the tip of her nose and said, "I have plenty of ways to run away if need be. No one's killing me down there, though I suspect there'll be plenty who try. How about, instead of worrying about what will come, we instead focus on the here and now?"

Cassandra socked him again and turned away in a huff, but she obviously had to hold in a laugh as pulled her back to him, whereas for Elise, all he had to do to lighten her mood was to tighten their embrace.

"I can't stand this," Cassandra grumbled. "If there's adventure, I should be heading out to meet it, not waiting around like a helpless maiden in a tower!"

"Next time," Leon promised her. "Next time."

Chapter 850 - Path to Hell I

The time had come. The Ten Tribes were waiting for him, and though Leon knew that the longer he waited, the more his research teams could bring him to strengthen his position, he couldn't wait forever. He had to move south.

So, on the appointed day, he didn't delay the beginning of his adventure. He assembled Valeria, Maia, Anzu, Alix, Gaius, Alcander, Marcus, and Red, and had them suit up. All but Red had suits of wyvernscale armor, but Red herself was a wyvern, and Leon had given her rings that fit her larger form that would

grant her the same functions as the others had in their armor, so she was hardly underequipped in comparison.

Leon said his final goodbyes to those remaining behind, as did the others. In addition to Cassandra and Elise, Penelope, the Lord Protector, and the Grand Druid had come to see him off. Sofie, too, had come for Alcander, Leon having permitted Alcander to tell his lady that he was leaving for an indeterminate period of time. As for Anastasios and the Grand Druid, while he didn't explicitly tell them that he was heading for Kataigida, he was ninety-nine percent convinced they knew already, as both had rather emphatically wished him good luck.

Once their goodbyes were over, Leon and his people took off into the sky. Technically illegal, but given his position in Heaven's Eye and Anastasios' tacit permission, that hardly mattered. Not that he was planning on being caught, anyway, since as he and his people rose over his villa, they activated their darkness enchantments and vanished from sight. Even Red in wyvern form became essentially undetectable to any but themselves, thanks to some upgrades that Leon had created to ensure they were able to keep track of each other while they were invisible.

And with little fanfare, they turned south and began making their way toward the Pegasi States.

It wasn't difficult for Leon to find his rendezvous point with Anshu. The Pegasi States were generally fairly dry, but there were some swamps closer to the coast. Only one was large enough and located close enough to the Veins of Vigilance to be where he needed to go.

As he and his retinue dropped closer to the ground, Leon got out his comm lotus and kept in contact with Anshu, whom he'd ordered to keep his lotus nearby despite his general reticence to use it, and had his secret retainer talk them down to the specific landing location.

Anshu and only a handful of others were there when Leon and his retainers touched the ground and returned to visibility. It had been a hard flight, but his retainers had weathered that challenge marvelously, landing in more than fighting condition. Judging by the power of those few with Anshu, he guessed that his people could kill them all without breaking a sweat, even before they'd had a chance to rest from their long flight.

"Leon!" Anshu called out as Leon and the rest of the retinue made themselves visible. "It's good to see you! You made good time!"

Anshu's comrades weren't quite so welcoming, all of them giving Leon's group some amount of side-eye, but Leon spared them no more mind than he needed to assess them as little threat.

"We were in a hurry," Leon responded as he walked forward and grasped the Indradian's wrist. "Is everything in place?"

"We're ready on your word," Anshu said.

"Then lead on."

With that, Anshu led Leon and his other retainers deeper into the swamp, just enough boats to carry them all—so long as everyone remained in human form—expertly hidden within the swampy brush.

Some of those whom Anshu had brought were water mages, and they, using their power, made the journey through the swamp quite easy. Leon himself, his own small measure of skill in the element informing him, was rather impressed with how easily they maneuvered through the swamp, avoiding many of the dangers he could sense within it, from strong monsters to natural obstacles.

Eventually, they reached a thick cluster of trees as large as a palace about two or three miles from the coast and the Veins of Vigilance. This comparison wound up being almost accurate as Anshu made a sign in the air and Leon sensed light magic at work. Their boats proceeded onward, apparently on a collision course with one of the outer trees of the cluster. However, just as they were about to make contact with the tree, the boat pierced through some kind of film of white light which Leon immediately recognized as the outer edge of an illusion created with light magic.

After passing into the illusion, a whole outpost was revealed where the tree cluster once was, with warehouses, a small dockyard, and several large residential and commercial buildings. Leon had already been briefed on the place by Anshu, so he knew that this outpost was run by the Saltwater Road, one of if not the largest smuggling operations on the entire plane. As a result, while it was a smuggling outpost, Leon found it quite orderly, and he was able to pick out where the tavern was relative to the Saltwater Road offices. He only knew thanks to Anshu's briefing, though, as every building there was fairly well-enchanted—not enough that he wouldn't be able to blast his way in if needed, but certainly warding against magic senses.

Without a word, Anshu led the boats to the docks, where they disembarked, and with nothing more than a nod from Leon, continued onward to the tavern.

The tavern was hardly a ramshackle place, but it was relatively small and dark. It was the first floor of a three-story building, the other two stories reserved for temporary guest quarters set aside for the use of visiting smugglers. Anshu had claimed that he'd gotten Leon's group a room from where they could conduct their business.

As they moved through the outpost, they got a lot of looks. Leon noted that just about everyone stared and that all but two of the smugglers Anshu had brought with him separated from them once they left the docks.

[We're not welcome here,] Gaius whispered to him using what little darkness magic he'd learned in the past few years.

[Not a surprise,] Leon replied. [Are smugglers known for celebrating new arrivals to their dens?]

[Point taken.]

Leon frowned as they entered the tavern, using his magic senses to look back once more at those out on the street. They numbered a little over thirty, but he knew there were more—Anshu had counted upwards of seventy at the outpost's busiest times, but Leon could easily imagine there being a hundred or more in the office buildings that Anshu had never seen before. Regardless, Leon felt a little unsettled at just how much attention they were getting, despite what he'd said to Gaius.

So, as they entered and Anshu led them to the stairs in the back, he ordered Gaius, [Take a few minutes to get situated, then go invisible and post up on the roof. I want to know if our presence has stirred up the nest.]

Gaius gave him an almost imperceptible nod in response.

"We can set up in here," Anshu said as he led Leon's group into their main room above the tavern. The two men who'd accompanied him took up positions just outside the door and closed it behind them.

"Val, check the enchantment scheme," Leon ordered. "Make sure that we're truly in private."

Valeria nodded and grabbed Alix and Marcus to assist her.

"Who are those two outside?" Alcander asked.

"Subordinates of mine," Anshu explained. "They're loyal to me, no need to worry about them."

"I'll worry about them anyway if it's all the same to you," Alcander replied as he leaned against the wall next to the door.

"How much longer must we wait?" Red asked aloud, showing hardly any sign that she'd only relatively recently learned how to speak out loud.

"Until we know we're secure," Leon answered. "Once we do, I'll make a call and clear things up with our friend."

Red scowled and slumped down on a sofa. "Better to kill the lot of the humans here. They are parasites, are they not? None would miss them."

"I'd rather not make a habit of killing everyone that we run across," Leon replied. "They have made no hostile movements, no need for us to stir up trouble with powerful smugglers."

"Yes," Anshu agreed, responding surprisingly rapidly and without much of the vehemence that Leon would've expected, given his usual attitude. "Our job here is going to be hard enough, leaving some friends behind here can only serve to aid our cause."

"What need have we of these pitiful humans, hiding in the swamps out of fear?" Red grumbled. "Had they anyone worthy enough of allying with, they would stand up against those whose laws they subvert instead of creeping about the wild like field mice, ever-watchful for predators..."

"It's good, then, that we're not here to join them," Leon responded. "Neither are we here to judge them. That's the job of the local Pegasi city-state."

Red clicked her tongue in displeasure, and for a moment, Leon felt through his connection with Maia that his river nymph lover felt much the same, clearly agreeing with what Red was saying.

"I'd... rather we didn't leave these people behind us, either," Marcus said as he finished up his sweep of the room. "Ignoring smugglers... doesn't sit right with me."

Leon grimaced. "This is not our business... you want us to get involved anyway? Dealing with smugglers down here is not our job."

"Anshu," Alcander began, his tone serious, "what sort of things have been smuggled in and out of this outpost? It's quite large, so I imagine they move a diverse range of goods."

"Just about everything that can be smuggled, is smuggled through this outpost," Anshu said with some trepidation, his eyes flickering around the room as if gauging how everyone was taking this information.

"Gold?" Alcander asked.

Anshu nodded.

"Drugs?" Marcus inquired.

Again, Anshu nodded.

"Some Pegasi States practice slavery; do slaves pass through here?" Alcander pressed.

Anshu repeated the same gesture.

"What about captured beasts?" Alix asked as she joined them in the center of the room.

"Yes," Anshu confirmed. "Even a few wyverns from the last hunt, as I recall. They'd like to put chains on you, very much, should they learn what you are." He bowed his head slightly towards Red, making it clear who he was talking about.

Red scowled, and Leon felt her killing intent spike.

"And vampires?" Marcus continued. Leon felt Xaphan's attention momentarily drift up to monitor the conversation.

"They have some connections with certain groups of leeches," Anshu responded. "None bound to fire demons, but there are still a fair number of vampires that pass through here. I'd even be willing to bet there're few times when there isn't at least one vampire staying here at any given time."

"Where?" Leon growled.

"In the main office building," Anshu answered. "They're 'honored' guests and clients and get good treatment. Wined and dined by the outpost captain."

A brief silence fell over the room as everyone turned to look at Leon, who sat there listening to the conversation, his mood growing fouler with every word. He made eye contact with all of his people, judging how they were taking this news.

Alix, Alcander, and Marcus stared at him imploringly, as if they hoped that he would make shutting down these smugglers his business. For that, he empathized with them; hearing of all that was smuggled through this outpost had him quite tempted to burn the whole place to the ground. This was the main reason why he hadn't asked Anshu during their planning exactly what goods the outpost moved, not wanting to feel compelled to get involved.

Red and Maia, on the other hand, seemed more bloodthirsty than anything else. Red glared at him, her killing intent flickering through her aura, grinning in a way that seemed more like she was baring her teeth than smiling. Maia, however, averted her gaze fairly quickly until she was looking out of the window, and Leon could feel through his connection with her that she felt rather disgusted and kill-hungry.

Of all of them, Anzu seemed to care the least, and yet his reaction had Leon more willing to do something about this outpost than any of the others. The griffin-in-human-form was just watching and listening, but the innocent way he looked to Leon as if wondering what Leon was going to do and ready to learn from his actions, and Leon felt no small amount of shame in contemplating what kind of example he was setting for his 'little brother'.

Before he could say anything, Valeria finished up her more in-depth sweep of the room and reported, "We're clean. Privacy wards have been reinforced, and I found no surveillance enchantments."

Leon smiled at her, and she gave him an expectant look, a quick glance at Anshu explaining just what she was expectant about.

"None of you are making this easy, you know," Leon said with playful bitterness. "We have problems enough without adding to them, but what can we do after all of that? What is everyone suggesting? That we massacre this place? Slaughter everyone here? Or something as simple as letting the Pegasi States know this outpost's location? I doubt they'd even arrive in time to do anything of worth."

It seemed, for a brief moment, that Leon had stunned his retainers into silence, until Red simply stated, "I'd like to kill them all, yes. If these creatures want to capture and enslave me, then I will burn them first."

She rose from her seat but before she could take a single step, someone knocked on the window, drawing everyone's attention. No one was there, apparently, but Leon nodded to Valeria, who went and carefully opened the window. Something unseen flitted in, detectable only by the air they displaced as they entered.

A moment later, Gaius appeared as Valeria closed the window. Gaius pulled off his helmet and reported, "We have movement within the central office. People are assembling there, and sentries have been posted around the tavern downstairs."

Leon grinned. "Looks like the decision might be taken out of our hands, then. I was hoping we could simply use this as a rest stop before proceeding onward, but I suppose I should've more readily expected something like this. All right, I guess we're going to have to go with plan B."

As soon as he said this, Anshu sprang to his feet and made his way to the door. He handed one of his two people standing watch in the stairs several spell scrolls, and the man nodded, stuck one of the spells on the wall, and went down into the tavern, leaving the other man to continue his watch alone. At the same time, Valeria began walking around the room putting up more spells on the walls to add additional protections to the room.

Everyone else, meanwhile, prepared themselves for battle. Most of Leon's retainers armored up and took out their weapons, save for Red, Anzu, and Maia. Only Maia had any armor, and none of them fought with conventional weapons.

Marcus and Alix, each with thunder wood bows, went to the windows and posted up while everyone else encircled the door.

While Leon hadn't gone into this outpost hoping to fight, he'd at least come up with a plan just in case they were attacked. They would wait for the other side to make the first blow, ensuring that they were

in the right when they struck back. Based on what Anshu had confirmed, however, Leon supposed they could make the plan a little more aggressive after first blood had been spilled.

"There's a group gathering outside!" Marcus called out. Leon projected his magic senses and found that there was a small, but growing group of armed individuals outside, staying out of sight of the windows but not otherwise hiding themselves.

"We should hit them first," Red declared, and Leon instinctively agreed with her. However, these smugglers weren't their enemies yet, and he restrained himself from making them enemies himself.

"Not yet," he growled. "If they are to be our enemies, then it will be by their hand, not ours."

As he said that, someone obviously very important walked out of the central office, followed by several dozen relatively powerful mages. The one in charge was seventh-tier, while everyone else was fifth or sixth. No challenge to him or his in a straight fight, but Leon wondered if they knew how big of a bite his people were. As this group began marching toward the tavern, some splitting off to approach from the tavern from the back and sides, three sixth-tiers even taking off into the air with the aid of some of his older flight belts to watch the sky over the tavern, Leon sighed.

"Is it arrogant of me to assume that they're coming here for us?" he asked aloud.

"No," Anshu replied. "I've been working with that one leading them. He doesn't leave his office for any but the most important reasons, those usually being powerful clients arriving at the outpost. He's coming here for you, no doubt about that."

'Fuck,' Leon silently cursed. He alone remained unarmored, wanting to project some measure of control and confidence, but he still had to fight his instincts to armor up and jump down there to confront the smugglers. Instead, he contented himself simply by walking to Marcus' window and looking down at the group as they surrounded the tavern.

As he did, the man leading the smugglers assumed a position of prominence in front of the tavern, standing between it and the warehouses. Even from within the tavern, Leon could feel the air swirling about him, his magic already saturating the environment.

'Wind mage,' Leon identified.

And then the man looked up, making eye contact with Leon, gave him one of the most shit-eating grins Leon had ever seen, and walked into the tavern.