

Storm King 861

Chapter 861 - Meeting the Hawks

Leon walked into the Jaguars' gathering hall like he owned the place, taking every step with the confidence and assertiveness that he would expect of any King he, himself, would follow. He kept his aura mostly restrained, but let enough magic radiate from himself that no one would struggle to sense his presence.

At the far end of the gathering hall, being seen to by several Jaguar elders, including one of the ninth-tier elders, were five mages, all dressed in black with cloaks trimmed in brown feathers. Their leader appeared to be old enough to be an elder, and his eighth-tier aura certainly backed up that assumption.

The Jaguars in the hall straightened up and began to bow before Leon said, "There's no need for that."

He put on an easy-going smile and stepped past the Hawk delegation and onto the dais, closely followed by Nikolaos, with the other elders accompanying the ninth-tier elder taking seats near the dais.

"Are you Leon Raime?" the eighth-tier Hawk asked, his posture somewhat guarded, a suspicious look on his face.

"That is my name," Leon acknowledged. "And yours?"

"Rain-Dancer," he responded.

"Well met," Leon said. "I take it your people received the Jaguars' message?"

"We did, and I and my comrades were sent to ascertain the truth."

Leon didn't move, but he called upon his power and a moment later several bolts of silver-blue lightning rippled across his body, the unmistakable power of the Thunderbird washing over the delegation. Rain-Dancer's expression softened a hair, but the other four, all of them seventh-tier, reacted with a little more emotion, from looks of shock and amazement to fear.

"Have you need of anything else?" Leon asked. "Will your Tribe support my claim as your King?"

Rain-Dancer took a few deep breaths, Leon not pressing too hard for an answer with the man so clearly lost in thought. When he spoke, he did so with his voice carefully controlled and his expression just as carefully schooled.

"We must return to our Tribe," Rain-Dancer said. "However, I would not expect the response to be entirely positive."

The few Jaguar elders watching took on more serious and judgmental expressions, though they didn't make any real noise to express that disapproval.

"Do you not remember your histories, Rain-Dancer?" Nikolaos harshly inquired. "The Thunderbirds are our rightful Lords."

"The Ten Tribes have never had a King before," Rain-Dancer retorted, not apparently intimidated at all.

"We became the Ten Tribes after our last King died and his Clan crumbled. We flew to Kataigida through the winds of war, our wings broken, our feathers plucked, and we roosted to rest and heal. Now, we are

beginning to realize our old strength, our old wounds aching, but no longer bleeding. We have retaken the Sword, sacked Argos, ruined the barbarians across the eastern strait."

"The Strait of Keraunos," Leon said. "That is its name, something that both you and the Imperials seem to agree on. Might as well use it."

Rain-Dancer smiled bitterly but nodded. "Allow me to get to the point, then. We are resurgent, our power is expanding and returning to glory. What need have we of Kings, then? Why should we bow down to someone who just so happens to fly in out of the storm we've been in for the past eighty-thousand years—coincidentally just after a major victory? Even if he bears the lightning of the Most Venerable, why should that make him a good King? Why should that entitle him to rule over the Ten Tribes?"

"We stand upon the shoulders of our Ancestors," Nikolaos argued. "It is through their labors that we have endured. Barely. Scraping by when once we sailed the Void like gods! It was the power of the Thunderbird that delivered us to such heights, and it was the loss of that stewardship that saw us so diminished. We now have the opportunity to honor our Ancestors and return ourselves to our rightful place, and follow our rightful King back to our ancient homes."

Rain-Dancer sighed. "Such is tradition. We have hoped for such an event to occur for so long, it hardly even seems possible." The man fixed Leon in a steely gaze, his eyes a dull yellow, a far cry from Leon's vibrant gold or the Thunderbird's much brighter yellow. "There are many in my Tribe who clamor to rejoin the Thunderbird as its wingmate, but there are many more who wish to tread our own path, free of Kings and masters."

"Would you then support the Thunderer?" Leon asked.

"That is up for our tribal council to decide," Rain-Dancer replied. "As for what they will decide, I cannot say."

Leon's smile thinned slightly and he stared Rain-Dancer down with as much intensity as he thought he could get away with without seeming hostile or overly rude. "Tell your tribal council that I will visit them shortly. If your people are concerned about me, then let them get to know me, and in doing so, realize for sure if I'm the sort of King they might want to follow."

Rain-Dancer took a moment to think the proposition over, then nodded.

"And make it known," Leon added, "that the Jaguars and the Screaming Eagles stand with me, as well."

Rain-Dancer's expression momentarily shifted to muted surprise. "The Jaguars were known, but the Screaming Eagles as well?"

"They acclaimed me as their King just a few hours ago," Leon explained. "Their delegation, led by Exallos Aetos, remains in the city if you wish to confirm with them before you depart."

"I will do that," Rain-Dancer replied.

"Then, if there's nothing more for us to say," Leon said leadingly, to which Rain-Dancer shook his head, "let us be off. We both have much business to take care of, but expect me to visit your people within the next few weeks."

Rain-Dancer smiled and lowered his head slightly, then led his people out of the gathering hall.

When the door closed behind them, the sound echoed throughout the largely empty hall, no one speaking while Leon stared at the door with a host of thoughts running through his head. He knew that he couldn't simply come to Kataigida and be made King without pushback, and he'd expected quite a bit of pushback from the Thunderer and his followers. And yet, the quick acclamations of the Jaguars and the Screaming Eagles had given him some hope that he'd find more support amongst the other Tribes.

"Well," he said slowly, keeping his tone light and unconcerned, "I suppose I have a journey to plan."

"Once they see you, they'll realize their mistake," Nikolaos said. "All Ten Tribes venerate the Thunderbird as much as their own most honored Ancestors, if not more so. They will soon realize that they have no other choice than to support you, or be left behind."

"Let's not head too far down that line of thinking," Leon said with a look of warning. "Firstly, I'd rather not make assumptions. Secondly, Rain-Dancer made good points. If I want people to follow me, then I can't rely only on tradition and the reputation of my Ancestor. The Heart-Stabbing Hawks will follow me because I will go to them and show them that I would be a worthy King. If I fail in this endeavor, then I will not see them brought into the fold violently. Assuming they keep the peace as well, of course."

"We have never fought amongst each other for long," Nikolaos said. "Though, we have never had a proper descendent of the Thunderbird amongst us, either."

"Then let's hope your tradition of peace within the Ten Tribes holds out, even if no others do."

Nikolaos hummed and nodded in agreement.

With nothing more to say, Leon left the gathering hall and returned to his guest house to update his retainers on the answer that the Hawks had given, and to inform them of their new travel plans while Nikolaos did the same with the Jaguars.

For the next week, Leon remained in Raikos, meeting with various Jaguars and Eagles who arrived to pay their respects. He accepted quite a few personal vows of loyalty, for which he was always grateful, but he couldn't help but notice that it was only the Jaguars and Eagles who arrived. While it had been decided that the Hawks and Eagles would be the two Tribes he would concentrate on recruiting first, messages had been sent to all of the Tribes as well announcing his presence, and yet, now a few weeks into his stay on Kataigida, not a single other Tribe had sent a delegation to meet with him.

He was tempted to feel somewhat insulted at this blatant snub, but he clamped down hard on those feelings.

'The easy part is over,' he'd told himself. 'Now begins the hard part of building a proper Kingdom.'

The most interesting part of that week had been a strategy meeting with the Jaguars and a number of Screaming Eagle elders who'd made the trek to Raikos. After the Hawks' disappointing, though not definitive, refusal and the Thunderer's statement that he would bureaucratically and politically resist Leon's attempt to unite the Ten Tribes under his own banner rather than the Thunderer's, it was clear

that the other Tribes weren't simply going to fall in line, and so they needed a proper strategy going forward.

The Jaguars and Screaming Eagles were in Leon's camp, now. The Heart-Stabbing Hawks, Ravens-of-Hail-Hall, Lions, Rock Mane Bisons, and Ancestral Harts were all undeclared. The Booming Brown Bears, Tigers, and Ji Spiders were all more than likely supporting the Thunderer. Given the Thunderer's command over his army and the Inquisitors, he greatly outnumbered Leon's potential military forces, even considering the Jaguars' military prowess—yet another reason why Leon didn't want to militarily challenge the Thunderer, alongside the fact that the man was tenth-tier.

As it was, despite their jointly-stated desire for peace, reports came in from the eastern Jaguar territory that a suspected military build-up had begun along their border with the Booming Brown Bears, the Tribe that the Thunderer hailed from. The Jaguars also shared a border with the Tigers in the east, and Leon was comforted with the knowledge that there weren't similar reports coming from that border, but that the Bears seemed to be making some aggressive moves was greatly concerning.

Of equal concern was the apparent arrival of a large party of Bear and Spider elders in Stormhollow. Neither the Thunderer nor any of the Tribes had called for the Elder Council to meet, so having a larger number of potentially hostile Tribesmen in Stormhollow, which also bordered Jaguar territory to the north, had more than a few people in Raikos nervous.

While Leon had wanted to argue against it, he'd acquiesced to the Jaguar's request to call up some of their reserves—most of their military forces already deployed to protect the western coast of Kataigida from Imperial attack.

That aside, it was agreed upon that Leon would first visit the Hawks and do his best to secure their southern flank by winning their loyalty. After that, he would concentrate on the undeclared Tribes, visiting each in turn by their physical proximity, starting with the Lions, then moving on to the Bisons, Harts, and Ravens.

If his luck held out, he'd have seven Tribes to the Thunderer's three that way, though he doubted it would turn out so cleanly. Given the Bears' actions so far, it seemed they were already getting ready for a fight, and he couldn't imagine the Thunderer just sitting on his laurels while Leon went around courting the other Tribes.

No, Leon knew that he'd be courting them just the same as he was, in one way or another. To that end, Leon began learning what he could of each of the Tribes so that he may know what to expect from them.

The Hawks to the south were rather isolationist, rarely coming down from their mountains for any reason. They were also quite communal, greatly valuing the bonds among their flocks.

The Lions, generally speaking, were warriors first and foremost, with the largest Tribal army of all the Tribes. They were fiercely loyal to their prides, which mostly consisted of small family units.

The Bisons were generally peaceful but possessed great physical strength and endurance. They were the most productive farmers and herdsmen of the Ten Tribes.

All three of these Tribes had limited military potential on Kataigida since most of their fighting men and women were deployed to the Sword.

That left the Harts and Ravens.

The Harts were forest people, and though they weren't particularly numerous, they were some of the most skilled craftsmen among the Tribes. If any Tribesman needed some luxury good or product, they would usually go to the Harts to make or acquire it.

If they wanted weapons, on the other hand, they would go to the Ravens. The Ravens-of-Hail-Hall weren't particularly violent people, but they were extremely clever folk, with some of the best enchanters and arksmiths on the entire plane. They weren't overly fond of war, but they certainly profited greatly from it.

Hearing of the Ravens had Leon already salivating to go and meet them.

As for the Tribes sworn to the Thunderer, the Ji Spiders, Tigers, and Booming Brown Bears were some of the more solitary Tribes, not forming prides or flocks or other kin groups. They were more individualistic and less friendly with the Tribes in the west.

The Spiders were particularly known as the best miners in the Ten Tribes, while the Bears were their best beastmasters. The Tigers, like the Lions and Jaguars, were known as great warriors, performing the same duty as the Jaguars only along the eastern coast rather than the western.

When all of that was said, Leon couldn't help but wonder at what the Eagles' specialty was, if any, and had it explained to him that the Eagles were the best merchants and explorers among the Tribes.

Once he'd gathered all the support he could, the Elder Council would be called and his claim would be officially put forward. If all went well, the Ten Tribes would acclaim him their King, and the other Tribes, seeing his support, would fall in as well. If they didn't, then Leon would have to figure out a way to peacefully ensure that they didn't threaten his future endeavors.

So, after that meeting was over, Leon found himself relaxing knowing what his next few steps would be. He'd have to return home at least once during that time to put in some face time at Heaven's Eye and check in on his home and those retainers he'd left behind, as well as spend some time with Elise and Cassandra, but he still felt better with a plan in mind, even as undetailed as it was.

Before he could return to the guest house, however, he was approached by Nikolaos and a number of other elders with a request that he simply couldn't refuse. As much as he hated ceremonies, there was one that had been moved up to take advantage of his presence that he wouldn't miss for the world...

Leon stood upon a large, raised platform in one of Raikos' largest outlying fields. Spread around the stone platform were other stone platforms, but these were slightly sunk into the ground like shallow craters. They numbered more than a thousand, each one large enough for ten men to stand upon and not feel crowded.

But on this day, only five hundred or so had been occupied, and only by two people each, one old and the other young. The old mage upon the platform was either an elder, a Clan Chief, or some other

relatively powerful older mage of the sixth-tier or higher. The young mage upon each platform was invariably first-tier or weaker, and none looked older than twenty years old.

Each of the young mages was stripped practically bare while the older mages painted various symbols upon their body in blood.

Leon clearly remembered his father had done the same in a similar ritual many years ago and enjoyed seeing the similarities and differences here.

Indeed, it was a mass-bloodline awakening ceremony that he would facilitate. Such ceremonies were held once a month, and only for those mages who had shown a willingness to train and dedicate themselves to magical training. The Jaguar Tribe counted millions of people among their members, but few of them, relatively speaking, ever had their bloodlines awakened—barely five thousand per year on average. That meant the Jaguars still had quite a few around given how much longer a mage would live than a mortal, but it was still less than a single percent of their total population.

They still had many more mages both weak and strong whose families had gone many generations without bloodline awakening, and so could advance normally without the ritual, but those who actually bore the power of the Blood-Thunder Jaguar would always be a relative minority in the Tribe.

It was easy for Leon to forget given how small Raikos was compared to the great national capitals he'd seen in his life, but the Jaguar Clan controlled several times the territory that the entire Bull Kingdom did, and had more people call it home.

The symbols painted upon the young mages appeared both practical and ceremonial. Some of them were light enchantments designed to provide some vigor and strengthen their bodies for the ordeal they were about to undergo, while other symbols seemed little more than ceremonial art to fill in the gaps between every enchantment.

Once every young mage had been suitably painted, Leon watched as one of the other ninth-tier elders gave a speech, and then fought to keep an embarrassed smile off his face as all of the young mages swore their loyalty to him as their King, amongst other oaths of loyalty and honor and duty to their families, Clans, and Tribe.

All of that complete, several large war beasts were brought to the platform and sacrificed, their bright red mana filling huge ritual bowls. The mana was then mixed with potent magical herbs and potions, and then each of the present elders on the platform blasted the concoctions with a single bolt of lightning each, Leon adding his own bolts to every ritual bowl. They didn't do anything, but it was tradition, and he was more than happy to participate.

Then the ritual bowls went around to each of the young mages, who drank deeply before their bodies began convulsing. Their skin turned the same golden color as the Jaguar's, and spots in varying numbers began appearing on their skin. All of them, however, fell into unconsciousness and were unable to appreciate the changes their bodies underwent.

Unfortunately, twenty-three of the young mages never woke up, dying as their blood awoke too fiercely or too weakly, killing them directly or failing to fight off the foreign magic that ravaged their bodies, acting as a catalyst to awaken their blood.

Those that survived, however, were marked when their bodies erupted in blood-red lightning scorched their platforms, and shot into the sky.

It was a spectacular display, and Leon couldn't help but wonder if this was what his Clan had looked like in millennia past, and if it was what his Clan might look like in the future, long after he was gone.

Chapter 862 - Bellicose Elders

Stormhollow was a large city. Unlike Raikos, it was populated at all times rather than only serving as a meeting place for any Tribe's constituent Clans. The massive lake in the center of Kataigida, which the Central Empires called the Lake of the Feathered Demon, yet which the Ten Tribes called Lake Ontarii, was of extremely significant strategic importance to all the Ten Tribes, and Stormhollow completely dominated it. As a result, while the site of the city had once been Jaguar territory, the Jaguars had ceded the land to the city itself as it was settled by representatives from all Ten Tribes. It was self-governing day-to-day, but it was still subject to the Elder Council.

'And, therefore, the Thunderer,' Hector thought as he stared out over the city from the hill upon which the Elder Hall had been built.

The Elder Hall was a massive gathering hall built reminiscent of the Tribal style, yet instead of a long hall with two rows of terraced benches along its longer sides and a raised dais at the far end for the Lawspeaker or whoever presided over the tribal councils, the Elder Hall was a circular building capped with a magnificent silver dome. The top of the walls and base of the dome had been trimmed with lapis lazuli, and the ceiling of the dome was adorned with a massive fresco depicting the glories of past eras, most of which did not belong to the Ten Tribes.

Instead, most of what was depicted on the ceiling fresco that would stand above all meetings of the Elder Council were scenes of conquest under the Thunderbird, few of which, if any, the Ten Tribes could recognize these days. In the center of the fresco was the Thunderbird itself, surrounded by deep black clouds that radiated silver-blue lightning outward, drawing the eye to the most important scenes, only one of which Hector himself could identify as the first Elder Council that ratified the confederation of their Ten Tribes so long ago.

The rest of the Elder Hall was taken up by the seating for ten thousand people arranged in an ascending circle around a massive speaker's platform. There were no seats on the platform, for it was not for Kings or any other monarch.

Behind the seats were huge trees brought from the Nexus, fed with nature magic. The trees were of two different, but complementary species; the first had dark, nearly pitch-black bark and some of the brightest and most brilliantly green leaves that Hector had ever seen; the second type was stranger, with pale white bark and deep, twilight blue leaves.

The entire chamber was given an almost ethereal feel with floating lights, arranged in an alternating pattern of silver and blue. The natural light that was fed into the room through arched windows along the base of the dome and the chamber's door-less entrances did little to dampen that feel.

Rarely was the chamber filled, with the Elder Council meeting perhaps once or twice a year at the most, once every two or three years more commonly. All Tribes had the right to call the Elder Council to assemble, but although two Tribes' elders were present, that wasn't why they'd come to Stormhollow.

Sitting in one of the ten seating sections were a large handful of tall, thin, and pale men, all clean-shaven and with sharp, defined features and dark hair. Their eyes, pupil and sclera both, were pitch-black, the divide between the two barely visible even in the best light. They might've been mistaken for vampires save for the lack of fangs and demonic auras. They were all clad in either black or brown, and none of their clothing had any additional adornment.

The other group of elders were practically their complete opposites: about twenty powerful mages, all built like they'd been carved from marble and all sporting long braided red hair. The men of this group had thick, bushy beards and wore golden arm rings. The women, meanwhile, wore golden torcs, but both sexes wore fur-trimmed armor that looked more fashionable than functional as the elders showed off large tracts of skin, putting their heavily-muscled physiques on full display.

The former were the elders of the Ji Spiders, while the latter were of the Booming Brown Bears. Both Tribes' full complement of elders hadn't come, but those who had were their most powerful and influential.

Standing in the center of the chamber was the Thunderer himself wearing the black and gold uniform he'd had designed and a carefully constructed neutral expression, which he maintained as both groups of elders argued vociferously against the Jaguars and their puppet.

The debate about how to handle the situation had started fairly peacefully. The elders had arrived not long after the Thunderer returned from Raikos, with each having decided to come of their own accord after hearing the news of the Jaguars' discovery. Each also advocated for similar strategies, from storming the Jaguars' territory to arrest and execute the pretender, or to put on such a grand display of their force of arms that the Jaguars would have no option but to capitulate and surrender.

Hector was personally in favor of the former, with the thought of driving into the perennially-recalcitrant Jaguars' land and making them see that their traditions wouldn't stop progress bringing a smile to his lips. The Thunderer, however, was noncommittal on that topic.

The debate, which had gone on for several days already, didn't get truly heated until word came from Raikos that the Eagles had declared for the pretender, as well. Hector could hardly believe that a second Tribe had fallen for the scheme, so he'd wracked his brain trying to think of what the Jaguars might've promised the Eagles in return for their support. Given what they were going up against—namely, the Thunderer's new army and his strong alliance among the eastern Tribes—he couldn't see what could make that declaration worth it that the Jaguars had the power to give.

And yet, despite this news, the Thunderer remained soft-spoken and moderate in speech.

"... are the ones demanding violence!" one of the Bear elders roared, living up to the name of his Tribe, for if it weren't for the chamber's powerful enchantments protecting it, Hector would've expected it to shake down to its foundations. "We must be ready! No one brings a claimant to a throne that has gone vacant for so long and doesn't mean violence!"

"Good cousin," one of the other Bears—this one ninth-tier and about seven hundred years old if Hector recalled correctly—said directly to the Thunderer instead of the other elders, "This is an existential crisis that we face! The Jaguars are already gaining in strength! This is nothing less than treason against the order that has existed now for tens of thousands of years! We must act!"

“And we will,” the Thunderer softly insisted, though his aura pulsed outward in a display that was decidedly less than soft and showcased his slowly-growing anger and frustration.

Hector could understand it intellectually, but if he weren’t barred from the chamber and forced to remain just outside the entrance where he could barely listen in, he would’ve—and had in private multiple times in the past few days—been in there arguing with the Bears.

“It’s clear to me,” the Thunderer continued, “that the alliances which we’ve built are not sufficient. In truth, this has been clear to me for many years, now, with the complaints coming from the Jaguars being echoed both loudly and quietly in other corners of our fair island. The Spiders, Bears, and our friends in the Tigers, have done much to help raise the Ten Tribes out of their curse of factionalism, but this isn’t enough!

“I will go to the other Tribes personally to ensure that all we’ve built is not undone!” The Thunderer paused and glared around the room, though Hector noticed his eyes lingering on his own kith and kin. “But before I depart, I will warn all of you of the dangers of keeping ourselves divided! We are all different Tribes, yes, and we bear different powers, yes, but we are all one people!”

“Clearly, we aren’t,” a ninth-tier Spider angrily responded, his high-pitched voice coming out quickly and with a rather jerky cadence. “The Jaguars would keep us all separate! They will never stop opposing your ideals, and the time is coming when they will have to be convinced by means other than words!”

“I will hear no words of civil war!” the Thunderer thundered, his voice doing what the other Bear elder’s could not and shaking the Elder Hall slightly. “If there is to be war, then they will have to strike first! I have given my word to keep this disagreement political and to convince the other Tribes of the merits of our work with the merits of our work! To attack the Jaguars and Leon Raime right now would only convince the other Tribes that we have nothing of value to argue with, save for our strength of arms!”

“Force is argument enough!” an eighth-tier Bear elder declared, and many of the elders stomped their feet in approval.

“I will show you differently,” the Thunderer growled, and the elder paled as the Thunderer’s tenth-tier aura settled around him, exerting pressure. “When the other Tribes declare for our side, you will all see. This meeting is adjourned.”

With that, the Thunderer stalked out of the chamber, his neutral expression shifting into one more wrathful than serene.

Hector was about to follow him when he heard one of the Spider elders say once the Thunderer had left, “We must prepare anyway. War is coming, but our Tribe, at least, will not be caught with webs half-spun just because our Thunderer is unwilling to strike a decisive blow against our clear enemy!”

“We have already begun mobilization,” one of the ninth-tier Bears responded. “When the Jaguars make their move, we will be ready.”

“We don’t have much time,” another Spider said. “There are reports that the pretender is already planning to head to the Hawks to solicit their support for his coup. Two treasonous Tribes are enough! Three would demand a more active response!”

“We will not return to monarchy!” another Bear elder added, all the other elders making sounds of support that grew louder the farther away the Thunderer moved.

Hector smiled in anticipation. He and Lysander had dreamed big when they were kids, and though his one-time friend had set those dreams aside along with his name, Hector never had. He would aid the Thunderer in bringing the Ten Tribes back to glory, and he would enjoy seeing ‘the Jaguar of the West’s’ reaction when all of it was done, even if that reaction had to come after stomping his damned Tribe down into the dirt.

The mountains to the south of the Jaguar Tribe were extensive, running along the entire southern coast of Kataigida. They were thick and almost impenetrable, but far from inhospitable. Much like the Frozen Mountains and the Northern Vales within, the mountains that the Central Empires called the Devil’s Spine had wide valleys carved into them by the hands of nature and powerful mages alike.

It was deep within those snow-capped peaks, forested valleys, idyllic mountain lakes and streams, that Leon found the Tribe descended from the Heart-Stabbing Hawks. The Hawks dominated almost the entire mountain range, making their territory long and narrow, but filled with great natural resources from minerals to animal hides. They were a proud people, Leon had been told, great hunters and aloof around outsiders. He shouldn’t expect much welcome among them.

Neither the Jaguar of the West nor Nikolaos could accompany him south, but it was a short journey and he still had a relatively large escort of one hundred powerful Jaguar mages and a couple Eagle elders acting as his escort, along with his retinue. As they flew southward, Leon had Red and Anzu transform into their beastly forms to make their entourage that much more impressive.

As they flew, he observed the landscape below him grow rougher and rougher as his party ventured further and further away from the relatively flat plains that dominated the center of Kataigida. He couldn’t help but relax as the land below grew more and more mountainous and more and more forested. He’d lived longer in cities than he’d had in the Forest of Black and White at this point, but nothing could make him feel like he was coming home than the fresh scent of wild mountains and wilder forests.

And the landscape below was quite wild, with only the occasional village he could see here and there. For the most part, as his escorts explained to him during the journey, the Jaguars didn’t live in large cities, mostly scattering about and living alone or in fairly small villages, which was the biggest reason why Raikos was such a transient city.

However, even these small villages shrank as they moved into the mountains and Hawk territory. The Hawks were much more communal than the Jaguars, living in larger kin groups, but they preferred to pack themselves into dense apartments and large longhouses, rarely needing more than two or three per village.

As they flew, Leon noticed that they drew plenty of attention. The Hawks were short and stocky, but nearly all of their mages practiced wind magic, allowing them to fly much earlier than other mages might. As a result, it wasn’t that rare of a sight for Leon’s group to be suddenly surrounded by a hundred Hawks as they flew over a village wondering who they were and where they were going. Every time,

Leon's party would explain that they were on their way to Raikoraki, the capital of the Hawk Tribe, and whatever mages had flown up to greet them would accompany them for several miles before returning to their village.

The mountains were quite misty, scenically so, so it wasn't until they were relatively right on top of Raikoraki that Leon laid his eyes upon the city—which was only when they drew to within a few hundred miles of the place. It had first been built upon a series of rocky plateaus, with the largest and most important estates and public spaces built there, but the city had long since outgrown its more humble beginnings. It sprawled out—as much as a Hawk city could sprawl given how close together they lived—across the valley floor. A large mountain river passed through the center of the city, bringing more than enough water down into the wide valley's many farms.

As they approached the city, another delegation was sent out to meet them, this time a group of eighth-tier mages and about a hundred seventh and sixth-tier mages. The eighth-tier mages only numbered eight, but all were fairly aged, appearing about fifty or sixty years old by mortal standards at the youngest.

"Greetings!" the leading elder—for they were too old and strong to be anything but an elder—called out as he halted in mid-air and raised a hand.

Leon's party halted as well several hundred feet away, but Leon continued onward, meeting the elder about two or three dozen feet in front of him. "I am Leon Raime!" Leon loudly declared as a thick blanket of dark storm clouds appeared over him, his magic inundating the sky. "I have come to speak with your Tribal council!"

He called upon the Thunderbird's power and a bolt of bright silver-blue lightning fell from the sky between Leon and the elder before arcing back upwards and vanishing back into the clouds.

"By the winged grace..." Leon heard one of the sixth-tier mages mutter, the sentiment echoed throughout not only their group but also down in the startled city.

Taking a deep breath, Leon then roared, his voice backed up with his ninth-tier power, "THE THUNDERBIRD HAD RETURNED TO THE TEN TRIBES!"

The elders hardly seemed too surprised, but Leon could see surprise and awe on the faces of many of those accompanying them, and as his voice echoed around Raikoraki, that same shock rippled through the populace.

After a moment of silence, the leading Hawk elder said, "That was... unnecessary..."

Leon just smiled back at him.

After another uncomfortable moment of silence, the elder then lowered his head slightly and said, "Please, follow me. Our Tribal council is eager to meet with you."

"As am I to meet with them," Leon responded as he gestured back at his waiting party. "I come with Jaguars and Eagles."

That news elicited a curious look from the Hawk elder, but he didn't say anything he flew down toward the gathering hall on the highest plateau.

It was a magnificent building, if not overly large. Made of enchanted timber and covered in hawkish art, the hall was surrounded by colorful gardens and insulated by large trees. Many of those trees had been grown in such a way as to resemble perches, upon which platforms had been built for many other powerful Hawks had posted up.

The building itself was more open than the Jaguar's, with only a few load-bearing walls and columns, leaving the seats and elders within them exposed, though not to the elements as the enchantments woven into the hall's surroundings kept the entire plateau quite temperate. Instead, it exposed the elders and whatever they might be discussing to whoever wanted to listen in from the nearby perches, and there was space for several thousand, at least.

Already, as Leon and his party descended upon the hall, thousands of people were rushing toward the hall, and Leon could already tell that this was going to be a much larger deal than his meetings with the Jaguars and Eagles had been.

He smiled as he neared the hall's forecourt, pausing to circle about their Tribal Totem several times in a show of reverence, and landed. Putting on a kingly mask, he then strode into the Hawks' gathering hall projecting both his aura and his confidence, though the former he restrained it to not be uncomfortable to those weaker than him, and the latter he boosted to make an impression.

There were only a few elders present, perhaps only forty or fifty, but he still took a deep breath as he crossed the hall's threshold and made for the dais at the hall's far end.

'All right,' he thought to himself. 'Already got two Tribes on my side, let's go three for three.'

Chapter 863 - Hawks' Request

Leon stood before the Heart-Stabbing Hawks, soaking up their attention. He had thousands of eyes upon him and could sense many more pulses of magic senses from powerful mages not physically present in Raikoraki. Surrounding him were his retainers, with Valeria and Maia standing at his shoulders. Anzu paced behind them, occasionally flapping his wings in what Leon was sure was a griffin expression of dominance. Red was conducting her own intimidation campaign as she circled the open gathering hall in her wyvern form, walking on the ground like a bat, her body too big to fit inside.

The Eagle and Jaguar elders who'd accompanied Leon to the city didn't join him on the dais. Instead, they sat in the elder's seats in front of the dais, though making sure there was enough room between them that everyone knew they were of separate Tribes.

None of the Hawk elders joined Leon on the dais, though he did recognize Rain-Dancer, the eighth-tier Hawk elder who'd visited Raikos just over a week ago. Of all the Hawk elders, though, Leon didn't see a single one who was ninth-tier. The Hawks were relatively small compared to most of the other Tribes, but he knew that they possessed at least one ninth-tier mage, so he couldn't help but wonder where they were.

He took some time to make eye contact with most of the Hawk elders, but the silence in the chamber stretched out quite awkwardly, made even more so as more and more Hawk tribesmen filtered out onto the plateau where they could watch what was happening in the hall.

Eventually, Leon realized that there weren't any more Hawk elders coming to the hall; his magic senses blanketed the city and its surrounding for hundreds of miles and he couldn't sense any mages stronger than the sixth-tier attempting to reach Raikoraki with any haste. So, he decided to just jump right in.

"Your delegation, led by the honorable Rain-Dancer," Leon began, nodding at the Hawk elder, "indicated that your Tribe had not made any decisions regarding my presence on your island or about my claim. So I've come here in person to make my claim known, and to hear your opinions. I seek to restore my Clan to its old heights, and any Clans or Tribes that support me will be likewise elevated."

He paused to gauge their responses. For the most part, the elders were fairly neutral, but many of the people watching descended into hushed whispers. What Leon could overhear, however, was neither promising nor discouraging. It didn't seem like the people were immediately rejecting him, but neither was he hearing many declarations of support.

"And what form," one of the elders sitting in the closest seats to the dais began to ask, "would this support take? And what would giving up our independence get us?"

Leon chuckled good-naturedly, though he had to force it out a bit. "Forgive me for this opinion, I have only been here for a short while, but it doesn't seem like your people are entirely independent. You are in a confederation with your fellow Tribes, yes, but that means autonomy, not independence."

Another elder made to speak, but Leon held up a hand and pushed on.

"But, in truth, it doesn't matter whether we call this 'autonomy' or 'independence'. Whatever it is, I would not take it from you. Though I would have your Tribe swear itself to me as its King, I would not demand you change how you govern yourselves. Taxes and military service are what I would require of you, both of which you already provide to the Ten Tribes' central government—however much that the Thunderer has managed to build, anyway."

"We willingly give our blood and treasure for our neighbors," another elder growled, clearly high-ranking given how close to the dais he sat. "You are a newcomer."

"I am the blood of the Thunderbird," Leon replied, though he thought he might say the same thing in their position. But he wasn't in their position.

The storm clouds he'd called earlier hadn't been dismissed, and he called another bolt of silver-blue lightning from them that curled about the image of the Thunderbird at the top of their Tribal Totem. When it dissipated, the totem hadn't been so much as singed, but his power had practically exploded all across the city.

"My Clan has been absent for a while," Leon continued, "but the Clans that make up your Tribe were our vassals for millions of years! Following us, you won glory beyond any that could possibly be gained upon a singular plane! If you follow me, then I would lead you back to the Nexus! Back to the Void! Together, we would all elevate each other beyond the petty squabbles of a single insignificant plane!"

"With you as our King," a third elder practically spat.

"Yes," Leon said. "Such an arrangement was good enough for your Ancestors, was it not? You did not fight against us for independence, you were only forced to form your Tribe after my Clan's fall. Until

then, your people were perfectly fine following my Clan and reaping the benefits of having the Storm King himself as a patron.

"I do recognize," Leon continued as more Hawk elders grumbled discontentedly, "that a great deal of time has passed. And things can't just go back to the way they were. I will not compel anyone to follow me! I am here to seek your support, and if it's withheld, then I will leave and seek it elsewhere! I have already won the support of the Screaming Eagles and the Jaguars, for I have already promised them what I'm about to promise all of you here and now!

"I will not disband any tribal councils! I will not dissolve the Elder Council! Your traditions are yours to keep, and I would protect them as I would protect your Tribes in every other way, if you would only swear to support me as your King!"

The Hawk elders made quite a bit of noise, but it was Rain-Dancer who spoke the loudest.

"Protection?" the man inquired, his tone sounding a little angered. "Do we need protection?"

"Your Ancestors clearly thought so when they confederated into the Ten Tribes," Leon replied.

"A long time ago," another elder intoned.

"How much has changed since then?" Leon asked. "You're still fighting the same war for incremental gains. Your army is, as we speak, still on the Sword, and has been for five years! Seizing one large island may be a coup for you as you are now, but it is so far from the glory of our past that it hardly merits a mention. We once plied the Void in arks bigger than anything fielded on this plane these days! Does no one here wish to return to that time?"

Leon glanced around the room, and though the elders still seemed skeptical, he could hear the people outside sounding far more supportive of his position.

He supposed he understood that though; the people still venerated the Thunderbird everywhere in the Ten Tribes, but the elders had to watch out for their Tribes at all times. Giving him their support was a big step that had to be carefully considered.

Just as he was about to speak again, one of the eighth-tier mages sitting close to the dais stood up and said, "If what you're offering is protection, then we'd have to see it. Experience it."

A few elders began to angrily mutter at those words, but Leon paid them no mind as he focused on the standing elder.

"These mountains have never been tamed in their entirety, and with our army deployed to the Sword for so long, things have grown out of hand," the elder continued. "Already, we've lost several villages to powerful monsters that we're struggling to deal with—"

"Such a pessimistic view of our situation," another elder shouted. "You would give up our independence just to secure aid against a threat we can deal, and have been dealing with, for thousands of years?"

"We are all aware of the situation in the east!" the standing elder shouted, his voice easily reaching the people around the gathering hall, who began shouting in support. Turning more towards Leon, he said, "I promise nothing. But anyone who would aid us in protecting our lands would be looked upon more favorably by our people and those who speak for them."

Leon grinned. "If nothing else, I can say that I'm quite good at killing monsters. As are those who follow me." He gestured to retainers, most of whom flexed their muscles or their auras in response, only Maia and Valeria not bothering. Red made quite the show of her enthusiasm, roaring into the air so loudly that many watching the gathering hall had to cover their ears.

As everyone calmed down, Leon spoke again.

"I'll say it again. I consider you to be my people, and I would treat you as such! I would share with you many powers that I have learned, that could be of great benefit to you! And if you want more guarantees of my sincerity, that I mean what I say, then look to your fellows in the Screaming Eagles and Jaguars! They have elected to follow me, and not out of a sense of obligation or whimsy! I understand your concerns, though, so, if you'll give me a couple of days to rest here, then I will head east and show you my sincerity!"

The Hawk elders were more subdued, but the Eagles, Jaguars, and watching Hawks began to roar and stamp and make noise to show their support, and Leon felt like while the Hawk elders were being more reluctant, he'd eventually get their support, too. He just had to kill some monsters, first.

"This isn't going to be quite so easy," said Exallos Angelos, a member of the same Clan that Exallos Aetos came from and the leader of the Eagle elders in Leon's party.

"Why not?" Alcander asked. "Sounds easy enough to me; show up, crack a few skulls, and come back as glorious heroes!"

"And with bellies full of the conquered," Red added with a vicious smile. She was still in her wyvern form, making the expression that much more terrifying.

"Don't go breaking the wine and mead out just yet," Gaius cautioned. "We don't even know what kind of beasts we'll be facing."

He turned an expectant look to Angelos, who continued, "The threat is big enough that they sent their only ninth-tier mage to deal with it, and she's been having quite a bit of trouble."

"Define 'quite a bit'," Valeria quietly demanded.

"She's been in the east for months and the threat yet remains," Angelos explained.

"Is there something about the east that's particularly dangerous?" Marcus wondered aloud.

"Titanstone," Leon whispered, eliciting a look of surprise not only from Angelos but also from the rest of his retinue and the Eagles and Jaguars accompanying him. With a shrug, Leon said, "I've been reading some of your maps. It's hard not to see five massive Titanstone quarries in the east and not connect the dots when the Hawks mention a constant threat from that direction."

Angelos nodded. "Indeed, it's the Titanstone. Or perhaps it's merely correlated and not causal, I can't say. What I can say is that my friends in the Hawk's Tribal council have explained that there are four high-profile monsters that have been terrorizing their eastern territories. Three of them are eighth-tier but don't let their magical strength fool you, they're powerful enough that even with the Hawks' ninth-

tier elder, they still haven't been dealt with. The last is ninth-tier, and is practically able to do what it wants in the east."

"Let's get more specific then, so we can adopt a proper strategy," Marcus responded.

"One of the eighth-tier monsters is a seaborne menace," a Jaguar explained as Angelos took out a map of the Hawk's long and narrow territory. "Some kind of large amphibian thing that nests in shallow water. Reptilian, with hide so thick and resistant to magic power that it's almost impervious to magical attacks. Oddly, while it has titanic strength, it doesn't seem to use much magic itself."

"Another eighth-tier monster is a massive serpent," Angelos added as the Jaguar elder paused. Leon immediately frowned at the idea of another giant snake slithering about Aeterna. "It's the least... destructive of the four beasts, given it doesn't need to eat that often. But it can spit venom nearly half a mile, and one drop is enough to kill a fifth-tier mage. A bucket-full can kill an entire field of crops."

"The third," the Jaguar elder picked up, "is a mad bull. Likely an escapee from the Bear's breeding programs, who then gorged itself in the Titanstone-rich forests of the southern mountains. It's about three times as large as a normal bull, but it absorbs magic power and can eject it out of its horns."

"I've never heard of a beast doing that before," Leon said, leaning forward with sudden interest.

"Like the sea beast, it's almost impervious to magic attacks, but the difference is that it can, for all intents and purposes, reflect attacks at the mage attacking it," the Jaguar elder explained.

Leon grinned. "That... sounds like a lot of fun, actually..."

"Four villages, amounting to some two thousand Hawks, have died to this thing in the past six months alone," the Jaguar elder said, and Leon cringed and clamped down on his enthusiasm.

"The fourth," Angelos said before the awkwardness in the guest house's conference room grew too thick, "is the most dangerous. A ninth-tier monster, also likely the result of some escaped Bear experiment. A gigantic bird called a 'roc', but as large as they usually get, this one is larger still; bigger than one of our largest ships and with a wingspan wide enough to cast all of Raikos into shadow."

Leon's grin turned darker; he felt almost insulted. The only giant bird in the sky, a greedy part of him thought, ought to be him, not some magically twisted monstrosity from one of his Clan's former vassals.

He already felt like he knew which of these beasts would be the first he'd tackle. However, first, he had to do his duty.

"Where is our ninth-tier Hawk elder?" he asked.

"Singer-in-Caves is here," Angelos said, indicating a village on the map a little further west than where the beasts had been placed. "She, and a group of elders and Chiefs, have made this point their base of operations while they attempted to deal with this problem. That's where we're most likely to find her."

Leon frowned slightly, noting that that village was even further away than his magic senses could reach. Significantly further, in fact, with the distance being nearly six thousand miles. He noted, however, that the closest monster to that particular village was the roc...

"Then we ought to make our way there," he said. "But before we do, we should go over our current strategy." He fixed Angelos in his golden gaze, then glanced at the Jaguar elder, and then all the other Eagle and Jaguar elders that had accompanied him to Raikoraki. "I want all of you to stay behind and drum up support among the Hawks. From what I can tell, the elders aren't thrilled with me, but there's a great deal of support for my claim among the people of this city. See what you can do to make the elders see that."

"We will do as you command, Your Majesty," Angelos said with a slight bow, the Jaguar elder following suit.

"As for the monsters..." Leon said as he turned to his retinue, giving them all a questioning look and silently inviting any of them to speak their minds.

"We should split up," Marcus immediately suggested.

"I agree," Valeria added.

Leon lightly smiled and leaned back in his chair. "United in thought then? Justify it for me." He agreed with them, but he simply wanted to hear what they had to say.

"There are a lot of monsters here," Marcus explained. "We might not be quite on par with them, individually, but with the aid of the Hawk elders and some of what we brought with us..."

Leon grinned at what he was blatantly not saying.

"... we should be able to tip the balance in favor of the Hawks."

"And would lead to a quicker fulfillment of this task," Valeria added.

"The quicker we get this done, the fewer people will die to these monsters," Gaius offered.

"I would like to sink my fangs into this 'roc'," Red said with a mean glare a flaring of her killing intent.

"Such a creature should be reminded that it is only prey."

"Even if it's stronger than you are?" Anshu growled, shaking his head. He seemed to be thinking something quite uncharitable as he glanced at Red and shook his head.

"Magic is not everything, human," Red breathed, the back of her throat glowing as she called upon a bit of fire. Leon recognized this from Anna's work with her wyvernlings to be an intimidation tactic, and it seemed to work as Anshu paled slightly and didn't respond to her. Instead, he spoke to Leon.

"I have experience in dealing with sea monsters. Allow me to attack that one."

Leon nodded slightly. "I'm tentatively in agreement that we ought to split up, so long as we're reinforced by Hawk elders. But we need to learn the situation on the ground in the east before we go making definitive plans."

"If we are planning, though, then I'd like to kill the bull!" Anzu declared.

"Yeah!" Alcander growled. "Doesn't seem right allowing something like that to wander freely!"

"I'll take the snake, then," Marcus said.

"I'll join you," Alix added. "That thing'll fall to our thunder wood bows, easy!"

"Don't make such quick judgments," Gaius cautioned. Turning to Leon, he said, "I can join Anshu on his part. This may not quite be the same as fighting against Jormun, but I think I can adapt."

Leon nodded again before glancing at Maia and Valeria.

"I'm with you," Valeria told him.

[We're hunting the roc?] Maia asked. Leon nodded again. She smiled and said, [Then it's only right to go with my mate and help in defending his territory.]

Leon's smile widened. "It sounds like we have the beginnings of a plan, then. Let's get some rest and then we can distribute some of the weapons we've brought. We'll head east in two days."

Chapter 864 - Singer-in-Caves

It took a few days of fast flight for Leon's party to reach the village where the Hawks' ninth-tier elder had based herself from. It was a fairly large place as far as villages went, with space for some three or four thousand people to live in the cramped longhouses that the Hawks preferred. In addition to the longhouses, there were farms in the valley the village overlooked and what looked to be several productive mines in the area.

However, what took Leon's attention were the large buildings of stone that lay at the foot of a shallow mountain with tall smokestacks that belched far more fire and smoke than would be needed simply to heat the place with fire—not that Leon thought they needed fire for heating given the amount of magic power surging through their walls. It was hard to see precisely what these buildings were, but given the complex network of metal pipes running along the exterior and several massive metal drums poking out of the roof of most of the buildings, he figured they were refineries of some sort, undoubtedly turning whatever minerals were taken from the local mines into usable materials.

The ninth-tier elder they were looking for was fairly easy to find. The village was large enough to have a central gathering hall, and though it was constructed similarly to the one in Raikoraki, it was far smaller. Within, Leon could see several relatively powerful mages huddled over a map on a table, while sitting on the dais and meditating with her magic senses projected was a woman with hair silvered from age pulled back into a long braid. Her face was lined, though hints of residual beauty remained in her high cheekbones and soft smile. Her skin was quite tan, in line with many of the Hawks, and she wore a cloak of brown feathers over her shoulders.

As Leon's party drew closer, her eyes opened, revealing pale blue orbs that sparkled with intelligence and wisdom. She softly smiled and spoke something to the other mages who then turned in Leon's direction, but then she closed her eyes once more and returned to her meditations. Leon felt her magic senses pulse outward several more times, though, so he guessed she was keeping track of their quarry, the four monstrous beasts that had been terrorizing their eastern territories for a while.

It took near half a day for Leon's party to reach the gathering hall. As powerful as they were, moving a thousand miles wasn't done in an instant. When they arrived, they found the other powerful mages awaiting them rather formally.

"Who goes there?" the lead one shouted, his tone more cautious than unfriendly. He was an older man and possessed eighth-tier strength. Leon guessed him to be one of Singer-in-Caves' subordinate elders.

"Leon Raime!" Leon declared. "Last living descendent of the Thunderbird!"

The man's eyes widened, but to his credit, he quickly returned to a fairly neutral expression. The others who stood at his side did likewise, though their shock lasted a few moments longer.

"Leon Raime," Singer-in-Caves whispered, her voice carrying despite that. "I have heard much of you in recent weeks."

Leon touched down on the ground, followed a moment later by the rest of his retainers. The others who stood in his way quickly parted, allowing him to enter the gathering hall, his retainers at his back. Even Red took human form to enter in his wake.

"All good things, I hope," Leon said with a sarcastic smile.

"Hardly," the Hawk elder responded.

Leon sighed and said, "Well, to dispel any rumors is part of the reason why I'm here."

"You're also here to solicit my support," Singer-in-Caves added, her tone matter-of-fact as if she were simply commenting on the weather.

"Yes and no," Leon argued. "I'm here to defend people I consider to be my own from powerful beasts running amok amongst them."

Singer-in-Caves lightly smiled at him as she opened her eyes. She stood up, stepped down from the dais, and bowed slightly at the waist. She didn't quite lower herself to show the proper respect to a King, but Leon didn't care.

"You were not gone from my Tribe's home city for more than five minutes before my fellow elders rushed to inform me that you were on your way," she said. "I've heard other things about you from the Jaguar of the West and the office of the Thunderer. I'll admit, though, that the words of warning given to me have only left me more... intrigued. I'm glad you've come here, Leon Raime, for I would much like to judge you for myself."

"Am I in need of judgment?" Leon asked with a playful smile. "It seems you've been having trouble putting down some monsters, shouldn't we make that our priority?"

"We're tracking those destructive carrion feeders," Singer replied. "They're no current danger to my people. We have time to speak."

"And you'd rather talk about me than our targets?" Leon asked.

"You came to my Tribe to offer your protection in return for fealty, I ought to think that might warrant a few questions, aye? If for no other reason than ruffling my Tribe's feathers..."

"Apologies for any offenses I've made," Leon said with a slight lowering of his head. "I don't mean to be arrogant, but what I seek to accomplish won't be won with humility."

"You sound rather saddened by that, Inheritor of the Most Venerable."

"I have many interests, all of which demand my time and energy. Had I not been personally wronged by those in the Nexus, and had I not been blessed with my Ancestor's power, I think I would be perfectly happy staying at home studying the arts of enchanting and blacksmithing."

"No one's forcing you to do anything, are they?" Singer asked.

Leon gave her a thin-lipped grin. "I also want to restore my Clan to the glories it once had, to be sure, and that provides motivation enough. Regardless of the precise reason, I'm here to set the foundations for the return of my Clan to universal importance. I already have the support of the Jaguar and Screaming Eagle Tribes."

"And that's why you're here in my lands," Singer stated again. Leon nodded, and they locked their gazes, neither of them blinking for what felt like hours. Eventually, however, Singer closed her eyes and sighed. "I... apologize for the reception my Tribe gave you, Leon Raime. I was told it was rather hostile..."

"I didn't find it disagreeable," Leon responded with a shrug. "They didn't try to kill me on sight, that's actually a fairly good outcome given the reception I'm used to getting."

Singer laughed. "And yet, former wingmates ought not to fight. The Thunderbird and the Heart-Stabbing Hawk are of the same flock, are they not? Partners and confidants, even if one is senior and the other junior?"

"I'd like to think they are," Leon said.

Singer clicked her tongue in what appeared to be thought, then smiled again and said, "I would ask you not to think too harshly of my people. We have our traditions that we love as much as the Jaguars, and we hold the Most Venerable close to our hearts. But we are a small Tribe, and I am our only ninth-tier mage. The other Tribes ignore us for our small army and remote aviaries, despite our attempts to forge closer bonds with them. I believe this has led to some... insecurities among our leadership, and a lot of anger."

"I understand," Leon said conciliatingly.

"I'm glad you do. Our Tribal council worries greatly about how to lead our flocks, and that can lead to them being rude or disrespectful to those whose motives aren't entirely trusted. These recent incidents with monsters running rampant throughout our lands haven't helped matters."

"Understandable," Leon replied with a gentle smile.

"So... I would like to thank you for coming out here, no matter your reason," Singer continued. "Any help I can get to put these monsters down, I'll take."

"In us, you'll find a great deal of help," Leon said as he nodded to his retainers. "We'll help in any way we can. I also have a proposal for you, if you're interested. Something that might gain your people more power."

"Oh? That sounds both intriguing and too good to be true."

"In a way, it is too good to be true given how it works. But let me ask you; have you ever wanted to fly through the air on wings of your own?"

Leon practically quivered in excitement. Despite Nikolaos' statement of support for using the transformation enchantment, he'd yet to see any use it. To a degree, that was understandable given the sheer complexity of the enchantment, but he'd have thought there would be more people willing to make use of something that could increase their power dramatically.

Fortunately, when he offered it to Singer-in-Caves, she accepted, though somewhat hesitantly. Since the other elders and Chiefs that she'd deployed to the east with were still tracking the monsters and could verify that they weren't around any villages, Leon and Singer decided to test the enchantment out on her. She was a fairly skilled enchanter, by her own admission, and felt like she could verify if there was anything wrong with the enchantment that Leon gave her.

To that end, after getting the rest of his retainers situated in an empty longhouse, Leon sat down with Singer and started going over the enchantment with her, and she periodically jumped into her soul realm to begin its construction. Given her strength as a ninth-tier mage and the fact that she was nearing a thousand years old, she had great command over her soul realm, and she was finished with building her simplified transformation enchantment by the end of the next day.

And so, Leon found himself standing in the gathering hall on the morning of his second full day in the village, Singer-in-Caves standing in front of him on the gathering hall's dais, the rest of the powerful mages that were in the city filling the rest of the hall. Leon's retainers had to wait outside, but they were still close in case they were needed.

Singer took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and began to concentrate. At first, nothing seemed to happen, and Leon could practically feel the tension in the room increase with every second until the air felt as thick as molasses.

But then Singer's aura flickered. Leon might've missed it had he not been concentrating on her so completely, but after a moment, her aura began to flex in ways that were impossible to miss. It twisted and spun like the fiercest of tornados, and Leon could sense the weaker mages in the room start to weaken. One seventh-tier mage was even forced to a knee with a cry of pain as Singer's aura continued to grow fiercer.

And then her breathing hitched, and for a moment, Leon thought that she'd stopped the process. But then she began to shrink, her clothes settling about her and shielding her from view. However, Leon tracked her progress with his magic senses, and he could see her body shrinking down to about half her original height, but growing in other places.

Her chest grew and rounded as her arms cracked, bent, and reformed. Feathers erupted from her skin and the shape of her skull changed. Her eyes opened as she cried out in pain and fear, her pupils and sclera turning midnight black. Her mouth protruded forward and hardened, forming a curved beak that was yellow near her face but darkened to black at the viciously-sharp tip. Her legs yellowed and her skin hardened into scales, her toes and toenails elongating into fearsome talons. Above all, however, her aura grew as her body shrank, her power expanding as the enchantment stimulated her blood. She grew stronger and more in control of her power as she grew more in tune with her bloodline.

In less than ten minutes, it was over. Singer lay on the dais, buried beneath her clothes, her eyes wide, a terrified hawk's cry coming from her beak.

"Singer-in-Caves!" Leon shouted, shocking the others in the hall so badly that a couple nearly jumped out of their skin. "If you can hear my voice, remember that you can turn back at any time!"

The hawk beneath Singer-in-Caves' clothes still seemed terrified out of her wits and didn't react to Leon's words, so he reached out with darkness magic, calling upon his meager but slowly-growing skill to touch her mind and impart his message. With the transformation enchantment, it was fairly easy to turn back human, it simply needed to be used a little differently to bring one's human characteristics back to the fore.

This seemed to reach Singer as her breathing slowed and she closed her black hawkish eyes. Her aura calmed and her breathing slowed. The shrieks of pain and fear ceased. And a moment later, her body began to expand again, her feathers receding, her scaled legs turning back to aged skin, her wings turning back to arms. She was still buried in her clothes, and she had enough faculties that, as she grew, she managed to at least somewhat refill them as she grew and transformed back into a human.

Once she'd returned to her normal form, she took a moment to collect herself, and then in a flash of light, she was fully and completely clothed again.

"That..." she whispered in a tone that sounded like equal parts awe and fear. "That was..."

"Terrifying?" Leon asked with a knowing smile. "Painful? Confusing? All of your senses change into something that seems so alien, and yet..."

"... So right?" she finished as a deep smile spread across her face. "That was the most visceral experience I have ever had! My blood felt like it had turned to fire, and yet it sang such beautiful notes that I have only ever heard once before..."

Leon grinned in understanding. He guessed she was talking about when her bloodline was first awakened.

"Elder!" one of the seventh-tier mages in the room called out. "Are you... all right!"

"I am fine, my boy," she said with a loving smile. In response to Leon's slightly cocked eyebrow, she explained, "My son, Cloud-Runner."

Her son was strong and seemed fairly old himself, about fifty years old or so by mortal standards. Leon nodded respectfully to him, though he appeared more concerned about Singer than anything else.

"Do you feel any different?" one of the eighth-tier mages asked. "Your aura does seem... expanded..."

Singer-in-Caves took a moment to think, closing her eyes and turning her magic inward. She opened them a moment later and exclaimed, "My soul realm has grown! Several hundred miles!"

The other elders and mages stared at her for a second with mouths agape, and then a flurry of questions was directed toward her.

"Are you sure?!"

“You didn’t lose track of growth from earlier, did you?”

“How difficult to use was this transformation technique?”

“One at a time,” she growled, silencing her petitioners in an instant. She then closed her eyes and her aura flexed again. She once more began to transform, but this time went much faster, and in a matter of seconds, she was sprawled out beneath her clothing on the dais once more.

And then she began writhing and twisting, attempting to get to her talons. Leon quickly uncovered her, and she managed to struggle upright... only to almost tip over again as she fought to gain some semblance of balance in a body so completely different from what she was used to.

As she got used to herself again, Leon took a moment to appreciate her transformation. Her wings were dark brown spotted with black, as was her long tail. Her head was a lighter shade of brown, while her shoulders and torso were bright red, almost orange. Some of her feathers were lighter and greyer, however, and on further inspection, Leon noticed that her leg scales were flaking slightly.

She chirped and cried out, her beak now unable to form anything resembling human speech. So, Leon called upon his darkness magic again and asked her a simple question.

[Would you like to try flying, or do want to get used to your new body, first?]

She cocked her head, stared at him intently in what he thought was condescension, and then raised her wings and shrieked.

Leon grinned, and then did something he’d never tried before, and reached out with his darkness magic once again. However, instead of trying to communicate with her in words, he instead attempted to utilize a technique that the Thunderbird and Xaphan had both used on him in the past, recalling some training that the Thunderbird and Xaphan had given him regarding it.

He didn’t push words into Singer’s head but instead filled his own mind with thoughts of flight in Thunderbird form, the feeling that filled him, the instincts that lurked in his blood that helped him to take off and move his wings just right in the wind. He took all of these things and began trying to share them with Singer.

Her black hawkish eyes narrowed slightly and dulled as her focus shifted to these new thoughts and feelings. She didn’t move, but as Leon shared with her how it felt to spread his wings and be lifted by the wind, he saw her spreading and angling her wings in just the same way.

Then, as Leon felt like she was getting the gist of it, he began adding in how it felt to use his wind magic to make his flight that much easier and faster. How it magically felt to lift himself by the wings and propel himself forward at great speeds, how it felt to have fine control over the wind and feel it pass through his feathers almost like he were running his own fingers through his plumage.

After about five quiet minutes during which Leon only had to tell the other Hawk mages to be quiet once, Leon felt like he’d shared with Singer everything she needed to know to move her new avian form. Or at least, enough to get started building up her muscle memory.

As soon as he withdrew his magic from her mind, she spread her wings, called upon her wind magic, and took off into the air almost as fast as a bolt fired from a Lightning Lance.

Leon laughed in delight as she shot out of the gathering hall and into the sky, and he found himself chasing after her, the other Hawk mages doing likewise. As soon as he hit the open air, he leaped into the air, his retinue hot on his heels as were the other Hawks, and he transformed into his altered Thunderbird form. His silver feathers shone brilliantly in the sun, his blue crest trailing behind him like a short cape. He joined Singer in the sky, dancing about on feathered wings as their respective followers tried their best to keep up.

Chapter 865 - Unofficial Declaration

Leon and Singer-in-Caves danced in the sky for a long time. The sheer joy of flight in avian form was indescribable, especially now that Leon had someone to truly share it with. Flight using magic just wasn't the same as feeling the wind in his feathers.

That being said, it wasn't long before Leon started summoning the wind to aid their flight. He called upon one of the elements that the Thunderbird was known for, lifting him and keeping him moving as he danced about in the air. Singer was just behind, flying in his wake in a way that suggested timidity, but as the minutes and then hours passed, gave way to confidence and the ecstasy of flight.

She was much smaller in avian form than he was, but she called upon her own wind magic, which she was far more skilled at than Leon was, and was soon flying literal circles around him. She even lived up to her name as she opened her beak and began to sing, letting loose with one of the most beautiful bird songs that Leon had ever heard.

Even with having given her some second-hand experience with darkness magic, Leon was surprised at how quickly Singer picked up moving about in her new body. He was almost jealous, having had to put in days of work to learn in his own time.

But he supposed it was for the best and quickly put those thoughts out of mind and focused only on their dance, for he soon started trying to fly circles around Singer in turn. However, she was small and sleek whereas he was large and bulky, and she was able to fly faster than he could and turn on a silver coin. Their circular dance soon gave way to playful chasing, and before Leon knew it, all the other Hawks and his retainers had returned to the ground. They'd followed him and Singer into the air but hadn't been able to keep up.

After a while, Leon started growing a little self-conscious about how many magic senses he was feeling keeping an eye on him and Singer, but as Singer kept flying around with hardly a care in the world, Leon found it easy enough to not care. He was more reticent about what he suspected were Singer's attempts to get him to join her in bird song than he was in appearing dignified and regal for anyone watching.

But they couldn't remain in the air forever, and after about two or three hours, Leon slowed down and sent a quick message to Singer courtesy of his darkness magic to land. Singer sang in protest but followed him downward anyway.

As they approached the ground, Leon saw that their crowd had grown by several high-tiered mages, and quite a few people in the village were watching them. He put on one last show for the people, flapping his wings and letting a bolt of silver-blue lightning, bright enough to be almost blinding even on the sunny day, erupt from his feathers and dissipate in the air several thousand feet above him. The

accompanying thunder reverberated throughout the village, startling the people, but those who'd been watching stared at him with even more shock and awe than they had been before.

Feeling somewhat proud and satisfied, Leon transformed back into his human form, dressing so quickly that he doubted anyone got even so much as a glimpse of his body and landing with practiced grace and dignity.

Singer-in-Caves came down a little rougher, but with much more energy. She waited until she was touching dirt to transform back, and in that time, Valeria had run over to Leon, a faint smile spreading across her face.

"Have fun?" she asked, the last traces of worry vanishing from her gorgeous features as she stopped just close enough to Leon for him to pull her into a tight one-handed embrace, which he did immediately.

Leon pressed his lips to hers in a quick, but loving, peck and answered, "I did."

[I'm jealous,] Maia whispered as she joined them. [I almost wish I had wings, too.]

"You're perfect just the way you are," Leon replied as he pulled her under his other arm and kissed her, too. "But if you ever want to go flying, you know I would never refuse..."

"Something to keep in mind," Valeria responded as she slipped out from under Leon's arm, though he could see her faint smile widening slightly despite this. Maia, however, remained with him, apparently unconcerned about the attention they were receiving.

"That... was amazing!" Singer-in-Caves said as she finally transformed back into her human form, interrupting Leon before he could respond to his lady. "I would never have guessed flying like that would be so exhilarating!"

Leon chuckled and said, "Like you've been craving something your whole life, but only now is that craving being satisfied, right?"

Singer nodded. "It's like every fiber of my being had been demanding I sprout wings and fly, but only now have I even realized it!" She stared up into the sky, the wind she'd summoned ruffling her hair, and sighed, her dignity as an aged ninth-tier mage and most powerful elder of the Heart-Stabbing Hawks returning. "I can already tell what's going to be filling my free time from now on, but that is something that can be discussed another time. For now, we have some monsters to kill, don't we? And some other business besides..."

She gave Leon a look of such admiration and gratitude that he started to feel a little uncomfortable, but at the very least, he at least hoped it meant that he'd be getting the Hawk Tribes' support once all this was over. Given the way Singer seemed to be buzzing with energy and joy, he could tell that she, at least, would be on his side, whatever the future had in store.

The group began moving back to the gathering hall, but just as they were about to leave, Leon heard Red audibly harrumph and grumble, "Feathers are overrated..."

He blinked in surprise, but before he could turn to her in indignation, Anzu jumped in and quietly responded, "Don't be jealous, you're still cool too."

Red scoffed as Anzu kept walking, but Leon caught the wyvern trying to suppress a smile. When she noticed him watching her, she glared at him and didn't say a word, following Anzu and the others to the gathering hall instead.

Leon just shook his head, chuckled, and let the matter go as he followed everyone else in.

As he and Singer took their places on the dais with everyone else, including Leon's retinue, taking seats, Singer said, "Who else would like to try this transformation enchantment? I can verify that it's safe, that it's boosted my power, and is quite possibly the most exciting thing that's ever happened to me." Singer paused a moment, glanced at her son, then added, "Well, maybe not quite that high, but in the top five, to be sure."

Cloud-Runner laughed, then said, "I'll be second!"

Another Hawk elder added, "And I'll join you!"

A third Hawk mage, and then a fourth and fifth, and soon enough, Leon had twenty or so Hawk mages, elders and Chiefs both, willing to try the transformation enchantment.

'A good number,' he thought to himself, though he couldn't quite quiet a worry that lodged itself in his head. 'Hopefully, this works for them, too.' Two people were a small sample size and he hoped that the enchantment wouldn't prove itself surprisingly dangerous. But he had faith in his Ancestor, his employees in Magical Research and Development, and himself that the enchantment was safe enough.

"Stick around after the meeting," Singer ordered. "I'll personally get all of you up-to-speed on what you need to do. So let's get this meeting done with so we can take care of that, why don't we?" She turned and nodded respectfully to Leon.

"Indeed," Leon said. "How are we doing with the monsters giving all of you problems?"

An eighth-tier elder said, "The sea monster is on the move, but it won't be in range of anything important for days; we have plenty of time to cut it off. The mutated bull is more problematic, but he seems to be resting right now. It's the serpent and the roc that's most concerning. The serpent isn't directly threatening anything right now, but it's cut off several important passes cutting through the mountains that link us with the Common Lands in the east."

Leon nodded in understanding. The Common Lands were shared by all the Ten Tribes since that's where most of their Titanstone was mined. The land wasn't too hospitable for anything other than Titanstone quarries, anyway. The Titanstone itself was usually transported within a powerful mage's soul realm, as far as he was aware—along with a mountain of paperwork ensuring that none was 'misplaced' in a soul realm—but other supplies flowing to and from the quarries usually required more mundane transportation methods.

Ocean travel was out given how dangerous the water south of Kataigida were reported to be, and the sea monster wasn't making that any easier, so having a giant, violent, territorial serpent blocking access to the east was a huge problem not just for the Hawks, but for all the Ten Tribes. Supplies could be moved by soul realm, of course, but if that were too widely known, then the Hawks would lose a lot of prestige, so they wanted to avoid that as much as possible.

That meant they had to kill the damn thing, and soon.

"What about the roc?" Leon asked.

"We're having some trouble tracking it; it moves fast," the elder explained. "It's of the highest concern, and we have our best trackers on the problem. If we notice it's moving against any more villages, we'll only have a day at most to intercept it."

"Do we know where it roosts?" Leon asked.

"We do," Singer said. "It moves a lot, though, and can fly for days. It rarely rests at its home."

"So the possibility of springing a trap won't work? For any of these things?"

"We've tried," Singer replied. "Our Tribe isn't the most well-equipped, but we've brought great force to bear when we've tried. Every time, our prey wriggles out of our talons."

"We've come close to killing the bull twice," Cloud-Runner added. "The damned bull heals surprisingly quickly, its horns can absorb our magic, and it's faster than a red-tipped hare on kata beans."

Leon gave him a blank look and said, "That... sounds fast."

"It is," Singer confirmed.

Leon blinked and decided to just move on. "How about the serpent?"

"The largest of the bunch," an eighth-tier elder informed. "It can take more punishment than just about anything I've ever seen, and its venom is a potent weapon it can use at immense range. Its scales are hard and its hide is thick, so penetrating and hitting something vital will be difficult. But we have perhaps the best chance of springing an ambush on it out of any of the others."

"Then the sea monster?" Leon asked.

"It's a sea monster," Singer said matter-of-factly.

"More specifically," a seventh-tier Chief added, "it's very strong and its hide has anti-magic properties."

As he spoke, he waved his hand and used light magic to project an image of the beast, and Leon just about recoiled in disgust. It had been described to him as an amphibian, but it looked like some unholy combination of frog, shark, and kraken, with a long, thick central body, a shark's head, a frog's legs, and kraken-like tentacles sprouting from all over its body.

"We aren't powerful water magic users," Singer whispered. "We have to wait until it's on land before engaging. If it falls back below the waves, we'd never get a chance."

Leon nodded again, filing the information away. "All right. Here's what I'm thinking, and stop me if this sounds stupid. But my retainers have already expressed interest in hunting these things down in smaller groups. I've spread out some weapons among them to make their jobs easier, and I'm thinking having some of you join them in their hunts would be wise."

"What kind of weapons are you talking about that would prove so effective?" Singer asked.

Leon quickly broke down the MALLs that he'd brought along, as well as the Lightning Lances they came with. Additionally, he'd told them, all of his retainers had some access to anti-magic and some miscellaneous salves and potions that would help courtesy of Helen and Heaven's Eye.

"Those... could come in handy," Cloud-Runner said with a thoughtful look, which slowly turned into a subdued smile of anticipation.

"We don't get many weapons down here," another elder added. "We have some war beasts, but for the most part, weapons and war beasts are reserved for the Jaguars, Tigers, Lions, and Bears, for they are the ones most active in defending the island from attack. What we get are designed more for civilian applications than military ones."

"That's a shame," Leon replied. "All of the Tribes ought to have the equipment they need to defend themselves."

"We don't get many weapons, it's not that we don't get any weapons," Singer corrected. "Under normal circumstances, we'd have what we need, but our army is on the Sword right now, and with them, all of our best weapons and war beasts."

"I see," Leon whispered. "And you haven't asked for aid from any of the other Tribes?"

"We haven't yet felt the need," Singer coldly stated as she glanced over Leon's shoulder, her eyes seeming to focus on something only she could see.

"We'd rather not involve them in our matters," another elder diplomatically stated.

Leon smiled in understanding. "I get that," he said. "Well, should I succeed and become King of the Ten Tribes, you can be sure I'd want to change that. Pride is one thing, but I want all of the Tribes to trust me with their problems, and to feel secure that I'd render any aid I could, free of judgment and with great discretion."

Silence fell upon the gathering hall, and for a moment, Leon thought he'd made a mistake campaigning for himself during their strategy meeting. However, Singer quickly disabused him of that notion.

"For the transformation enchantment alone, you'd have my support," she said. "When the rest of the Tribe hears what you've given us, I'd wager they'd be clamoring for the ancient bloodline to return to its proper place. The lack of progress with the war against the plane's natives across the sea after our initial successes has dampened some spirits, but the return of the Thunderbird Clan would restore that feeling of restoration."

Singer paused a moment and gave Leon first a cheeky look, but grew more contemplative after a couple seconds.

"The rest of the elders will fall in line," she declared. "Aid us in this, and you'll have done more for the Hawks than the rest of the Ten Tribes has in ten thousand years. You will have proven that you would be the kind of King that we would follow."

Leon smiled as his gaze lingered on Singer, then slid over to the other handful of elders, and then to the Chiefs, all of whom were looking at him with respect and gratitude—or, at least on the faces of the more stoic among them, at least tacit acceptance of Singer's words.

“Then let’s make that a reality,” Leon said. “Let’s get our teams sorted out...”

Two days after Singer’s first flight, the time came to move. The sea monster had made landfall and was moving against a small city in the south that was the locus of some of the Hawks’ most productive farmland, and it had to be intercepted before it could pillage that food. The serpent was still resting easy, but the bull was being more belligerent, steadily moving towards another village that processed much of the mineral wealth that the Hawks mined.

The roc, meanwhile, was still flying around several hundred miles further east, still stealing the occasional livestock or raiding a granary, but it recently started moving with greater purpose and with much greater killing intent towards a village that maintained some of the only pasture lands that the Hawks had that supported their war beasts. If that pasture land was destroyed, or if too many of their breeding stock was killed, the Hawks would be forced to purchase more from the Bears—and from what he could gather, doing so would not be cheap, and would undoubtedly come with severe caveats given the current political climate.

So, over that day, his people broke down into their agreed-upon groups. Valeria, Maia, and Red were with Leon, as were Singer and Cloud-Runner.

Anshu and Gaius were going after the sea monster; Anzu and Alcander, the bull; Marcus and Alix, the serpent. Accompanying all of them were Chiefs and elders who had taken that morning, all of the previous day, and the night that Singer had transformed to learn how to transform themselves. They hadn’t had much time to get used to the form, but all of them had grown stronger, their new avian forms boosting their power considerably compared to their human forms.

Seeing that none of them had any adverse effects relating to the transformation not only boosted Leon’s confidence in the enchantment, but also that of the other elders and Chiefs present, but while they’d learned the enchantment, it would take some time for them to actually build it in their respective soul realms and get some practice. For the time being, they would fight as humans, whether using magic or using other weapons, their own or one of Leon’s design.

They all assembled one last time before heading out, and Leon decided to give them all a few parting words.

“You all know what your jobs are!” he shouted.

“Fuck yeah!” Alcander boomed.

“Let’s kill some monsters!” Alix shouted.

“We’ll get it done,” Gaius confidently stated, his more sedate response clashing with those previous.

“That we will!” Marcus added, bridging the attitude gap between the other three.

“That sea creature will be dead before it has a chance to take another human life!” Anshu declared.

“And the bull!” Anzu responded with a nod of confidence, a small jump of excitement, and a look of childish seriousness that Leon would’ve found funny if he weren’t irrationally worried about his eighth-tier adoptive brother.

The Hawks going with them expressed their confidence as well, being swept up a bit not only with the new transformations but with the excitement and confidence expressed by Leon's retainers.

"Good!" Leon responded. "Now, do what you have to do, but in the off-chance that you can get me some bits of those monsters, I wouldn't say no to them..."

There were some polite chuckles, and Leon made quick eye contact with all of those about to head off to confront these dangerous eighth-tier beasts. Then, he spoke words that he knew to be traditional among the Ten Tribes.

"By the winged grace, we'll succeed in this endeavor. For the Ten Tribes!"

"For the Ten Tribes!" the others roared, and into the air they went before splitting up and flying in three directions.

Then, Leon finally turned to his group. Singer and her son gave him looks of respect and solidarity. Red looked like she would've been chomping at the bit to get moving and attack that roc, if only she had a bit.

"We're ready," Valeria said with a quiet, comforting confidence that had Leon smiling back at her.

[The sky is for my mate and our children,] Maia added with a look of love and determination.

"Then the only thing left is to do it," he said as he took control of the air around him and lifted himself into the air, closely followed by the other five. As he rose, however, one last voice came to him, familiar crackling tones that just had to get in one little jab.

[Hey boy,] Xaphan said from his soul realm. [It would look really bad if you fucked this up. So don't do that, you hear? Don't you bring any more shame upon my name as a Lord of Flame!]

[Don't worry, Xaphan, you do that enough yourself,] Leon responded, the demon's snort of amusement and derision bringing him almost as much relief as the confidence in him that everyone had shown.

Chapter 866 - Roc I

Leon, Singer-in-Caves, and Cloud-Runner split the sky in avian form, the two Hawks flanking Leon's much larger body—he'd assumed his natural form rather than the Thunderbird's form as it amplified his power more than simply copying his Ancestor did. Below them flew Red in wyvern form, dwarfing even Leon in size as she almost lazily glided upon the wind Leon had summoned. Valeria and Maia, on the other hand, flew above them, the only two of their party who looked human, despite the truth of the matter.

They'd made good time since leaving the village that had been Singer's base of operations since this crisis had started, coming close enough to the roc for Leon to see it with his magic senses within a couple of hours. It took about half a day more for them to come within visual range of the great flying beast, and Leon had to admit that he felt no small amount of jealousy.

His body in his cloudy silver and blue Thunderbird form was by no means small, but Red was much larger, and the roc was even larger than her, and by so wide a margin that it wasn't even debatable. Its wingspan was easily three hundred feet long, and its body was the size of a warship. So large was it that

if it weren't for the veritable tornado of wind magic beneath each of its wings, there would be no doubt in Leon's mind that it would've been entirely incapable of flight.

That much, however, brought a small measure of relief to him. Knowing that it was using wind magic meant that it essentially couldn't use any other magic while it was flying, if it could even use other elemental magic at all. Leon decided not to assume it couldn't, however, for it was ninth-tier, and more likely than not possessed sapience on par with humans at least.

Still, as they'd approached, he'd already started to formulate a plan of action.

With a quick burst of darkness magic, he called his flying party to a halt on a mountaintop about fifty miles away from the roc. It was enormous and quite powerful, but all of that enormity was working against it somewhat, and it couldn't fly very fast. Leon estimated that he and his people could fly more than four times its speed if it was already flying at its limit—which, again, he forced himself not to assume.

Upon landing, he transformed back into his human form, followed shortly thereafter by Singer, Cloud, and Red. Valeria and Maia landed a moment later.

"So, there it is," Leon said as he stared at the roc in the far distance.

"There it is," Singer-in-Caves repeated. "It's been quite an annoying twig in my feathers over the past few months. I've tried to bring it down, but it's tough and strong, and it's been able to fight me off every time I've come at it, even when I've come with others."

"How much can you tell me of its capabilities?" Leon asked.

"It focused on wind magic almost exclusively," Singer said. "It's even stronger than I am, I would say. When attacked, it showed a keen awareness of its surroundings and shrewd and ruthless decisiveness when selecting opponents; it would create a wind barrier that the attacks of the weaker members of my Tribe couldn't penetrate, and then it would target the strongest of us exclusively. For all its power with magic, though, I think most of its power is used just keeping itself in the air. Whenever I tried to stop it, it would attack me with wind magic, but everyone else would only be answered with beak and talon."

"Hmm," Leon hummed in thought. "You know, I have something that I understand is similar to what at least some in the Ten Tribes use..." As he spoke, he retrieved one of his anti-magic gems, the one that targeted wind magic. "I can use this to try and disrupt its use of wind magic." He quickly explained to Singer and the others how the gem worked, though only the elder and her son needed the explanation.

Or perhaps Red needed it too, Leon knew that she didn't pay that much attention to anyone else during his retinue's training sessions.

"Really..." Singer whispered in surprise. "I didn't know you could make things like that. Most of our anti-magic devices are created by the Ravens-of-Hail-Hall, and they are some of the only weapons that they aren't willing to export to any of the other Tribes..."

"Huh," Leon grunted in similar surprise. "I would've thought that such weapons would be spread among the Tribes given just what kinds of threats you face from the Imperials."

“The Ravens aren’t stingy with their use when the need calls for it,” Cloud said with a hint of bitterness in his tone, “but they never let anyone else so much as touch one of their anti-magic weapons. They’re terrified of just what might happen if such capabilities are spread outside of their Tribe.”

“Well, I hate to say it, but such magic exists in many places outside of Kataigida,” Leon replied. “Not just with me, but Heaven’s Eye has been experimenting with them, and many Kingdoms on the mainland have ways to prevent prisoners with magic from using their powers to escape...” Leon’s thoughts drifted back to the Bull Kingdom, which possessed manacles that could interfere with a mage’s ability to call upon their magic, though what little of them that Leon remembered, he knew that they were fairly primitive and had severe restraints. Jormun, too, had similar bindings that could interfere with a mage’s control over their own power, though Leon spent less time dwelling on that particular memory.

“Perhaps something to bring up with them once you reign, King Leon?” Singer said half-jokingly, but Leon took her serious half more seriously.

“I’ll bring it up with them when I visit,” he said. “We’ll have much to discuss, I’d wager. But for now, let’s focus on that roc. I can try and force it to the ground with this gem, but then we’d have to bring the pain. And that’s assuming we even want it on the ground. Is there anywhere in its path that might serve as a good ambush point? We have other methods we can use to attack it...”

Leon quickly reminded Cloud and Singer about his Lightning Lances, two of which he still had in his soul realm after distributing the rest to the other members of his retinue as they left on their own hunts.

“How effective might these weapons be?” he asked.

“Hard to say,” Singer replied. She grinned and added, “We’ll just have to try them out and see what happens...”

“Just going to wing it, then?” Leon laughed. “I can do that. Now, we just have to decide on where to have our ambush...”

The roc flew the air like a mountain with wings. It was primarily brown and gray when seen from above, its feathers aiding it in blending in with the ground. However, its undercarriage was an almost pearlescent white that flashed blue depending on the angle it was seen from. It wasn’t hard to imagine that the creature could be mistaken for a cloud by a weak or inattentive mage on the ground had it not required such intense wind magic just to get its bulk into the air.

The tempest it had conjured to hold itself aloft could be felt for miles, and as it came closer, the wind that heralded its arrival tore whole trees from the earth and lifted them into the air, spinning them and hurling them for miles before they hit the ground again.

Leon watched the incoming monster with nervous anticipation. He was fully armored and invisible, with Valeria and Maia close by, also invisible. Red lay on the valley floor in human form, waiting for a chance to strike. Singer and Cloud were on nearby mountaintops with Leon’s Lightning Lances, having been given a crash course in their use as Leon set them up. Each of them had applied some invisibility salve made by Helen before Leon’s entire retinue had gotten armor with invisibility enchantments, so while

they couldn't be seen, in the wind that raged throughout the valley, Leon couldn't quite say that the stuff would hold up.

Regardless, they were about as ready as they were going to be. After setting up the Lightning Lances, Leon had then scattered about the valley a number of other traps. He hadn't been able to set up as many as he'd have liked since the roc wasn't being so accommodating as to wait around for Leon to finish, but he felt like he'd gotten a good spread of traps set. Now it was only a matter of waiting these last few minutes.

The roc soon became visible as it flew through the mountains and into the valley. About ten miles further west was the Hawk village it seemed intent on reaching, so Leon knew that they had to stop it here or Hawk civilians would undoubtedly die.

'Just another thing to add to the stress,' he thought as he took a few deep breaths and forced himself to calm down. This wasn't his first hunt, though it was fairly unique in its own way. He wasn't an unblooded chick yet to leave the nest, he was a ninth-tier mage and had seen his fair share of war.

On the other hand, it wasn't that hard to feel at least a little nervous about a titanic bird-of-prey flying through the mountains on tornados.

Still, that anxiety dissipated as it ponderously flew closer, Leon and his ladies having posted up above the center of the valley, right in its path. Leon raised a hand, the gauntlet bearing his anti-wind magic gem, and after waiting only a few more seconds for the roc to get into range, activated it.

Magic poured into the gem and the enchantments in his gauntlet that projected its power, with some upgrades compared to the last time he'd used his anti-magic enchantments. This magic then spilled from his fingers like a ray of light visible only to his magic senses. The ray struck the roc, piercing its tempest with ease, and for a moment, Leon thought it hadn't worked.

And then the roc shrieked in surprise and panic as the wind spiraling about it and beneath its wings cut out. It, being carried only by lingering momentum, immediately lost what little speed it had and began to plummet, gliding beneath Leon, Valeria, and Maia and coming to a crashing stop on the lightly-forested valley floor.

The roc hit the dirt in range of three of Leon's traps. Almost immediately, it was bathed in lightning as one of Leon's old Thunderblast spells, now significantly upgraded with much greater power, activated. The roc shrieked again, but this time in pain, but as it slid across the valley floor, another trap activated, and this time it was a fiery explosion that rolled over a wing, burning away a goodly number of its feathers.

The final trap, another upgraded Thunderblast spell, was activated when the roc finally came to a halt, though this one was a little further away and only struck the roc with a few arcs of lightning. Still, some damage had been done, and though the massive monster's impact had kicked up a tong of dirt and dust—to add to the haze its wind had brought—it was made immediately obvious that neither Singer nor Cloud had lost track of the creature, for a pair of bright flashes of golden lightning were followed by the iron bolts the weapons fired almost immediately slamming into the roc, having cut highly visible paths through the dirt cloud on their way.

The roc screeched in pain again and flooded the valley with killing intent. Leon was largely unaffected, and so was Maia by his own estimation, but he heard Valeria's breath hitch for a moment in response. Immediately, any hint of pride and elation at the plan having gone as planned until this point evaporated, replaced with white-hot anger.

Leon pulled a weapon from his soul realm that he'd been dying to use for a long while now: his thunder wood bow. His old bow of red-painted wood had long been replaced with this new one, marginally larger than the bows he'd given the rest of his retainers, and more heavily enchanted. He didn't take a moment to appreciate his handiwork, though, and simply pulled back the bowstring, allowing his power to flow into the bow. An arrow of silver-blue lightning formed, crackling and hissing as if it were begging to be released; so, Leon did just that, loosing it at the roc.

The lightning arrow sped faster than any lightning spear he could've thrown, slamming into the roc's back with all the power of Leon's bow and his ninth-tier strength. The arrow erupted so powerfully upon hitting the roc that the previous Thunderblast spells were made to look small in comparison. Lightning rolled over the roc in a great wave, burning away feathers and searing flesh.

The roc shrieked once more, but this time, while Leon heard pain, he also heard an equal amount of anger. The roc flexed its wings and sent a wave of wind rolling through the valley. Trees were torn from the ground and boulders ripped from the earth, both thrown like weapons. More concerning, however, was the wind itself, which formed into sharp, invisible blades that rent the air like millions of tiny claws.

Leon's group was hit, but their armor wasn't even scratched. They were, however, rendered visible, and the roc's massive head turned in their direction, its pale yellow eyes wide with fury and hate.

[Scatter!] Leon shouted mentally to his ladies, and Maia immediately took off into the sky, shedding her human form to assume that of a flying ice dragon that matched the roc for size. Valeria plummeted as she drew her glaive that Leon had made. He felt it flare up with her ice magic, and he knew that if it managed to pierce the roc's flesh, it would attempt to freeze everything within the monster's body.

He didn't follow them, instead shifting into his natural Thunderbird form and flying toward the roc as it fully turned to face him, intending to clash with the creature head-on. Silver-blue lightning danced over his feathers as storm clouds gathered above, and another pair of bolts from the Lightning Lances struck the beast in the back.

This time, the roc didn't shriek. Instead, it flapped its enormous wings and seized control of the air around it. Another wing flap sent a hurricane-level gust of wind in Leon's direction, the massive wave of air picking up dirt and debris and becoming opaque.

Leon flapped his own wings and pierced through it, though the wind bit and tore at his body, and he lost some blood and feathers within. As he reached the other side of the wind wave, he found the roc waiting for him, and the beast lunged at him with its massive beak.

Knowing that it could swallow him whole, Leon rolled out of the way as he flew towards it, and called upon his Ancestor's lightning. Silver-blue bolts of lightning began to rain down from the storm clouds above, and the roc, after taking the first couple, responded by making a loud war cry and causing the

wind to pick up much more dirt and dust and sent it flying upward. Leon's bolts penetrated the roc's wind but lost most of its power.

But Leon wasn't deterred, and instead of relying upon his magic, he dove in and began tearing at the roc with beak and talon. The roc retaliated, but it moved too slowly to catch Leon, and with its magic tied up in shielding itself from Leon's magic, it had little other recourse.

Its capabilities were tested when Maia came barreling in from above, her ice dragon form crashing into the roc like a frozen meteor. The roc let out a strangled cry as Maia's icy jaws sank into its neck, while at the same time, Valeria made her presence known as she sprang upward from the ground and began slicing at the roc's muscles around its scaled legs. Red made her move at the same time, springing forth in wyvern form and bathing the roc in a storm of fire.

The roc once again shrieked, but managed to twist its head around and tear Maia off of its neck, though the fountain of blood that sprang from the wound she caused didn't seem promising for its future plans to remain in the land of the living. Leon didn't spare it much thought, but as the roc snapped at Maia and crushed the ice dragon in its beak, he dove in, his anger growing exponentially. He could feel Maia panicking a bit as she jumped out of the ice—she was physically fine, but her panic was enough for him.

He dove at the roc's face, slamming into one of its massive eyes and letting loose with a torrent of silver-blue lightning. The roc's eyes immediately filled with blood and popped, its cry of pain nearly rupturing Leon's eardrums. It beat its wings again and summoned a twister around itself, hurling Leon, Valeria, and Maia away. Red, however, had managed to latch her jaws onto one of its shoulders and barely managed to stay attached as it moved. However, it jerked its head and tore her off of its wings with its beak, and threw her away like an unwanted worm. Red peeled off and, though she was bloodied and one of her wings looked rather torn up, she remained in the air.

Turning its attention away from Red and now missing an eye, the roc glared balefully at Leon and snapped in what he guessed was anger, Leon's bolts from the sky still falling and largely failing to penetrate the beast's feathers with its wind shield still in the air.

And then the roc began to rapidly shrink, and just in time to have two more bolts from the Lightning Lances bounce off its shoulders rather than penetrate into vulnerable flesh.

Leon realized just a moment later what the roc was doing as its features became more and more human. He dove downward, attempting to finish the job now that the monster was so weakened and injured, but a last-second burst of wind magic sent him careening backward.

When he righted himself in the air, he found that the massive roc had disappeared, leaving a naked man standing on the ground, one eye burned out of his skull as blood poured down his face, several other burns and injuries plain for him to see. The man had long, wiry hair and a long scraggly beard that looked like it hadn't ever seen any grooming. He was tan and hairy, with gaunt features and an aquiline nose that put even Leon's to shame. His one remaining eye kept its yellow coloring.

He stuck around to glare at Leon for a single moment before he tore off toward the mountains, apparently deciding to cut his losses and run.

[After him!] Leon shouted to the others.

Chapter 867 - Roc II

Leon, Valeria, Maia, and Red tore off after the roc, with Singer and Cloud not far behind. The latter two had to pull the Lightning Lances back into their soul realms, so they were a minute or two behind Leon and his small group as they pursued the roc-in-human-form back into the mountains.

The roc moved fast, his injuries making him desperate, but he didn't move nearly so fast that Leon in his avian form couldn't keep track of him. However, it was fast enough that Leon was having trouble closing the distance. The roc wasn't helping matters as he inundated the air behind him with his power, pulling and slicing at him and his three hunting partners with blades of wind.

Leon and the ladies didn't take that lying down, however, and Leon constantly fired off bolts of lightning from the sky at the roc. Some of them hit, but most of them the roc managed to dodge by the skin of his teeth. Still, the burns were accumulating, and soon enough, he began to slow.

In the end, he'd only managed to flee several miles before he stopped in a clearing and turned to face Leon's group closing in on him, a look of mad desperation in his one remaining eye, blood pouring down his face from the empty socket where his other eye used to be.

[Slow down,] Leon ordered as he fired off another couple of lightning bolts, but the roc made his move as he summoned a twister around his form, and Leon's lightning was lost within the wind. [Spread out.]

Valeria and Maia did as commanded, but Red swooped in, her killing intent soaring. She closed with the now-stationary roc and the twister he shrouded himself in and let loose with a massive breath attack, a tidal wave of flame crashing down upon the roc. However, the roc's wind took the flames and pulled them away from him, and Red's fire was simply carried upward into the sky, away from the roc.

A moment later, a lance of wind came peeling out of the fire and slammed into Red, hitting her just below her right shoulder and nearly severing the wing entirely. Red roared in pain and Leon dove in to rescue his wild retainer. He called up all of his skill in wind magic and dove into the twister, the wind tearing at his feathers and opening even more shallow cuts and ripping away even more of his feathers, but he made it through and, with a quick beat of his wings, he sent a silver-blue lightning bolt down upon the roc.

The roc had been in the act of gathering wind for another attack at Red, one that likely would've left her maimed if not dead, but Leon's bolt struck true in the moment before Red might've departed for the Kingdom of the dead. The roc reeled back as he was struck, his magic dissipating as his right arm was charred to the bone by the heat of Leon's strike.

"Fuck!" he shouted as he fell to the ground, and Leon's eyes widened in shock about as much as they could.

[Hold!] he shouted to Valeria, Maia, and Red. For Valeria and Red, he didn't so much need to make the order as Red was in no position to move for at least another minute or so, and Valeria was already seeing to her with healing spells and potions. Maia, on the other hand, had formed half a dozen large water dragons, all of which were circling the rapidly-dying twister just waiting for the chance to fall upon the roc and tear him apart.

The roc was horribly wounded, all of his wounds on full display thanks to his lack of clothes. If he saw no medical attention, Leon estimated that he would bleed out in a matter of minutes—and not very many at that. Making matters worse for the roc, there was a startling lack of bright red mana seeping from his wounds, nearly all of his blood being mundane crimson indicating a lack of magic power in his body.

‘At the least, he’s no threat anymore,’ Leon thought as he circled about once more and landed close to the roc. He returned to human form, armored up, and cautiously approached, sparing only a moment to see that Maia was still keeping watch above, while Valeria was having some success treating Red’s wounds. Leon frowned in anger and displeasure at seeing his wyvern retainer so injured, but he bit down on his anger and approached his quarry.

“You can speak?!” he shouted at the roc, who glared back at him with his one good eye and tried futilely to drag himself further away from Leon. “I heard you speak!” Leon shouted again as he drew within comfortable speaking range.

The roc continued to refuse to answer, but he at least stopped dragging himself away—though that seemed more due to weakness than lack of will. He simply lay on the ground, the debris of his landing and the last few exchanges of their battle scattered all around him, his one eye tracking Leon unerringly with a hateful glare.

“I can save you,” Leon said as he pulled a powerful healing spell from his soul realm. “But I have some questions I want answered.”

The roc glared at him, not a word passing his lips.

“Where did you come from?” Leon demanded. “Why have you been attacking the Hawks?”

Again, the roc remained silent as his wounds continued to bleed.

Leon frowned, then began to slowly approach the beast-in-human-form. He was intending on using the healing spell on the roc anyway just so that he could continue to ask some questions of the curious creature, but as he took a few hesitant steps forward, the roc suddenly opened his mouth and began to scream incoherently. Backing up his scream was what seemed to be the last of his power, and the air that carried his voice flexed and vibrated powerfully enough that Leon was hurled backward.

Leon landed on his feet, coming to a skidding halt as the roc continued to roar, his voice like a hammer and nails taken to Leon’s eardrums, and it was all Leon could do to stay upright. He began to channel his magic, summoning a bright silver-blue lightning spear in his right hand and preparing to hurl it, but a moment later, an arrow of wind passed right past him carrying Singer’s avian form. The Hawk elder sank her talons into the roc’s chest and buried her beak in the monster’s throat, bringing the roar to a swift and strangled end as she ripped and tore into his flesh.

The last light in the roc’s one remaining eye went out, and he slumped over dead. He would not be answering any of Leon’s questions now.

Leon and his party reassembled on the mountaintop where they’d planned their ambush. They’d had to do some clean-up work after the roc was finally put down, with Leon having to head out and remove all

of the remaining traps he'd planted all across the valley while Singer and Cloud-Runner had to visit the village the roc had been threatening and make sure they were all safe and sound.

Singer took care of the roc's body, though Leon had made a cursory examination of the corpse before she'd taken it, his curiosity unsated. However, he'd not learned anything from his examination—not that he'd expected to, of course, but he had to try.

Maia, Valeria, and Red, meanwhile, took to licking their wounds while Leon, Singer, and Cloud were busy. By the time Leon joined them on the mountaintop, Red had just about fully healed of the grievous injuries the roc had given her.

That didn't stop him from grilling her on her physical condition as soon as he arrived, though, to her consternation.

Once Singer and Cloud joined them, however, Leon got down to business.

"That roc was intelligent," he said. "Sapient. And not just that, but he understood human language enough to curse."

"You heard that?" Singer asked with a deadly serious look about her, contrasting with her otherwise easy-going attitude. "You confirmed it?"

"I heard it plain as day," Leon replied, a touch annoyed. "He swore as he fell."

"So what?" Red growled. "The flying feast could speak. This changes nothing."

Leon sighed. "I suppose not, but it's still something I found... disquieting."

"It's not the first time we've killed an Ascended Beast," Valeria softly pointed out.

[Won't be the last, either,] Maia added.

Leon sighed again and repeated, "I suppose not. I would've preferred to get a chance to speak with him, though."

"He was attacking you," Singer pointed out. "Would you have rather I left him to continue?"

"No," Leon firmly responded. "Let me make one thing clear: I will sleep well tonight knowing that we've made the Hawk Tribe safer. What bothers me is that for an intelligent being to choose this... well, I guess what I'm saying is that I would've been even more satisfied had the roc given us just a few more seconds, that we could've been more certain he was just a beast acting on his base instincts instead of... I don't know what, but something other than that."

Leon scowled as a possibility entered his mind that he was loath to consider. However, when he glanced at Singer, the contemplative look on her face was one that screamed that she'd had the same thought.

"Are we certain these are random monster attacks?" Leon quietly asked.

"You're implying they weren't just random?" Cloud-Runner asked, his mother remaining silent for the moment.

"How often do these sorts of attacks occur?" Leon asked.

“Fairly often,” Singer replied. “I believe we’ve been over this before, but if we haven’t then that’s my oversight. But the Titanstone quarried in the east makes for extremely magical territory. Monsters and terrible beasts often breed out there in large numbers, which is one of the reasons why the Booming Brown Bears first settled in this region eighty thousand years ago. Not to mention the Titanstone itself can induce changes in a beast generation-to-generation like nothing else natural can. Powerful monsters coming from the east are nothing new, but our army is usually enough to handle the threat they pose.”

“And with our army on the Sword...” Cloud-Runner finished.

“Right, right,” Leon nodded in understanding. “But do these attacks usually occur in a group, like these have? Or are they more one-time affairs?”

“They’ll sometimes come fairly soon after each other,” Singer said. “It’s not unreasonable to think that some event that gave one beast power wouldn’t give another beast power at the same time.”

Leon frowned briefly, thinking for a moment of Tusk and how it handed out power for any beast that gave it sacrifices. He didn’t think there was anything like that out here, but he supposed some vaguely similar process could occur in a place with so much concentrated Titanstone.

“Fine,” he said. “If you don’t think there’s anything wrong here, then I suppose I’m just being paranoid. Maybe I’m just too used to people trying to kill me that I can’t help but wonder if this is some scheme, too.”

“We’re friendly enough with the Booming Brown Bears,” Singer said aloud with a thoughtful look. “I can’t imagine they’d move against us in any systemic way like this. I’m sure they’d love it if we were to grow more dependent on them for any reason, but I can’t see them intentionally weakening the Ten Tribes. They’re the ones who put the Thunderer in his position, you know.”

“I’m aware,” Leon replied. “The same Thunderer who’s been undermining the traditions of the Ten Tribes for decades, now—or so the Jaguars claim, at any rate.”

“The Jaguars are sticklers for their traditions, that’s for sure,” Singer whispered. “That we’re threatened by four powerful monsters when our army is away is an unfortunate coincidence. Our army has been away for years now, so there were bound to be some beasts that grow in their absence. Unless I see hard evidence to the contrary, that will be my official position. The Jaguars might be more than willing to fight the Bears, but the Hawks only want peace within our confederation.”

“Understandable,” Leon whispered. “Then I’ll drop the matter for now. Why don’t we head back to your base of operations and see if the rest of our people have been met with similar success as we have?”

“Sure,” Singer replied, but she then held up her hand and continued, “but first, why don’t we all share in the spoils of our hunt?” With a dramatic flourish, she pulled several huge feathers from her soul realm. Each one was about as long as Leon was tall, and was a pearlescent white with streaks of blue visible in the right light.

“These...” Leon whispered in awe.

“... are that roc’s feathers,” Singer confirmed. “I picked them up on my way back here. They don’t seem to have any functional purpose, but they’re quite beautiful, aren’t they? Worthy trophies, I’d say.”

“That they are,” Leon whispered as he took one of the proffered feathers, Maia, Valeria, and Red doing likewise. Red seemed the least sentimental out of all of them, simply tossing the feather into her soul realm with hardly a care in the world. Maia wasn’t too far behind her, but at least took a moment to look the feather over before throwing it into her soul realm. Valeria’s reaction was most like Leon’s: staring at the feather for several long seconds in awe and appreciation of the beauty of the thing. Only after several long seconds did she put the feather away.

“How many feathers do you think are still out there?” Leon asked curiously.

“Not many in such condition,” Singer replied. “Most were burned or broken in some way. Finding six intact feathers was a pain in my ass, let me tell you what...”

Leon chuckled. “Your gift is appreciated, Singer-in-Caves. Thank you.”

His words were echoed around the group, to lesser or greater enthusiasm depending on who was speaking. Fortunately, Singer didn’t take any offense where some might’ve, and without too many more words, the group took once more to the skies and began their flight back to the village where Singer had made her base of operations.

“... and the thing just kept regenerating!” Alcander exuberantly exclaimed. “Nothing we did seemed able to do much permanent damage to the damn thing!”

“But then we shot it with the Lances!” Anzu picked up with equal enthusiasm. “The bull kept healing for a while and was able to fight, but another shot hit it in the head and killed it!”

“Its horns could stop magic, but not a bolt from a Lightning Lance!” Alcander finished with a proud look as he presented the horns of the eighth-tier bull to Leon.

“Well done,” Leon said to his little brother and his retainer. “Did the bull... by any chance... happen to transform into a human, or exhibit anything resembling human-level intelligence?”

“Uh, no?” Anzu said as he cocked his head in thought.

“No,” Alcander confirmed. “It acted as a beast does, not as a man does.”

Leon hummed in acknowledgment and took the horns.

It had been two days since the roc had been felled, and Alcander and Anzu’s small hunting party were the last to return to the staging point. Gaius and Anshu had killed the sea monster faster than even Leon and his group killed the roc, arriving back in the village an hour or two before Leon did—much like with the bull, the Lightning Lances proved decisive in the fight, with several shots penetrating the monster’s brain and shutting it down permanently. Unfortunately, they didn’t take many trophies since the shark-squid-frog thing didn’t have much in the way of parts good enough to be a trophy.

Alix and Marcus returned the day after, the giant serpent also rendered lifeless at their hands. They’d run the thing down with MALLs given it had posted up in a wide, forestless valley; perfect terrain for the mobile weapons to be used. Unlike Anshu and Gaius, however, they came back with the serpent’s fangs—that happened to be about twice as tall as Leon—and venom glands, the latter continuing to produce venom even a day after the beast died. Apparently, their group of elders and Chiefs was

interested in the hide and other parts of the beast, so Leon didn't hold it against them that they didn't bring any of that back, he was happy enough with the trophies they did take.

Like with the bull, neither of the other two beasts had transformed into a human nor showed any sign of intelligence on par with a human. Leon was a little disappointed, but he supposed it was better this way.

Regardless, once Anzu and Alcander were done giving him the horns and making their report, Leon had them both get some rest—which largely meant Alcander dragging Anzu off to flirt and drink with the locals—and Leon turned to Singer-in-Caves, who had been present for the meeting.

"I think we're done here," Singer said. "Shall we return to Raikoraki? You asked my Tribe whether or not we would support your claim to the throne your Clan once held, and I think it's time for us to give you our answer."

She smiled at Leon, her expression promising much once they returned to the capital of the Hawk Tribe. Many of the other elders and Chiefs who hadn't immediately agreed to test the transformation enchantment were now building it in their soul realms since those who did agree to use it were showing that it was safe, and Leon imagined that the enchantment he'd given Singer would spread throughout the Tribe, now, as would their gratitude.

He smiled back at her and simply said, "Tomorrow morning, then? I'm eager to have my answer, too..."

Chapter 868 - The Hawk's Loyalty

The return to Raikoraki was glorious. They were coming back victorious, the eastern flank of the Heart-Stabbing Hawk's territory secured against further monster incursions for at least a little while, and the elders and Chiefs who were a part of the mission were coming back with new powers.

Leon was in the lead, every flap of his silver wings sending storm clouds roiling out before them for miles. Thunder boomed and lightning flashed in his wake.

At his wings were Valeria and Maia, while just behind him were the rest of his retinue, with Red and Anzu bringing up the rear.

Flying in a cloud all around them were several dozen elders and Chiefs in hawk form, Singer-in-Caves herself leading them in a beautiful song that could be heard even above Leon's thunder. It was a cheery, upbeat tune that so raised everyone's spirits—and was repetitive enough—that over the days required to fly back to the Hawks' capital city, many of those in Leon's retinue started singing along, though the effect was somewhat ruined when sung by a human who'd only ever heard the song sung in avian tones.

Still, when they crested over a range of tall mountains and finally laid their physical eyes upon Raikoraki, everyone in Leon's party was energized, their morale high. This feeling grew more as Leon took them lower and slowed their pace by a considerable margin, making them quite visible to those in the valley, and then those in the city's streets. When the people saw them and heard the song, they joined in and began running after them. It wasn't long before it seemed like the entire city had picked up the song, and in so doing, welcomed them back.

It wasn't any surprise to Leon that the Tribe's gathering hall was mostly full by the time he and his party arrived. They'd made no attempt to hide themselves, so the elders had had plenty of time to notice them coming and prepare accordingly. Neither the Eagles nor Jaguars had left in the couple of weeks

they'd been absent, and most of them were present, too, sitting a respectful distance from the hall's dais.

But even though everyone in the hall was waiting for them, Leon took the time to lead the others in a victorious circuit first about the hall, and then made several laps around the forecourt and the Tribal Totem. It was only after he completed the tenth lap that he finally landed in front of the totem and transformed back into his human form, followed shortly thereafter by everyone else. The sight was clearly a shock to the Hawk people, who were scrambling to assemble around the gathering hall, but what really had their jaws hitting the floor was Singer-in-Caves and the other Hawks in Leon's party landing and transforming back into their human bodies.

Leon particularly enjoyed the sight on the faces of all those in the gathering hall, Eagles and Jaguars included.

And so, marching as a conquering general—which wasn't that far off from the truth, if Leon were to mildly mutilate the definition of 'conquering general'—Leon entered the hall, Singer at his side. He took his place upon the dais, as did Singer, while his retainers posted up by the door and the other Hawks took their seats upon the benches.

"We have returned!" Singer declared there in the hall, her mastery of wind magic causing her voice to carry throughout the city. "The threats that plagued this Tribe's eastern borders have been dealt with! The Tribe is safe once again!"

A great cheer went up throughout the city and the valley so loud that the city practically shook down to its foundations. But even that reaction was nothing compared to what Singer said next.

"This victory is in no small part thanks to the actions of the Thunderbird Clan! Rejoice, for our King, our Tribe's senior wingmate, has returned to the Ten Tribes!"

Raikoraki practically exploded into spontaneous celebration. Raikoraki was a large city with millions of icons of birds of prey adorning it—this didn't surprise Leon at all, given their Tribe's Ancestor. However, it soon became clear that not all of these images were of the Heart-Stabbing Hawk as thousands of people began converging on specific icons and falling to their knees in reverence.

These, he realized, were images of the Thunderbird. Enormous statues to small shrines, reliefs and mosaics, paintings and smaller family totems, everywhere he looked as his magic senses blanketed the city he could see people venerating his Ancestor and the founder of his Clan.

He had to admit, it felt indescribable to have his bloodline so revered. His entire life he'd spent under the threat of death if it ever got out in an uncontrolled way what Clan he belonged to. This kind of reverence wasn't something he'd ever truly experienced before; not even after his participation in the Bull Kingdom had he ever had so much respect.

The capstone for the entire affair was the awkward gathering hall, for while those elders and Chiefs who'd been with Leon and received the transformation enchantment were beaming with pride, those elders and Chiefs who'd given Leon a slightly chillier reception mostly looked like they'd swallowed a whole basket of lemons.

"We have returned victorious," Singer said in a normal tone, finally turning her full attention back to her fellow elders. "In the past week, I have gotten to know Leon Raime well. He has shared with me—and those of us who joined me in the defense of our Tribe—a great boon, one that brings us closer to our Honored Ancestor than ever. He is, as far as I'm concerned, the right and true successor to the Most Venerable, and I have no reservations about supporting his bid for the throne his Ancestors once had. He has proven himself a friend to our Tribe and shown his commitment to ensuring we rise with him. I hope that after I finish sharing our deeds in the east, all of you will come to see that as well..."

Singer waited a moment when she had finished speaking her piece for any elder or Chief to speak up. Only one elder, a truly aged and wizened eighth-tier mage who hadn't been present when Leon first came through the city days before, took that unspoken offer.

"You returned in familiar form, Singer-in-Caves, though one not human. Are we to believe that the power of transformation, a power which I've heard the heir of the Thunderbird possesses, has been shared with our Tribe?"

"Yes, Tree-Cutter," Singer replied with a beatific smile. "All of us who joined in the hunt in the east now possess this power."

Singer paused for a moment and Leon took the opportunity to interject. "And the power was freely given without conditions. It is a power that I've already shared with the Eagle and Jaguar Tribes, and if our Ancestors walk with us, then it will be one I share with all Ten Tribes. I ask you to make me King, to hand over some amount of your sovereignty to me; how could I not share such good fortune with those who place such trust in me?"

The gathering hall went silent, most of the elders and Chiefs looking contemplative while those who'd been in the east looked relatively smug as they attracted many curious looks from the others.

As the silence stretched onward, Singer stepped forward and began to explain the hunt in its entirety, beginning just as she'd left Raikoraki long before Leon had arrived, and ending with the return of all parties back to their staging point. She paid special attention to Leon's sharing of the transformation enchantment, even explaining how it worked in broad terms before finally finishing.

Few of the elders or Chiefs appeared inclined to break their silence once she'd finished, but those few who did raised Leon's spirits considerably.

Rain-Dancer, who Leon considered himself on fairly good terms with, though the last time he'd stood before the Hawk elders hadn't been as amicable as he'd have liked, stood to speak.

"Last time you were here, Leon Raime," he intoned seriously, "I was rude and abrasive. For that, I apologize. I have the utmost respect for the Thunderbird and Singer-in-Caves. I will side with her; you are the only man who could be our King." As he spoke, he stepped down from the benches and took a knee before the dais. "Let me be your talons to rend your enemies, let me be your wings to lift you aloft."

As he spoke, the other elders and Chiefs from the east swiftly came down from the benches and likewise genuflected.

And then Tree-Cutter went down the hall's floor and took a knee, followed by another eighth-tier elder, and then a seventh-tier. In a matter of seconds, all of the tribesmen in the room, Hawk, Eagle, and Jaguar alike, had come down from the benches and bowed before Leon, each one offering words of fealty.

Outside of the hall, a couple thousand Hawk citizens had gathered and stood awestruck at the scene, and as more and more Hawks streamed in to witness the meeting in the hall, that awestruck crowd only continued to grow.

Leon grinned, and with the storm clouds above not abated, he filled the sky with his power. Silver-blue lightning began arcing through the sky. Every bolt descended from the sky, brushed against the top of the gathering hall as close as Leon thought possible without damaging the building, and turned back upwards, vanishing into the clouds.

There were a few screams of surprise from the people, but others began falling to follow their leaders' example and fell to their knees. Those people started a chain reaction, and thousands of Hawks began to genuflect to Leon.

"I accept your fealty," Leon said to all of them. "In return for your loyalty, for your military and financial support, you will have my protection and share in the spoils of all my victories. As I rise, so will you. This, I swear."

He glanced at Singer-in-Caves who smiled back at him and took a knee herself.

"Leon Raime," she said, "though we will have to have a formal vote later and inform our army on the Sword, I don't think it's putting the cart before the horse to say that the Tribe of the Heart-Stabbing Hawk is yours. Once more, the Hawk and the Thunderbird shall fly together, and our enemies will tremble!"

Leon's return to Raikos was almost as triumphant as his return to Raikoraki. He came back in his natural Thunderbird form again, bringing a rainless storm with him. His entourage was much larger than it was with Singer as he brought the Eagle and Jaguar elders who'd accompanied him south back, as well as several Hawk elders, including Rain-Dancer and Cloud-Runner.

A couple of Jaguar elders flew ahead of Leon's group as they made their way back north, so even before they came within range of Leon's magic senses, the Jaguars knew that they were on their way back and sent out an escort led by Nikolaos himself.

"Your Majesty!" Nikolaos called out as they came into comfortable speaking range, ignoring both the rumbling thunder within Leon's clouds and Leon's changed form. "So wonderful to see you return!"

[And you, elder Nikolaos,] Leon silently responded, though he sent the words to all those around him so that they could be included in the exchange.

Nikolaos bowed in the air, then asked, "How was the journey south? Productive, I hope?"

"Very," Leon replied. "The Hawks stand with me. We can get into the details later; for now, I want to know how things have progressed in the north in my absence."

Leon began casually flying toward the Jaguar gathering hall as the other handful of elders in Nikolaos' party welcomed back their elders who'd accompanied Leon, as well as their Eagle and Hawk guests.

"We are making some progress," Nikolaos said in a tone that hinted at complications. "The Lions are willing to hear you out. The Harts and Ravens have sent a few elders to meet with you, but their delegations aren't large."

Leon nodded, but notionally frowned as the ninth-tier elder paused. [And the Bison Tribe?]

"... They are currently honored by the presence of the Thunderer himself," Nikolaos stated. "We can't have hoped that he would've just stayed in Stormhollow while you gathered support, and he has proven us correct."

[Can hardly blame him for moving when he sees a threat,] Leon mused. [What about those already in his camp?]

"The Ji Spiders have made their position known by publicly announcing for the Thunderer," Nikolaos said. "The Tigers are being more coy, but if the Bisons declare for the Thunderer too, then they would be surrounded and have no choice but to declare for him, too. Or at least stay neutral, but that's too much to hope for I believe."

Leon clicked his beak in agreement.

"The Bears present the most pressing concern," Nikolaos continued as they began flying over Raikos proper. His tone was severe, but it was muted somewhat by the cheers of thousands of Jaguars below.

[They were building up forces along your border with them in the east, weren't they?] Leon asked as his golden eyes narrowed slightly.

"They were, and we've responded in kind," Nikolaos replied. "Some of our reserves have been called up, and we've pulled many of our more capable warriors from the fleets back to guard our land."

[How realistic is a Bear attack?] Leon asked.

"... I want to say it's unlikely, but a decade ago, I would've said the return of the Thunderbirds was impossible. We live in unprecedented times, my King, and it's better to prepare in the face of uncertainty than to trust in established traditions of peace—especially when the Tribe in question is leading the charge to break down our Tribal traditions in the first place."

Leon growled though it came out as more of a low, dangerous chirp.

[Stay on guard. I also have other business to go over with all of you, but it can wait until we return to the hall.]

"Of course, Your Majesty. The elders are already awaiting you there."

It was only a matter of minutes before Leon's group reached the Jaguar's gathering hall, and as was quickly becoming his wont, Leon circled the forecourt ten times before landing in front of the Tribal Totem to pay his respects both to the Tribe's Ancestor, and to his own.

But he didn't linger too long, not when there was still business to go over. So, he quickly found himself back in the gathering hall standing upon the dais. All of the elders and Chiefs who were in the city had assembled, and those elders who'd flown down from Raikoraki with him took their seats in turn. The guests were suitably welcomed, but the welcome was short as everyone was eager to get down to business.

Once everyone was ready, Leon decided to just jump right into his business. He quickly explained everything that happened in as broad of terms as he thought he could get away with and enjoyed the few minutes of jubilation his success inspired, knowing that it could very well end as he continued to his second point of business.

"... I have to return to the mainland," he announced, and the gathering hall quickly went silent.

"Your Majesty," Nikolaos whispered, "this is a delicate time, the Thunderer is already making advances with the Bisons!"

"And with all the other Tribes in the north!" the Jaguar of the West added. "I think even the Eagles and Hawks will soon be getting delegations from him, too!" He nodded to the respective Tribes' present elders, though they scowled and reiterated their support for Leon.

"I'm aware that the timing's not... perfect," Leon said. "However, there's business I have to take care of back home. I can travel fast, especially on my own. A week to get there, a week or two to handle my business, and then a week back. Surely we can spare a month?"

"We are not soothsayers, Your Majesty," Nikolaos said. "We cannot see the future. But if you go through with this, you'd be giving the Thunderer far more time than you should!"

"Any time at all is too much!" the Jaguar responded.

"I agree!" Rain-Dancer shouted, adding the Hawks to the opposition. "We should be making entreaties with the Lions—"

"Don't worry about the Lions," Exallos Aetos, the ninth-tier leader of the present Eagles growled. "They won't support the Thunderer so easily. Neither will the Harts or the Ravens. The Bisons are the only ones who are in question, and the Thunderer already has a lead there that is unlikely to be overcome. We can continue to negotiate with them, but our King doesn't need to do that personally, does he? At least not yet?"

There were a few murmurs of agreement throughout the hall.

"Your Majesty," Exallos continued, "A month should be no problem. Two could even be doable. More than that would be a problem."

"I only need one," Leon replied with a confident smile.

Exallos bowed and replied, "Then nothing more needs to be said, is there? Our King needs a month. We can buy him that much time."

"We can," Nikolaos admitted, "but if we lose any of our fellow Tribes to the Thunderer's clutches, then it will almost certainly be because of this delay! And the more Tribes fall in with him, the more likely we are to descend into civil war!"

"I will be brief," Leon said. He didn't want to leave the island himself, but his frequent chats with Elise, Cassandra, and the others back in Occulara had kept him informed of the goings-on in Heaven's Eye and the Empires. Talal and the Director were holding down Heaven's Eye well enough, but they were stressing that Leon really should make an appearance, even if it was brief. Anastasios and the Grand Druid were also pressing Elise for an update, but she was stalling as best as she could, as was Cassandra.

But the real reason why Leon was excited to return to Occulara was that Tikos had informed him that the Hesperidic Apple trees were due for another batch within the next months, and he needed to get back home to partake.

It was both fortunate and unfortunate, but he simply had to get back home so that he could ensure everything was kept in order, and calling with the comm lotuses wasn't an option—he had to be there in person.

Eventually, the elders and Chiefs got on board with his plan, but plans were also made for his return. He'd stop in Raikos when he did come back, and then he'd head a day at most later to Lion territory. They would be his next diplomatic visit. Until then, the Jaguars, Hawks, and Eagles would see to their diplomatic overtures.

Once all of that was decided, Leon allowed the meeting to end. What he had to discuss next was something that ought to be done only with a few people, not with the entire hall—at least, not yet. He was growing more and more concerned about the Bears, and he needed to consult with wiser and more experienced elders before bringing the matter up with everyone else...

Chapter 869 - Visiting Home

"Just keep an eye on the Bears," Leon said. "It's clear to me now that they're going to be our biggest problem."

"Agreed," the Jaguar responded with a deep frown. "As much as it pains me to think so ill of a brother Tribe, the past few years have proven such concern is warranted. But you need not fear for us, Leon; in the event of a surprise attack, we won't be caught off-guard."

Leon sighed and nodded, then turned his eyes westward. He and the Jaguar were exchanging a few last words before Leon and his retainers departed for Occulara. They were in Raimondas, the capital of the Eagle Tribe, and it seemed like the entire Tribe had turned out to see Leon off, let alone the many Eagle, Hawk, and Jaguar elders who'd accompanied Leon west. It was time for the journey home to begin, but Leon had pulled the Jaguar aside right before they left, flying a thousand feet into the air to ensure privacy while they spoke.

"See to it that we aren't," Leon growled as he turned his eyes back east. He then let a cheeky grin spread across his face and he said, "It would be mighty inconvenient if I returned only to find the three Tribes who've sworn themselves to me have been wiped out."

"It would be a touch more inconvenient for us," the Jaguar quipped with a shallow smile. "But you can rest assured that we're keeping an eye on the Bears and will mobilize whoever we need to keep our lands safe."

“Pass on my concerns to the Hawks as well. If the Bears sent those beasts, then they need to be ready for any potential second tries.”

“To raise such powerful beasts isn’t done lightly,” the Jaguar replied. “War beasts are precious things, to let them loose in a neighboring Tribe is an enormous waste of resources. I can’t imagine this was intentional, and if it was, it won’t be done again. The Hawks lost a few thousand people, several villages, and trade was temporarily disrupted heading into the Common Lands. For four beasts of that power, that’s a bad trade.”

Leon frowned for a moment in thought, then shrugged. “I hope I’m just paranoid, then.”

“As do I...”

“Before I leave, Jaguar, there’s only one thing I want to see when I get back that I can’t see now, something I hope you’ll do everything in your power to make a reality.”

“Anything, my King.”

“I want to see Eagles and Jaguars using my transformation enchantment. It’s safe, if the Hawks are any indication, and it boosts power. It would be foolish not to use it.”

“Nikolaos has already begun constructing it in his soul realm,” the Jaguar replied a little hesitantly. “Some of our other warriors have also agreed to test it for themselves.”

“If, or when, those tests pan out, I’m hoping others will jump on it, too.”

The Jaguar grimly nodded but offered no additional words.

They hovered in the air for several seconds more before Leon glanced downward and said, “I should go. The sooner I leave the sooner I’ll be back.”

“If you say so, Your Majesty,” the Jaguar said with a bow.

Leon smirked as he resisted the urge to tell him not to bow, then began to descend, the Jaguar following just behind him.

Waiting for them on the docks of Raimondas were all of the Hawk elders and Chiefs in the city, as well as all those who’d accompanied Leon from Raikos. In front of all of them, however, were Leon’s retainers, most seeming quite eager to get underway. Red and Maia, in particular, seemed quite bored, while Anzu paced about watching fish swim beneath the docks and Leon’s human retainers chatted amongst themselves. Anshu and Valeria, however, remained quiet and aloof, with the latter standing in front of everyone else and watching Leon descend, while the former stood behind the others and stared westward, his eyes unfocused as if he were staring at something only he could see.

“All right,” Leon called out as he touched down. “Everyone ready?”

A chorus of affirmative statements followed.

With a smile, Leon then said, “Then let’s get moving. No need to waste time, right?”

With that, Leon landed and led his people to the docked Jaguar ship they’d been standing next to. They weren’t going to take the ship far, only needing it for a few miles so that they could get beyond the

misty veil that protected the island from invasion. That ship would remain in Raimondas, and when Leon was on his way back in a few weeks, he'd let the Jaguar know, who would then send the ship back out to the open sea to meet them. It would then ferry them back to the island.

And so, Leon and his people boarded the ship, leaving most of the elders and chiefs behind on the dock. It wasn't long before Leon was on his way back to Occulara.

Occulara had never quite felt like 'home' to Leon, not like the Forest of Black and White had when he was younger. He liked his villa, and he was quite comfortable there, not to mention that wherever his family rooted itself was where he wanted to be, but when he imagined what 'home' was, he didn't envision the villa.

However, that didn't stop him from sighing in relief as he landed in one of his inner courtyards. He had alerted Elise and Cassandra, so they were awaiting him with Helen, Anna, Tikos, Talal, and a few household servants, but otherwise, no one even knew that he was back. He and the rest of his retinue had flown in under the cover of darkness shrouds, invisible to all senses.

As soon as he touched down, though, Leon dropped the invisibility and changed from his armor into more normal clothing. He barely had time to adjust his shirt before he had his arms full of his fire-haired wife; Elise just about tackled him, but he spun her about to dissipate her momentum, much to her amusement. He passionately embraced her as she planted a flurry of kisses all over his face.

But after a few seconds, he set her back down and they separated. Cassandra had sashayed over in that time, a sly glint in her eye.

"Have fun across the sea?" she asked.

Leon grinned and pulled her into a tight hug. He whispered into her ear, "Not as much fun as I would've rather had back here with you..."

She giggled and replied, "And what made you think I want to have fun with you?"

"I can feel where your hands are drifting," Leon replied, making no attempt to stop her southward advance.

She cheekily smiled back, her ruby eyes flashing with desire, but before she could respond, Valeria stepped forward and said, "We should head inside. Business before pleasure."

"Of course," Leon agreed as he disentangled himself from Cassandra, eliciting from her a displeased whimper. Leon spared only one solitary moment to nod to Anshu before giving everyone else a quick greeting and leading them back inside the villa. Anshu, however, didn't follow. He had some people of his own to get back into contact with. Though he was going to be following Leon again, at least for a while, Leon had met with him and agreed with his desire not to let the resources he'd built up in his years away from Occulara atrophy.

When Leon's entire retinue—minus Anshu—assembled back in one of his larger meeting rooms, he found himself relaxing in a way that he hadn't in months. It simply felt good to have—almost—all of his people around at once. Elevating his mood further, it seemed that Anna was doing better, smiling more

readily and engaging with the rest of the retinue in a way he hadn't seen her do since before she killed Casimir.

When Leon finally got everyone sat down and situated, he began explaining to those of his people who hadn't accompanied him south what he and the others had gotten up to in the weeks he'd been gone. He'd been reporting to Elise and Cassandra just about every day, of course, but this wasn't just about making sure everyone was on the same page, it was also about hammering out just what to tell everyone else who might want reports of their own, such as the Director or the Lord Protector, for instance.

That meeting took nearly an hour, but when it was done, everyone's spirits were elevated when Tikos announced that the Hesperidic Apples would be ready for harvest in only two days, and there would likely be four to spare during this harvest.

Leon grinned, but the expression died quickly as he pondered just who to give those extra apples to. It would do well to give them to the Director or Anastasios and the Grand Druid—shoring up his alliances in the Empires while he was gone wasn't the worst idea. However, he wondered if he would see more benefit if he shared those apples with his supporters in the Ten Tribes instead. It would show them as much as the transformation enchantment could that he was willing to share power with them and not consider them merely slaves. Besides, he would only be strengthening his position by strengthening those who'd sworn themselves to him.

He hadn't yet come to a proper conclusion when one of the household staff members knocked on the door. Elise answered it, exchanged a few words with the servant, and then turned to Leon, a look of concern on her face.

"Some men from the Sunlit Empire have arrived, husband..."

Zeno of Tellarios was the kind of man that Leon couldn't imagine smiled often. He had hard, stern features that looked chiseled from stone, and a gaze that brooked no nonsense. Though he was 'only' an eighth-tier mage, when he turned to greet Leon he had the expression of one who very much did not think Leon his equal, let alone his superior in any matter.

And yet he stood in the atrium of the villa, flanked by half a dozen reasonably powerful mages of the fifth and sixth-tier.

"Leon Raime," he growled with barely disguised contempt—or so his tone came off. "Welcome back to Occulara." He didn't bother introducing himself to Leon, so Leon was thankful that he'd at least shared his name with Leon's staff, allowing Leon to hear about it from Elise.

Leon grinned dangerously. "That's an interesting way to say 'hello'. Have I been out of the public eye so long that people think I've left the city?"

"Such games are unbecoming," Zeno replied. "Let us dispense with pretense. I bear a message from my Emperor. He wishes to inform you that he has many concerns about the way you and Heaven's Eye have been behaving of late, especially with how... political your recent marriage to the Princess Cassandra was."

“Heaven’s Eye remains neutral, despite my personal affairs,” Leon shot back, though internally he knew that excuse wouldn’t fly. He wouldn’t accept it if their roles were reversed.

Zeno continued, “His Imperial Majesty has indicated that if no attempt is made to contact him to clear these matters up, he’ll be forced to come to Occulara to demand an explanation. It is in everyone’s best interest to ensure that no international norms are being violated and that the current Imperial status quo remains unshaken.”

“That sounds suspiciously like a threat, though I know the Sunlit Emperor is far too noble to stoop so low...”

“His Imperial Majesty will do as needed to ensure the prosperity of our Empire. Now, my message has been delivered; I will depart.”

Without so much as the slightest attempt to ask for Leon’s leave to leave, Zeno and his party left, leaving Leon feeling rather insulted and more than a little worried.

“He left, just like that?” Elise said with a scowl. “How rude.”

Leon sighed. “Something that we ought to expect from Imperial sorts, shouldn’t we, at this point?”

“Being rude is being rude whether expected or not,” Elise insisted.

Leon shrugged in agreement. “Well. Aside from that rudeness, shall we catch up? I’ll be heading into Heaven’s Eye tomorrow, so I’ll bring it up with the Director, and I’m sure the Grand Druid and Lord Protector will want to speak, assuming they don’t just show up like Zeno did and demand to be seen before then.”

Elise looked at him and grinned, a look of excitement that was mirrored on Leon’s face. It wasn’t long before they were in bed with Maia, making up for these past few weeks apart.

Leon waltzed into his workshop satisfied and more than a little tired. Elise and Maia had worn him out as best they could, and were he only twenty years old, he would’ve called it quits there and gone to sleep with them in his arms.

But he was closing in on forty now, and he had Valeria and Cassandra to see to, as well, and since neither of them were willing to share their time as Elise and Maia were, Leon had to rely on his magic to see him through to the end.

But see his welcome through to the end he did, and he left his ladies well-satisfied.

Now, with his mind clear, despite his relative bodily fatigue, there was one more person he needed to check in on.

When he entered his workshop, Nestor had changed things around a bit. The change wasn’t nearly so drastic as when Leon returned from the Northern Vales with the Iron Needle, but he still immediately noticed that many of Nestor’s golem-crafting tools had grown more sophisticated if their increasingly sleek designs were anything to go by.

Nestor had also expanded the mirror in Leon's enchanting corner. The mirror Nestor had made could allow the sketching of enchantments without needing to waste spell paper or ink, and now Leon found that Nestor had replaced it with an otherwise identical one, save for the fact that it was three times as big.

"If you keep making modifications to this place, we're going to run out of room," Leon quipped as he collapsed in his chaise lounge. As he did, Nestor's pet tiger lumbered over and made a playful chuffing sound, prompting Leon to reach out and start petting the vicious-looking predator, who immediately began purring and leaning into his hand like a kitten.

"I will make whatever modifications are necessary, boy," Nestor growled, hardly acknowledging Leon's return. "We are not so much limited by knowledge as we are by tools. With finer and more advanced tools, we can make anything; we only need to spend the time to do so."

"Dead man, is that... faith in my abilities that I hear? I know that you think yourself a genius, but you're including me in that statement, aren't you?" Leon grinned at the golem housing Nestor's magic body, hoping to provoke the man a bit.

Instead, Nestor just grunted in annoyance and turned back to what he was doing, which appeared to be upgrading the cores of the two labor golems that Leon had left with him.

Leon wasn't too happy with that response, but he refrained from trying to elicit any more. Instead, he got back up—to the annoyance of Nestor's cat—and replaced the golden tube containing the Iron Needle in its stone plinth on the floor.

"It's good you brought that back, boy," Nestor said as he paused in his work. "I half-expected it to be stolen out from under your nose."

"I suppose that answers whether or not you were expressing faith in my abilities..."

"Indeed. Now, why don't you prove me right yet again and regale me with tales from the Sky Devil's Hell?"

Leon chuckled and quickly filled Nestor in on the happenings among the Ten Tribes. It was a bit annoying repeating this information so many times, but he refrained from complaining too much, knowing that he would have to repeat it at least once more with the Director and Penelope, and possibly again with Anastasios and the Grand Druid.

"Hmm. Satisfactory. Not ideal, but satisfactory," Nestor said.

[Hm. Does the intangible corpse think himself so much better at making allies?] Xaphan crackled from deep in Leon's soul realm. [Perhaps he would like to step up, then, and pry himself away from his toys to do something actually useful for a change?]

[Are you asking me to repeat that to him?] Leon inquired.

Xaphan paused a moment, then answered, [No. Let him do what he pleases. Not like the shitheel would do anything constructive, anyway.]

Leon shrugged again and turned his attention back to Nestor.

"How about you, Nestor? Has everything been going well here?"

"Well enough. I'm furnished with the materials I need, and no one bothers me unduly."

"Are there any people duly bothering you?"

"Those pretenders sometimes come around and knock, but I ignore them and they eventually leave," Nestor said. Leon knew he meant Anastasios and the Grand Druid when he said that.

With a frown, Leon said, "They shouldn't be coming around here. If they persist, stay the course and don't let them come in."

"Wasn't intending on ever doing so."

"Good. As for other collaborations, though..."

Nestor finally paused what he was doing and turned to face Leon. His featureless face plate was incapable of expressing emotion, but Leon still thought it looked both serious and surprised then.

"What do you mean, boy? Are you going to try and sell me services?"

"No. You have other priorities. The Iron Needle, the golems, Adamant, so much to do and so little time. No, what I'm asking you about is something else entirely. I'm going to meet with the Director tomorrow to get an update on Heaven's Eye's arks. Want to come?"

Nestor just stared at Leon for a long moment before giving his answer.

"Yes."

Chapter 870 - Evaluating the Arks

It was with brazen confidence that Leon walked into the Director's office, Nestor at his side. He received quite a few curious looks from people not just in the Hexagon but throughout Occulara, but he ignored them all. Nestor was 'only' a golem, after all, which was of interest, but not considered dangerous. He didn't think he'd be quite so bold if it were more obvious who Nestor was, but as it was, he was beyond tired of hiding absolutely everything he had, and having one golem accompany him around was hardly a threat to anyone. If anything, people would only assume he was parading about a trophy he'd picked up somewhere, not that he had a Prince of his ancient Clan by his side.

The Director was less impressed and more curious when Leon arrived, though.

"I see you've brought a golem with you," he said. "Interesting construct."

"More than interesting," Leon said. "But before we get into that, I wanted to talk about the Sunlit Emperor..."

Leon quickly filled the Director in on his visit from Zeno the night before.

The Director sighed when Leon finished. "We knew that there would be some difficult questions asked about your marriage. It solves the Grand Druid-shaped problem but presents even more at the same time. Have you heard anything from the east?"

"In Sentinel lands?" Leon asked. When the Director nodded, he said, "No, I haven't."

"I have received reports that there have been a few meetings between the Keeper and the Sunlit Emperor over the past couple months. Sentinel military forces have been seen moving southward, apparently acting as an expeditionary force to aid in the war with the Sky Devils. But I've heard whispers about promises made behind closed doors and alliances made between tenth-tier mages..."

Leon frowned deeply. "Has the Keeper allied with the Sunlit Emperor? Have they allied against us?"

"This has all taken place behind closed doors so I can't say, but that is my fear. They see Ilion and Evergold growing closer, so they reach out to each other to act as a counterbalance. This in and of itself is hardly worth commenting on, just the ebb and flow of inter-empire politics. But given what we've been trying to accomplish, it has me feeling nervous. So, to relieve some of that anxiety, why don't you give me good news from the Sky Devil's Hell? There is at least some good news, isn't there?"

Leon's frown quickly bent back upward into a proud smile. "I have three of the Ten Tribes rallied behind me. I'll be visiting more once I get back, but I've gotten off to a promising start. There are some worrying signs that things won't be quite as easy with the remaining Tribes, but I have confidence that I'll be able to convince a majority of the Tribes to support me as their King."

"Good, good," the Director whispered. He asked a few more follow-up questions, and after about ten minutes, Leon had given him a reasonably thorough breakdown of how his few weeks on Kataigida had gone.

"I agree that these 'Bears' are going to be a problem," the Director said. "It sounds almost like they're trying to provoke a fight."

"That's my thought, too. What worries me is that the Jaguars are right to pull some of their military forces back to defend their lands, but this might also be used as a pretense for the Bears to break the peace and invade."

The Director frowned lightly and said, "I've generally found that if any political entity wants to do something, it's not a question of if they'll do it, but rather what they'll use to justify it. These Bears are going to do what they want to do anyway. Proceed with that assumption in mind and you'll be ready for them to make their move. But don't strike first if you can avoid it, better to keep the high ground as long as you can."

"I know and have been advised as such by the Tribal elders. I'm more and more convinced as the days go by that there'll be some kind of violence in the Ten Tribes, but I'll be ending it, not starting it."

The Director nodded. "Good. Good." Leon recognized his tone as the one he used when he wanted to move on, and he smiled when the Director finally looked at Nestor with more than just curious dismissiveness. Nestor had remained completely silent throughout the entire exchange, surprising Leon somewhat. He knew that the dead man was likely not going to want to draw attention to himself and saw all those around him as beneath his notice, but he still thought the golem-man would've said something by this point.

"I want to see the arks again," Leon said, momentarily avoiding talking about his mostly-dead kinsman and his steel shell.

"Little has changed in the months since you saw them last," the Director replied.

“You won’t just be showing me around, you’ll be showing him,” Leon said as he nodded at Nestor. “This is no ordinary golem, it’s more of an armored, enchanted frame containing someone’s magic body.”

The Director’s eyebrows shot up into his white hair as he stared at Nestor with a mixture of wariness and amazement. “A magic body...” he whispered. “Is the... are you alive?”

Nestor responded in his resonant metallic voice, “Yes. By some definitions.”

The Director took a few steps toward Nestor, then began circling the golem he resided in, inspecting it as thoroughly as he could. Nestor had built his golem frame with steel plate covering absolutely everything. He couldn’t be mistaken for a man in armor—he was clearly a golem—but all of the golem’s internal workings were completely obscured not just from physical sight, but all magical sight, too. There was nothing of any value the Director could learn from simply examining the surface of Nestor’s body as he was.

“Incredible,” the Director muttered. “So you’re not just a magic body projecting into this body? You don’t have a living body somewhere waiting for you to return?”

Nestor briefly glanced at Leon, then simply responded, “No.”

“That...” the Director whispered, not finishing the thought aloud. However, his eyes grew wide at what Leon was certain were the implications of such advanced applications of magic. Magic bodies were effectively ageless, after all. They were incredibly fragile, of course, being vulnerable to complete destruction from even the weakest and most common defensive wards.

Nestor wasn’t in any danger of that, however, with his golem body providing as much protection as he’d need in his daily life. After the visit the Keeper made to Leon’s villa several years ago, he’d also upgraded his body a bit to ensure that even a tenth-tier would have a hard time cracking through his shell and reaching the ruby his magic body resided within.

“How was this body built?” the Director enthusiastically asked. “Can others be made like it? Could anyone use something like this?”

“Let’s not get too carried away with questions,” Leon said.

“Are you aware of the implications such a device as this could have?” the Director demanded, appearing almost rabid.

“A mage could have a form of immortality if they were to use a golem like this,” Leon said with a nod of his head. “A magic body by itself can’t generate any magic power, so any mage using a golem like this would need a constant supply of magic power. Any mage stuck in golems would be unable to return to an organic body, too, so it’s not an option I think some would choose...”

“Enough would choose to live this way if they’ve reached the end of their natural life!” the Director insisted. “The value of something like this—”

“—Isn’t up for debate,” Nestor harshly interjected. “I am not in the business of constructing prosthetic bodies, especially not for barbarians who’re only a step or two removed from rolling around in mud and flinging their shit at each other.”

“The amount of good you could do—”

“—What you’re talking about is nothing new, yet it isn’t standard practice. The theory doesn’t hold up given the sheer impracticality of constructing a golem body for everyone. Move on.”

The Director glared at Nestor, seemingly taken aback at the man’s blunt rudeness, and for a moment, Leon thought he would press on, if for no other reason than because Nestor demanded that he drop the matter altogether.

But it seemed the Director decided to cut his losses. “Fine,” he said. Turning back to Leon, he asked, “Why have you brought him?”

“Have you heard of Nestor before?” Leon asked. “You have some knowledge of my Clan as it stood when it yet ruled over this plane, so...?”

“His name is somewhat familiar. I believe I’ve noticed his name referenced here and there, but other than that, I can’t say I’ve ever really heard of him.”

“Of course you haven’t,” Nestor grumbled.

“He was one of my Clan’s best enchanters in life. His lessons have made me the enchanter I am today, and as good as my skills may be, his are still leagues better. So what I wanted was for us to visit the arkyard and have Nestor look over Storm Herald at least, if not all six arks. He’ll know far more about them than we will.”

“I’m not an arksmith,” Nestor admitted, “but I agree with the sentiment. I’m also quite interested in the malfunctioning wisps found within Storm Herald.”

The Director stared at Nestor for a long moment, but when he turned his yellow eyes back to Leon, he nodded despite the deep frown etched into his aged features. Without a word, he opened the door to his secret passage and led them to his hangar.

Leon was expecting a fairly quiet and awkward ride to the arkyard, but Nestor had some words for the Director upon laying eyes upon the Director’s personal stealth ark.

“Ahh,” the dead man said, “I’m surprised any arks of this model survived our Clan’s downfall. Looks heavily modified, though...”

“We found this ark many years ago,” the Director said slowly. “It was in pieces and had to be rebuilt. Most of its internal systems aren’t original, but we managed to repair its stealth system when rebuilding it.”

As he spoke, the three of them entered the ark and took their seats. The Director ordered that they be taken to the arkyard, and a resonant voice acknowledged the order. A moment later, the ark began powering up.

“It seems like the wisp operating this ark is still intact, too,” Nestor observed.

The Director glared at him but didn’t deny it.

“Leon,” Nestor continued, “did you happen to notice the exterior of this ark?”

Leon nodded. The ark's hull was made of some kind of shiny, extremely reflective material that Leon assumed was another aspect of the ark's stealth capability.

"The ark's exterior is coated in low-grade Lumenite," Nestor explained. "Not strong enough for more... military applications, but enough to help make the ark invisible."

"Interesting," Leon whispered as the ark pulled out of the hangar and set out for the arkyard where the Director was keeping the rest of the arks he'd been holding onto.

The air in the ark was already awkward, but after Leon didn't ask any follow-up questions, Nestor didn't speak again, and neither did the Director. They simply 'enjoyed' the ride to its fullest and didn't make much small talk.

Upon reaching the arkyard, Nestor didn't wait for Leon or the Director and instead made directly for Storm Herald.

"He seems like he knows where he's going," the Director observed upon their entrance as Nestor walked with great confidence through the ark's opulent halls.

"This isn't his first time in the ark," Leon explained. "Out of everyone who we could have look the ark over, Nestor is one of the best we could've possibly had, even with his lack of expertise in arksmithing."

"And you believe his competence outweighs his disrespect?" the Director asked.

"If I didn't, he wouldn't still be around," Leon replied. "I've had him around a long time. He has a sharp tongue, but he's earned it through his skills."

Leon thought Nestor could probably hear, but at this point, he wasn't too worried about sharing his mind. Shooting barbs back and forth when in private was one thing, but now that they were with the Director, Leon felt compelled to defend Nestor. He was kin, after all, not to mention questions about Nestor's competence also questioned Leon's judgment.

Fair enough, as far as Leon was concerned, but in Nestor's case, he thought the man was proving him in the right for placing so much trust in him.

Over the next few hours, Nestor set about proving Leon right once again. He wasn't overly talkative, but he answered as many technical questions as he could whenever the Director had any. Seeing to the wisps in the ark was one of the few moments in their survey where he could speak quite confidently and authoritatively, without adding many qualifiers. Unfortunately, when Nestor led them to find the wisps, they found that the malfunctioning wisp was the only one still operational. Nestor took the wisp, indicating that repairing it might be possible, but leaving it in the ark was otherwise pointless.

Leon thought he was imagining it given the lack of expression on Nestor's golem face, but he thought the dead man gave him a sly look when he slid the crystal containing the wisp out of its cradle and handed it to him.

After that, Nestor took them on what was practically a tour of the ark, walking them through all of the most important sections of the ark and assessing their functionality as much as he could.

Once he was done, they found themselves on the bridge with Nestor operating several control consoles and analyzing the information they told him of the ark's remaining intact systems.

“There’s good news and bad news,” Nestor said as he turned back to them. “Which do you want to hear first?”

“The bad news,” the Director immediately replied.

“Given what I know of your plane’s abilities, it would take many years for this ark to become operational. It would require a lake of refined Titanstone and technical knowledge that I don’t possess.”

Leon scowled, then asked, “And the good news?”

“The ark still has plenty of power,” Nestor explained. “It was mothballed as much as possible, and much of the rest of the damage was intentional sabotage to keep the ark from falling into the hands of the plane’s natives. It was clearly a rush job since the wisps and power core weren’t taken, and that might be the biggest saving grace that this ark saw back then: the crippled systems didn’t drain the power core of all magic power.”

“How do we get the ark back into functioning order?” the Director asked through gritted teeth, his frustration obvious.

“Skilled arksmiths, the aforementioned Titanstone, likely a small amount of Lumenite, and several years of work. Once someone achieves Apotheosis, they would also need to work with me to create new wisps that can replace those that were damaged and lost. The bottom line is that this ark is not getting off the ground without a significant amount of work and more resources than I think anyone on this plane could give it. Not even Heaven’s Eye.”

Leon glanced at the Director and saw a dark look on the man’s face. He wasn’t happy about this news, though that much was understandable. Leon wasn’t quite sure Heaven’s Eye didn’t have the capabilities to get what Nestor wanted, but the key was keeping these arks away from the Empires, and moving all the resources and personnel to even try and repair these arks would tip them off.

However, that didn’t mean that they were out of options.

“How much Titanstone would we need?” Leon asked.

“About seven tons of it,” Nestor replied. “And that would just be for its critical systems. To bring all of this ark’s systems back online would likely require triple that estimate.”

“Titanstone is quarried in large amounts, but the Empires have a complete monopoly on its use and trade,” the Director said.

“There are some quarries on Kataigida,” Leon replied. “I could gain access to them if I succeed in winning over all Ten Tribes.”

“We shouldn’t place all our hope of that outcome,” the Director responded.

“There is an old Titanstone refinery the Clan built in what is now Sunlit land,” Leon pointed out.

“There was,” Nestor said with a nod of his head. “I believe you mentioned a belief that it’s likely not been found.”

The Director's head snapped around to Leon as soon as Leon mentioned it, and after Nestor's reply, he asked, "Where?"

Leon retrieved a map and pointed out the rough location. Most Thunderbird Clan sites of any importance became cities as people took advantage of the infrastructure already built after the Thunderbird Clan's fall. Only a few places remained potentially undiscovered or not looted bare. The Titanstone refinery was at the top of that list, along with one other important location...

"As for the technical knowledge," Leon continued as the Director scrutinized the map, "would it be possible that there are records still surviving in the east that might prove useful in repairing this ark? The capital the Clan established on this plane was never reoccupied, as I recall, with the Sentinels declaring it absolutely off-limits to everyone."

"That's true," the Director whispered as his attention shifted from the Sunlit Empire to the Sentinels' territory. "The largest cache of Thunderbird Clan artifacts and the Sentinels prevent anyone and anything from coming within physical sight of the place, let alone close enough to explore..."

"Then it sounds like we need to gain access to this refinery and see if it has any Titanstone left, as well as trying to gain access to the old capital in the east," Leon said. "I also have another reason to become King of the Ten Tribes."

"This is sounding like the beginnings of a plan..." the Director acknowledged. "Assuming the Sunlit Emperor doesn't get in our way..."

"There is one other possibility," Leon slowly murmured. "The Grave Warden offered arks and more for accomplishing his task. He might be able to fix this ark..."

"Let's see what we can do on our own, first," the Director insisted. "Debts to others ought not to be taken lightly. And when debts are taken, it's of paramount importance that we are receiving worthwhile benefits. In this case, I'm inclined to say that these benefits are, but that's a bridge we ought to cross only when there are no other options."

"Agreed," Leon said. He glanced at Nestor and asked, "Is there anything more you want to see here?"

"I am only interested in the wisps the other arks may possess," Nestor answered. "The other arks as a whole don't interest me."

"Then let's see about those wisps and then head back to the Hexagon," Leon said. "We've been gone long enough, I think."

"Indeed," the Director replied, and the three of them set about finishing up their work.

Leon wasn't too happy about Nestor's analysis of Storm Herald, but he took comfort in at least having some kind of plan for the future. They'd get those arks up and running at some point, that much he swore when they finally departed the arkyard. Storm Herald would fly again, but when it did, it would be flying under his banner as it lived up to its name.