

Storm King 871

Chapter 871 - Checking In

Leon, Nestor, and the Director quickly went through the other five arks as quickly as they were able. As much as Nestor professed that he wasn't interested in them, however, he couldn't help but take a quick look at some of their more important systems while they were there. Unfortunately, they'd all been quite thoroughly crippled, though not so much that, as Nestor put it, 'competent' arksmiths couldn't repair them with the proper materials.

It was getting those proper materials that was the greater concern. Titanstone was the biggest one since the substance was key in producing the enchanted machinery that powered and sustained arks, even the relatively primitive ones built by the Empires. Not even Heaven's Eye could get their hands on any in quantities larger than a few grams here and there. Seven tons just for Storm Herald was quite out of their reach for the time being, let alone the other five damaged Thunderbird Clan arks.

However, on the way back to his villa, Leon wondered how much the Grand Druid might be willing to part with now that they were family. He didn't want to tip her off to the arks that Heaven's Eye possessed, but he supposed a discrete inquiry or two while handing off any Hesperidic Apple seeds later might be warranted.

It was with only muted excitement that Leon and Nestor left the Hexagon. They hadn't found any intact wisps on the other arks, so Nestor was leaving with only the one damaged wisp found in Storm Herald. Fortunately, that damaged wisp was one of the more powerful and important wisps on one of the most powerful and important arks in the Clan's former fleet, so the gains they could make with it were profound, but it was hard not to think about what had been lost in the other arks.

It served to underscore just how far Leon still had to go just to get off Aeterna, let alone rebuild his Clan in the Nexus.

Leon wasn't able to head home immediately after leaving the Hexagon, though he sent Nestor on without him. The dead man had his own business to take care of, but Leon had to check in on Magical Research and Development. He'd left it in good hands with Talal, but that didn't mean he could just ignore his responsibilities while he was in the city.

Fortunately, no one had forgotten him, so when he walked into the building it was like he'd never left. His assistants and secretaries swarmed him and Talal and all department heads that were in the building dropped what they were doing to come and give him reports on what was happening in his branch of Heaven's Eye.

For the most part, Leon was happy with how Talal was running things. He made sure that every important project was funded, and several projects that hadn't been going anywhere had been scrapped entirely, allowing their resources to be sent to other projects.

For Leon, though, the projects he had his eyes on the most were those that were working on refining Tikos' comm lotuses, iteration on MALL and stationary Lightning Lances designs, and Valentina's research into the transformation enchantment he'd left her.

In the case of the first, he was presented with a new, smaller design. It didn't present any significant increase in capabilities, but they'd figured out a way to significantly cut down on the resources required to build a communication apparatus. Already, the equipment designed for comm lotuses was less expensive than the comm stones that were already in use throughout the world. The only problem that yet had to be solved so that they could truly be made practical was the production of the lotuses themselves, as Tikos was still the only one capable of making them. Solving that problem would be the key to fully realizing the potential of comm lotuses.

Matters on the MALL and Lightning Lance front were more encouraging. Leon had provided his research teams with thunder wood, and while it hadn't completely solved the limited power problems that the MALLs had, the material had at least allowed the Lightning Lances to fire without drawing too heavily on the entire platform's power supply.

In more practical terms, the latest designs promised to come close to tripling the number of bolts the Lances could fire, while also doubling at least the range the platforms could travel. Seeing that, as well as some artist mock-ups of the newer, sleeker designs for the weapon platforms, had Leon almost regretting that his engineers were still building their latest prototypes.

Finally, Valentina's project was one he was both most excited about and most disappointed by. Any possibility of amplifying his bloodline or otherwise drawing some new power from it would benefit him like almost nothing else could. Unfortunately, the team was still testing varying hypotheses, and little progress had been made to understand the bits of the transformation enchantment he'd left with them.

To encourage their work, Leon decided to just accept the risk and shared with Valentina more of the original transformation enchantments, both the one that he'd used for years that turned him into a clone of the Thunderbird, and the other one originally made by the Primal God that was responsible for turning him into the black dragon-eagle thing at the end of the campaign in the Serpentine Isles. He hoped that having the original work to study would aid them in realizing any more potential locked in his blood—and the blood of anyone else with Inherited Bloodlines that may swear themselves to him...

When those meetings were finally done, he found himself swamped with more paperwork. Talal was his second-in-command in the branch and had been entrusted with significant authority while he was away, but he could still only do so much, and Leon had to maintain some level of oversight to ensure that everything was running smoothly.

One such problem that required his attention was one of the few high-ranking holdouts from Rufus' time as branch Chief, a seventh-tier mage working in the admin department. He had been corruptly mismanaging significant resources, and while Talal had been able to minimize the damage, he didn't have the authority to unilaterally get rid of such a high-ranking branch member even in Leon's absence.

Leon sighed and simply ordered the man fired. The documented evidence of the man's corruption was enough for Leon, and what was more, he trusted Talal.

Of course, just because he trusted the man didn't mean he had no oversight. As soon as the high-level meeting ended, Leon went to another meeting with his accountants, secretaries, and others in his administrative staff and asked for evaluations of Talal. He was heartened to hear that nearly everyone he asked had nothing but good things to say about the man.

Many of those working in higher levels of the branch had been there when Rufus ran things and were able to testify to how Rufus had mangled the branch during his time. Rufus had encouraged his departments to compete against each other for resources and valued loyalty over competence, so the branch suffered from significant corruption while he was in charge. Rufus had been loyal to the Director, though, and had delivered results when they mattered, but he ran the branch like it was his personal fiefdom and did everything he could to ensure his power.

When Leon and Talal came in and purged most of Rufus' loyalists, Talal had gotten to work overhauling the branch's administrative structure to value results rather than loyalty, and as far as everyone was concerned, he'd largely succeeded. Not completely solved, of course, as the matter with the corrupt seventh-tier in admin showed, but morale was high, corruption was low, and progress was being made much more quickly than before.

When he left the branch tower later that night, Leon found himself more than confident in continuing to leave Talal in charge. If he did succeed in becoming King—and he was quite confident that he would—he'd probably have to leave Heaven's Eye, and having someone like Talal in charge of his branch would do much to alleviate his concern.

'Whatever the Director did to him when we arrived in this city must've put the fear of the Gods and all his Ancestors into the man,' Leon thought with some amusement as he made his way home. Talal had abused his power in Akhmim, where he'd originally been stationed, but now he was showing himself to be competent and dogged in his weeding out of corruption in the branch's ranks.

It was dark when Leon made it home, and he was greeted at the door by Elise.

"Leon," she said with a glowing smile as he walked in. "Productive day?"

"Productive enough," he said. "Less than I'd have liked, but progress takes time."

Elise smiled and took his arm, then began steering him away from the private areas of the villa and toward the wing where the Lord Protector and Grand Druid stayed whenever they were in town.

"You'll have to tell me all about it later. Right now, we have two tenth-tier mages in our home who are low on patience."

"In a bad way? Or a normal way?" Leon asked.

"Normal," Elise answered as she halted in the hallway. "Cassie's with them now keeping them occupied, so you have some time if you have something else you need to take care of."

Leon frowned for a moment and projected his magic senses. He saw through his villa's defensive wards that Anastasios and the Grand Druid were with Cassandra in the Grand Druid's apartments looking for all the world like a pair of grandparents doting on their granddaughter. Neither seemed to have noticed that he'd returned, which he chalked up to both their preoccupation with his wife and with the strength of his wards.

Then, he turned his attention to his workshop, where Nestor was hard at work evaluating the wisp and its container they'd taken from Storm Herald. Deciding who to visit first wasn't particularly hard.

"I need to check in with Nestor first," he said. "Our guests seem like they're being entertained well enough, and I'd rather have all my ducks in a row before I head in there."

"Then let's do that," Elise beamed, and together, they made their way down to Leon's workshop.

Upon entering, they were greeted at the door by only Nestor's sleepy tiger, the dead man himself being too taken with whatever he was doing with the wisp.

"Hey Nestor!" Leon called out upon entering. "How often do you let your cat out? Can't be healthy, leaving him inside all the time!"

"He's an indoor cat!" Nestor shouted back. "But he gets plenty of exercise outdoors!"

Leon gave Elise a skeptical look and muttered, "Have you ever seen him taking this monster outside?"

"A couple times," Elise replied with a shrug and a look of mild apprehension sent the tiger's way.

Leon sighed. The cat looked healthy enough, he supposed, and so long as it wasn't tearing the workshop to pieces, then he was fine. So, he waltzed over to the desk Nestor had been working at. The crystal containing the damaged wisp was in the middle of a complex enchantment array with dozens of different controls that Nestor was constantly adjusting. Next to the array was a projected light screen filled with what looked like some kind of simplistic technical readout, but Leon lacked the context to understand what it was supposed to be communicating.

"What is all this?" he asked.

"Wisps designed for specific purposes can sometimes need maintenance," Nestor explained. "Wisps in general are self-sustaining and hard to damage, but their containers can cause them to degrade if unattended for too long. That's what happened with this one."

"Has it said anything since bringing it in?" Elise asked as she joined them at the desk, a look of wonder on her face. "I remember you telling me that it tried to talk, but then seemed to die..."

"It appeared, kept stuttering, then vanished when I was first in Storm Herald," Leon confirmed.

"Degradation," Nestor growled. "It's an easy enough problem to solve... with the right tools. And I don't have the right tools. I'm trying to do complex surgery with a butcher's knife and graver's chisel."

"If anyone can do that, I'm sure you can," Leon said.

Nestor paused, then glanced at Leon for the first time since Leon had entered the workshop. "Are my auditory enchantments malfunctioning or was that a compliment?"

Leon shrugged noncommittally. "Take it as you please, but you've rarely failed to deliver on results... eventually."

Nestor audibly scoffed and turned back to the wisp, but he didn't immediately return to adjusting the controls on the enchantment console.

"There is something that I've been meaning to bring up with you, Leon," the dead man said.

"What is it?"

"You seem to prefer straight, uncomplicated magic. Conjuring lightning bolts and manipulating the weather."

"Yes..." Leon hesitantly replied. "As opposed to what, exactly?"

"Your fish girl—"

"Naiad," Elise corrected. "She has a name for others to use. Use it."

Nestor turned to regard her, his impassive featureless face impossible to read. Then he whispered, "Naiad often uses her magic to conjure river dragons. These creatures act autonomously, though still slaved to her will since they are her power."

Leon nodded along. "I think I see what you're getting at. Our Ancestor once told me that such magic was like creating primitive wisps."

"Like creating primitive wisps," Nestor said, nodding his head. "What she creates are as much wisps as one of these is a human." Nestor waved at the labor golems Leon had given to him for experimentation. "It would help us a great deal if you were to do something similar."

"Practice?" Leon asked.

"Practice," Nestor confirmed.

"Practice for creating wisps?" Elise asked. "How related is this, exactly? I don't think Leon can create eagle-shaped lightning bolts and count that, right?"

"No," Nestor replied before he sighed and looked away for a moment. "Look. I've created wisps before. I had to, for my golem research. But I wouldn't say that I'm skilled in their creation. My technical skills are good enough to get me what I need, but the art of wisp creation is beyond me. Repairing this wisp might be beyond me, too..."

"I thought you said repairing it was easy?" Leon asked.

"With the right tools, it would be," Nestor testily shot back. "As it is..." He paused again and seemed to need a moment to work himself up to what he had to say.

Leon wasn't used to seeing him like this, so he gave the dead man the time he needed. When Nestor was ready to speak again, he didn't turn to face Leon or Elise and spoke in a low murmur.

"... The demon is likely better than anyone else you could find at creating wisps... Learn from him."

Leon cocked an eyebrow in surprise. "Was that... a compliment, Nestor? Did you express faith in Xaphan's abilities?"

"You did so for me, it would be uncouth if I didn't reciprocate."

"Usually," Elise said, "the compliment is repaid to the person who complimented you, not to someone else."

"That's a shame; I had only the one to spare and it went to the demon. I'll agree that it was a waste, but what's done is done."

Leon just grinned and shook his head. Casting his attention down into his soul realm for a moment, he was mildly amused to see Xaphan in a healing trance. The demon likely hadn't heard what Nestor had said, and Leon doubted he'd believe him when he told the demon what had just happened.

"Well, keep working on it, Nestor," Leon said. "I'll talk to Xaphan later and see what we can do. Hopefully, if I ever reach Apotheosis, I'll be in a good place to start creating actual wisps."

Nestor grunted, then added, "One last thing, Leon. If the proper tools for wisp repair still exist on this plane, they'll likely be in the old capital in the east. Keep that in mind. Getting our hands on those tools might get this wisp back in working order and would help in getting our navigation wisp installed into Storm Herald, should the rest of the ark be repaired. These two wisps alone won't be quite enough to get the ark into shape, but we'll need them anyway."

"I'll make a note of it," Leon said before he glanced northward. Not for the first time, he wondered just how useful the stone giants might be in this endeavor. Their stone bodies were only shells, after all, and their true forms were quite wisp-like, if more powerful.

He didn't immediately bring the matter up, though, as he already knew what Nestor's reaction might be.

With that, Leon and Elise left the workshop. A more detailed report on the wisps could wait until later, as well as learning just what tools were needed for wisp repair, but for now, they still had two tenth-tier mages in the villa waiting for them. On the way back to the villa, however, Leon paused in the gardens.

"There's something I'd like to ask you, love," he said as he took Elise in his arms.

"You sound so serious," Elise replied with a laugh.

"I don't mean to, just something came up in Magical R&D today that I think you could help with."

"Anything you need," Elise quickly replied.

"Comm lotuses," Leon immediately said. "Right now, Tikos is our only source of the flower. If we're to replace comm stones, we need to figure out how to mass-produce the lotuses. I'm an amateur at such things, but you, Helen, and Tikos I'm sure could figure something out."

Elise hummed as she glanced toward their fields, a thoughtful look on her face. "I'd have to have a long talk with Tikos first, but I think it's doable. Are we working on a time frame?"

"Sometime within our lifetimes would be nice," Leon cheekily replied.

"I'll see what I can do," Elise responded with a bright smile.

Leon gave her a quick kiss, and together, they finally made their way to Anastasios and the Grand Druid.

Chapter 872 - Shoring Up Alliances

"... looked like a giant serpent's maw, and I could do nothing but stare into it for days because my workers refused to enter," Cassandra explained as Leon and Elise walked into the sitting room.

From what Leon had gathered, she'd been in there with the Grand Druid and Anastasios for more than an hour, entertaining them with stories of her expeditions outside of the Sacred Golden Empire.

As Leon and Elise entered, however, Cassandra paused her story to jump to her feet and playfully glare at them both.

"You're late," she growled.

"Had work," Leon simply replied as Elise shut the door behind them. Without another word, he waltzed over to the bar area to pour himself something to just have in hand, while he glanced at Elise and wordlessly asked her if she wanted anything. With a smirk and tilt of her head, she gave her answer; Leon grabbed a pair of glasses.

As he rummaged around in the bar looking for something reasonably tasty without much intoxicating material in it, Cassandra practically draped herself over the bar, demanding his attention. So, he stood back up, a bottle of Elise's favorite wine in one hand and some random juice he'd grabbed in the other, and grinned at her.

"Want something, Your Highness?" he asked.

She didn't waste any words, she simply grabbed his shirt, pulled him forward, and pressed her lips against his. The kiss only lasted long enough for the Grand Druid to gasp in delight and the Lord Protector to laugh in amusement, and Cassandra pulled away from Leon, her face slightly flushed with what Leon thought was embarrassment and perhaps something else if the way her ruby eyes had narrowed was any indication.

"It warms my old heart to see you two lovebirds so taken with each other," Anastasios said with a teasing smile.

"It would warm mine even more to see some great-grandchildren," the Grand Druid said with a grin that was both teasing and expectant.

"In our own time," Leon smoothly replied even as Cassandra rounded on her grandmother with irritation. "I hope we weren't interrupting anything when we arrived, but I understand that you two were waiting to speak with me?"

As he spoke, Cassandra seemed to relax and let her grandmother's words go, while Leon brought Elise her wine. She'd taken a seat on the sofa opposite the Grand Druid and Lord Protector, and when Leon slid in to sit next to her, she wrapped herself around his side. Cassandra wasted no time at all joining them on the sofa, leaning into Leon's other side, to the clear amusement of their tenth-tier guests.

"Yes," Anastasios replied, his tone taking on a more serious tenor. "It shouldn't come as much of a surprise to you that we are quite invested in the events taking place in the south."

"Let's dispense with the pretenses," the Grand Druid impatiently stated. "You and the Sky Devils. How is it going?"

"Well," Leon replied. "Of the Ten Tribes, three have sworn themselves to me. I'll be returning to the island shortly to work on the others, though it's looking like another three will more likely than not support the Thunderer over me. Still, my allies are confident that we can win a majority in the Elder Council, oust the Thunderer, and return the crown to my Clan—to me."

Anastasios and the Grand Druid exchanged a look before Anastasios replied, "It sounds like there are still many unknowns."

"This was never a guaranteed thing," Leon pointed out. "I had no one when I started, and in a month on their island, I've gained three Tribes."

"Have there been any... whisperings among them about what to do after you've been declared a King?" the Lord Protector wondered.

"Assuming I pull it off?" Leon replied with a self-deprecating smile. "I've been clear that my concern is the rebuilding of my Clan, and that means leaving this plane. That has been a defining trait of my campaign. Our attention ought not to be here, but out in the Void. I'm hoping that there won't even be a need for a peace treaty between your Empires and the 'Sky Devils', because once I'm done, there won't be any Sky Devils remaining on the plane to be in conflict with."

"Ambitious," the Grand Druid whispered. "I have to say, though, that I don't like the idea of you taking my darling Cassandra away from me like that..."

"Grandmother!" Cassandra indignantly replied. "For our family to grow is a good thing! And just because we leave doesn't mean we won't come back!" She paused and turned a curious eye to Leon. "... Right?"

"I don't see why not," Leon replied with a frown. "That would depend on how we manage to get off the plane, though I have a few plans for that."

"More of your Clan's resources that we haven't managed to uncover, hmm?" the Lord Protector probingly questioned.

Leon shrugged noncommittally. "Although," he said in deflection, "if you're so worried about being separated from Cassie, there's always another possibility..."

"... What are you suggesting?" the Grand Druid asked with a sly smile.

"Come with us," Leon replied, with a gasp of surprise from both his wives and a look of shock from both the Lord Protector and the Grand Druid. "Apologies," Leon hurriedly said. "I don't mean to spring this on anyone. Just floating a possibility that sprang into mind. The two of you desire Apotheosis, and I've already given you materials to aid in that pursuit." He gave the Lord Protector a quick once-over, and while the man's aura was as opaque and impossible for him to read as ever, Leon could almost delude himself into thinking that it was somehow sturdier or denser than it was. "I'm guessing there have already been some gains made?"

"You can say that," Anastasios said with a wide smile. "Not enough, but more progress in the past month than in the past century."

"Congratulations," Elise quickly said. "It's always good to see friends and allies growing stronger."

"It would please me to hear that you think me either of these, let alone both," Anastasios replied.

"Speaking of Apotheosis..." Leon smoothly continued as he noted the Grand Druid's smile fading slightly. "The next harvest of Hesperidic Apples will be tomorrow. It's my understanding that we'll have four spare apples, and a couple of viable seeds. Since you've already gotten one seed, Lord Anastasios, I was thinking the next seed should go to my grandmother-in-law?"

"More than agreeable!" Anastasios quickly confirmed as he beamed at his Evergolden counterpart.

"How many are 'a couple'?" the Grand Druid asked.

"One for you," Leon said. "The other will go to Ilion. Apple trees need another around them to flower—or so I've been told. So you'll be getting another seed after the next harvest. For now, they'll be split."

"That's... amenable," the Grand Druid said as he shot the Lord Protector a glance, to which he responded with an intrigued look. Leon wondered what they might be silently planning, but he refrained from asking.

"For now," Leon said, "we have another problem. The Sunlit Emperor."

Anastasios immediately scowled while the Grand Druid put on an expression of pure disgust.

"What has that cretin done now?" she asked, abandoning all pretense of respect for the young Emperor.

"Sent me a message communicating his concern about my marriage to Cassie."

Cassandra made a noise of disgust that matched the look on her grandmother's face. "That pig once tried to arrange a marriage between him and me; did you know that?" she asked him.

"I didn't," Leon darkly stated.

"I didn't let it spread," the Grand Druid told him. "He made the offer to me, I refused him on the spot. No one else knew for years."

"Sparing him the embarrassment?" Elise asked. "You didn't want to make a fellow Emperor look bad?"

"Something like that," the Grand Druid responded. With a sigh, she added, "For a man like him, war is a valid response to humiliation. He's repulsive and uncouth, but his Empire is powerful, and I have no desire to antagonize him any further than needs be. Do needs be now?" She pointedly looked at Leon as she asked her question.

"We can't say for certain," Leon replied as his eyes turned to Elise.

"He's threatened to come to Occulara personally if he isn't able to talk to someone about these matters," she reported.

"He can get fucked for all I care," Cassandra hatefully muttered.

"I will contact him," Anastasios gravely stated. "It's Heaven's Eye I'm sure he's worried about. I can work with the Director to soothe any burns he may have regarding these matters. Having the both of us putting pressure on him should keep him in line." He grinned at the Grand Druid and added, "Making it clear to him that he'd antagonize two Empires if he were to press too hard will strengthen our position."

"Is it 'our' position?" Leon asked with surprise. "Don't get me wrong, I appreciate the aid, but... I can't help but wonder what you get out of this..."

"Apart from keeping the peace in my Empire?" Anastasios asked with a loud laugh. "We are allies, Leon Raime. And friends, I'd hope. This is what we ought to do for each other."

Leon half-smiled half-frowned. He couldn't help but continue trying to discern what else might be at play while shame bubbled up from within just for suspecting him when he seemed so earnest. It was almost too good to be true that the Lord Protector would offer himself up like this without asking for something in return. Feeling just a little lost, he glanced at Elise again, and his fire-haired wife just smiled reassuringly at him while she snuggled up against his arm a little tighter. Looking to his other wife, Leon found her staring back at him with a thoughtful look in her ruby eyes.

[We should accept,] she said into his mind, taking him by surprise. [I've been practicing,] she silently stated with a smug look.

Leon sighed and turned back to the tenth-tier mages. "Apologies. Thank you for doing this for me."

"Think nothing of it," Anastasios replied. "You are the one who offered to take us with you when you leave for the Nexus, did you not? How would that reflect upon me if I were to leave you alone against our honorable neighbor to the south after such an offer?"

Leon shrugged. "Like a ruthless politician," he said.

Anastasios simply waved as if trying to physically ward off Leon's suspicion. "Even if you didn't make that offer, based on what more you can continue to offer our Empires, it would be foolish not to support you in this case."

Leon froze, his eyes narrowing.

Catching the expression, the Lord Protector added, "I speak of peace, of course! Peace with the Sky Devils! Why, such a thing can scarcely even be comprehended! But if it were to come true... few prices would be too steep to buy such a peace. The conflict between our peoples has gone on too long as it is and has consumed too many lives. Nothing will endanger this peace of yours if I have anything to say about it."

"Nor I," the Grand Druid replied. "Just show us you can deliver, Leon. I believe you can, but we need to see it, too."

"You'll see it," Leon replied. "It may be hard to believe now, but it's possible. And I'll make it a reality."

"I want to come with you," Cassandra suddenly declared, and Leon turned to face her with surprise and apprehension on his face.

"... That isn't a good idea, I don't think," he muttered.

"Fuck good ideas!" she declared. "I hate sitting around here doing nothing while my newly-wedding husband goes off building a new Kingdom! I have to be there!"

"And what are the Tribes going to think when a Princess from the people they've been fighting for dozens of millennia shows up in their lands?" Leon retorted.

"How are they going to know who I am?" Cassandra asked.

"I wouldn't put it past them to know who all the Royals are from every Empire," Leon shot back.

"Three Tribes already support you! Just order them not to touch me if they realize anything!"

"And what of the other Tribes? What support could I expect from them if I show up with their enemy in tow?"

"If you win them over, they'll have to get used to me anyway! Why wait?"

Leon looked to the Grand Druid for help, but she looked more thoughtful than anything.

"It's... risky, but not a bad idea," she whispered. "I don't like it, but I have faith that you can keep my granddaughter safe, Leon."

Leon looked to Elise next, who said, "I wouldn't mind coming, too, but I know that I'll have work to do back here." She squeezed Leon's arm again and added, "Besides, I get the feeling there's going to be violence there, and you know how I am with that sort of thing..."

For a moment, Leon remembered the few times he'd been with Elise in dangerous situations and had to fight to keep his heart rate down. Those who'd threatened her were long dead, but it still provoked feelings of great anger in him to think of the eagles that had wounded her and the vampires that had nearly brought their home in the Bull Kingdom down on their heads.

As if she could see what was going through his head, Elise smiled at him and rested her head on his shoulder, pulling him out of his thoughts.

With a sigh, Leon turned back to Cassandra and said, "Don't offer your identity and if your mere presence provokes conflict, then we'll revisit this matter."

Cassandra grinned and nodded. "I can live with that," she said.

"Good. With all that out of the way, I was hoping to broach another topic with you two." Leon turned his eyes to the Grand Druid and Lord Protector, making it clear who he was talking to.

"What is it?" the Lord Protector asked, speaking for them both for the moment.

"I have found myself in need of a large amount of Titanstone. I have some potential options for gaining some, including large deposits on Kataigida. But... I need a lot. I was wondering what it might take to open any stores of the stuff you two may have."

"Titanstone is a valuable material," the Grand Druid gravely stated. "The most valuable material on the plane, as a matter of fact. Very rare and hard to quarry and refine."

"More than that," the Lord Protector added, "Most Titanstone that is refined is almost immediately used. Stocks aren't usually built because it's in such high demand."

"That's... unfortunate," Leon said with a grimace.

"What are you intending to use this Titanstone for?" the Grand Druid asked. "And how much of it do you need, specifically?"

"Several tons," Leon quickly partially answered, and both the Grand Druid and Lord Protector stared at him in shock.

"That is far beyond our capabilities to provide," the Lord Protector replied. "A fraction of that would even be hard."

"There is another option, but it's not attractive, especially after what we just discussed," Leon continued. "My Clan had an old Titanstone refinery on this plane, and I suspect it hasn't been found yet. The problem is that it lies in what is now Sunlit territory."

"Then it might as well be beyond our reach," the Grand Druid said. "The Sunlit Emperor is not going to allow anyone to take that resource from him, assuming it still exists. And taking it would cost thousands of lives, if not hundreds of thousands."

"War with a powerful neighbor for resources that won't directly benefit our Empire isn't possible," Anastasios added. "Even our power within our Empires has its limits. We can keep the Sunlit Emperor in his own lands, but anything more than that is out of the question."

Leon sighed again. "Understandable. I'll think of something else, then."

"It would help if we knew what you need such a vast amount of Titanstone for," Anastasios said.

"Secret project, and one that won't come to fruition without that Titanstone," Leon dismissively said. "One that promises to embarrass me greatly if it doesn't come to fruition, so I hope you two can understand that I'm not too keen on revealing anything more."

"Hmm, very well," the Grand Druid said.

"I'm looking forward to seeing whatever project this is be realized," the Lord Protector said. "It should be quite a sight if you're going to insist on building it up like this."

Leon chuckled. "Maybe. Maybe." After a moment of silence, he hesitantly said, "Should I expect, if gaining access to the Sunlit Empire for that refinery is too much, that my Clan's old planar capital in the east is out of the question too?"

The Grand Druid burst out laughing at that question, and even the Lord Protector let out a couple chortles.

"Absolutely," Cassandra said almost dismissively. "The Sentinels don't let anyone in there. I've tried and I've always been flatly turned down."

"Really?" Leon murmured as he gave her an amused look.

"What? A people came to this plane from the Void and established themselves in a great city in the east. Anyone who hears something like that and doesn't want to explore it isn't worth interacting with, I say."

"It does feed the imagination, doesn't it?" Elise dreamily said. "Like visiting Argent Palace, if a little less personal, right? An old ruin kept free of scavengers by those who live there... What wonders might be left there just waiting to be rediscovered?"

Leon frowned for a moment at her initial comment but found himself nodding as she continued. "If nothing else, Keeper has already shown himself to be hostile to me. If they won't let me in to see the place, then I'll find my own way in at some point."

"Let us know when you do," Anastasios said. "Keeper has always been... difficult. Seeing him get kicked around would be entertaining."

“I’ll see how accommodating I can be,” Leon replied. Silence again fell upon the room, and he eventually said, “Well, I’ve got nothing else. Apples tomorrow; we’ll talk again then?”

The others agreed, and like that, their meeting ended. Leon spent the remainder of the night with his ladies, the three of them leaving to join Valeria and Maia in their private wing of the villa.

Chapter 873 - Return to Kataigida

Leon didn’t expect too much from the Hesperidic Apples during this harvest. Most of his people had ascended to their current tiers relatively recently, meaning it would be a while before they ascended again.

This time, however, he was surprised. Not only did Anshu—who’d returned from contacting his smuggler subordinates—ascend to the eighth-tier, but Anna did as well. The star of the day, however, was Cassandra, who reached the ninth-tier after eating hers. Judging by how her aura shifted, Red was also close to ascending to the ninth-tier, needing perhaps only one more apple to do so.

So, Leon gave her that apple, and he had two new ninth-tier equivalent beings in his retinue. However, that left him with only three apples with which to play the game of power. Fortunately, he didn’t have to share any with the Grand Druid or the Lord Protector as he gave them apple seeds rather than the apples themselves. After some thought, however, he gave an apple to Penelope. The Director was still hesitant about ascending to the tenth-tier and provoking Imperial attention, but his daughter was still only eighth-tier and had fewer such worries.

As it was, Leon wore a broad smile after the apples were eaten and power was gained. He sensed a serious increase in the size of his soul realm, too, and he knew that his training regimen for the next few months would be taken entirely by stabilizing and expanding the actual land within his soul realm.

But as encouraging as these results were, Leon didn’t allow himself to linger on them too much. He still had a little bit of work to do in Occulara and then he had to return to Kataigida. He’d remained in contact with his allies and knew that they were holding the fort, but the Thunderer had left the Bison Tribe and returned to Stormhollow, accompanied by several Bison elders. No one thought that was a good thing, and all were encouraging his rapid return.

So, Leon resolved to stay at home for only one more day after the apple harvest. With Talal and the Director taking care of business in Heaven’s Eye, Elise running their home, and the Grand Druid and Lord Protector still solidly on his side, Leon was ready to head back and finish his business.

His only real concern was the Sunlit Emperor. He felt confident enough to leave him to the other tenth-tier mages and the Director, but he honestly couldn’t predict what the man was going to do. At the very least, his people had continued their attempts to reclaim the Sword, even as the Ilian and Evergolden forces only put in token efforts to not draw attention.

The Keeper had proven himself violent and hostile; Leon hoped that Sunlit wouldn’t show himself cut of similar cloth.

Putting those problems out of his mind, Leon focused his last full day at home on two things: studying the Iron Needle and talking to the retainer that concerned him the most: Anna.

"How are you doing?" Leon asked as he and Anna sat down in a private room.

"Not a lot of preamble there, Leon," Anna said with a mostly-sarcastic smile.

"I have a lot to do and not a lot of time for small talk," Leon replied. "Apologies if I seem a bit curt, I'll make as much time as needed for you, should you need it."

"That's sweet," she said. "To answer your initial question, I'm doing well enough. Eirene's gods-sent. She's helped me more than I really want to talk about in this past year. I... It's good that we're talking like this because I have to apologize to you."

"What for?"

"For... Casimir. I... shouldn't have killed him. I know that got you in some trouble with Narses and the man had surrendered and killing him was wrong and—"

"Slow down," Leon quickly interjected. "We're not in a race, I'll listen to however much or little you want to say, without judgment."

Anna gave him a grateful smile. "I just... I don't want to cause you any trouble. You took me and my sister in years ago, and while Helen has held her own, I can't help but feel like I've only caused you trouble..."

"Believe me, you haven't caused me nearly as much trouble as I've caused myself," Leon said with a self-deprecating smile. "Have I ever told you how I almost ruined a peace delegation between a Kingdom and a Tribe of stone giants? Next to that, what have you done? Not much I'd say." Leon spoke with a playful tone by the time he was done, Anna seemed a little more relaxed and even wore a tight, toothless smile.

"I'm... thank you, Leon," she said as he finished. "You've been more accommodating than anyone else would've. I know I may not have much to offer, but... if you'll have room for me, I would consider it an honor and a privilege to serve you as my King."

The sudden declaration had Leon reeling slightly and it took him a moment to respond. He had to switch from less formal boss-talking-to-employee mode and go into his much more nascent King-talking-to-retainer mode.

"Your confidence in me brings me no small amount of joy," he gravely said, treating the matter with all the seriousness he believed it warranted. "I would happily accept you now, as I did all those years ago. Though you may not believe it, I value your skills greatly, and you're a valued member of my retinue. I understand your actions with Casimir and hold no grudge. I trust that any more of my enemies, especially since I doubt many will have such a personal connection to you, won't suffer the same fate."

"Of course not!" Anna quickly stated. "As I said, killing Casimir was a mistake—"

"Don't think too much more on it," Leon said with a quick wave of his hand. "What's done is done. This is enough for me. Let's look now to the future. And speaking of, are you feeling fit enough to head south with the rest of us?"

Anna blinked in surprise, then quickly nodded. "Absolutely!" she said. "Ladon's grown a little, and Nidar and Astar are bigger, too! Big enough to maybe even be combat-ready! There's just the problem of making sure they can reach the island..."

"That... shouldn't be too difficult," Leon said as he cocked his head in thought. "My flight suit enchantments are much more advanced than they used to be. Plus, we now have a ninth-tier wyvern who can carry more than her own weight, I'd say."

"She won't be happy about that..."

"Leave her to me. For now, get whatever you need ready to head out."

"Right!" Anna almost sprang to her feet right then and there but paused a moment. "Leon...? Would it be alright if... Eirene came with, too? I don't mean she has to accompany us everywhere, but she's... been very helpful with my war beasts..."

Leon thought about it for a moment. Anna's girlfriend was a little on the weak side compared to his retinue, but he was confident the Jaguars could house and defend her easily. Getting her to Kataigida was more of a concern to him than what might happen once there. The Veins of Vigilance and the Argonaut Sea were both large bodies of water not easily crossed by weaker mages, let alone his desire with everything going on to avoid Sunlit territory on their return journey, which would add a couple of days and thousands of miles at least to their return trip.

But... he supposed it was doable. Eirene had been training hard in the months since she'd been hired by his household, and sixth-tier had power that couldn't just be ignored even at his level. He was almost tempted to offer her one of the Hesperidic Apples he still had spare, but he kept those in reserve just in case.

'Better to use them on allies or to win over potential allies.'

"So long as she's able to keep up, it won't be a problem," Leon said.

"She won't slow us down!" Anna insisted. "I'll go—I mean, I need to—I have... I just... thank you!"

With hardly another word, Anna darted out of the room, to Leon's amusement. He kept his seat for another couple of minutes, watching Anna practically sprint through his halls back to the stable where Eirene was helping her tend to the war beasts. After some exchanged words, Leon noted that Eirene looked excited enough, though hardly jumping for joy as much as Anna pretty much had been.

With a sigh, he got to his feet and started making his way to his workshop. He had only one more full day left in Occulara, and he wanted to use as much of that time experimenting with Adamant and the Iron Needle as he could.

Leaving Occulara was a somewhat more emotional departure than it had been the previous time. This time, after all, Elise, Helen, Tikos, and Nestor were the only ones left behind. Anna, Cassandra, and Eirene were joining Leon's group, along with Anna's war beasts. The villa would hardly be deserted, but without most of Leon's retinue, it would be quite empty.

Still, as Elise put it, they had plenty of practice at saying goodbye, and Leon had made sure to lavish his fire-haired wife with all the attention she could get the night before, ensuring that she didn't feel abandoned. Cassandra wasn't too thrilled at being left to her own devices when she'd have rathered Leon visit her bed as well, but she understood.

If he hadn't been before, Leon felt that her attitude alone would've convinced him not to take any more wives. Ideally, they'd all end up immortal together, but time still waited for no one and there were only so many hours in the day to spend with loved ones.

Leon simply counted himself lucky that, while a little sulky, Cassandra wasn't actually upset by his decision regarding how to spend his final night, and when the entire party met up the following morning, she was in good spirits.

They didn't leave immediately but instead took close to an hour to make sure that they could fly with Anna's war beasts reasonably well and that Eirene was not only equipped but taught how to use some invisibility equipment that Leon had thrown together for her the day before. She wouldn't be armored, but she'd at least not be seen and be able to track the others since Leon wanted them all flying as invisibly as possible.

Doing so with Anna's war beasts was a little more complicated. Her two wyverns, Nidar and Astar, hadn't yet developed human intelligence, but Red—grudgingly—agreed to shepherd them. They were to be the only three of the group flying visible to the naked eye, though they'd be doing so at great altitude such that even powerful mages wouldn't see them unless they were actively searching for them.

What she was less willing to do was to carry Ladon on her back. Leon had, since the days of the expedition to the Prota Forest, rigged up flight equipment for the large beast, and had in the years since refined that gear further, but the snapper was still a slow and cumbersome beast. Anna would have to ride on it to make sure it stayed in the air and kept up with the group.

When they finally took to the skies, it came as almost a relief. Leon knew that planning and practicing were one thing, but doing was another. Fortunately, there weren't any mistakes or mishaps, especially since both the Lord Protector and Grand Druid came out to see them off—sans any other mages from their respective Empires, thankfully.

Though he still didn't quite trust their motives, Leon almost surprised himself with the realization that he didn't hate the idea of leaving the Sunlit Emperor to them and the Director. They'd been around long enough that Leon found himself beginning to trust their actions, at least, and that they'd continue to help him defend his home. His offer for them to accompany him to the Nexus, likewise, he found he didn't regret either, made in haste though it was.

And so it was that he and his group ascended invisible—mostly—into the sky, and then turned southwest. They were to curve around the Sunlit Empire, then venture out above the Pegasi States over the Veins of Vigilance, meet up with the ship that would be waiting for them, and then finally return to Kataigida.

And this time, Leon knew, he'd only be leaving the island again in disgrace, or with a crown upon his head.

“Your Majesty,” Exallos Aetos said with a low bow as Leon and his party disembarked from the ship and onto the dock in Raimondas.

His bow was mirrored in the massive party he had with him to welcome Leon back to the capital of the Screaming Eagles. The Jaguars were there, too, including the Jaguar of the West himself, as well as Cloud-Runner and Rain-Dancer of the Heart-Stabbing Hawks. All of them bowed; all of them spoke traditional words of fealty.

Leon had to admit that, though the flight back was long and boring, leaving him rather mentally tired, the sight of so many people bowing to him was invigorating. It felt like he was truly, finally doing as his Ancestor had bid him and begun to rebuild his Clan.

It wasn’t enough, of course, so while he reveled in the feeling, he was quick to wave them all up.

“It’s good to be back,” he said with a broad smile. “Now, let’s waste no more time. What have I missed since we last spoke?”

He’d kept in regular contact with his allies on the island—the only times he brought his party to a stop along their flight for any real duration was once a day so that he could check in with the Jaguar on the island’s events.

“It’s been... worrying,” Exallos replied as a grave look replaced his more deferential attitude. “Shall we talk somewhere more private?”

Leon nodded, and with the rest of his retainers and allies, they made their way to the gathering hall, Leon pausing only to pay his respects to the Tribal Totem—though this time he refrained from flying around it ten times.

Once he and his retainers were upon the dais and the Eagles, Hawks, and Jaguars were on the benches, he asked again, “Something happened in the day since I last spoke with any of you. What was it?”

“The Thunderer has remained relatively passive since winning over the Bison Tribe,” Exallos replied with a scowl. Leon could understand his disappointment well enough; it was made official just a few days ago, but the Bison Tribe had put forward a powerful statement of support for the Thunderer and his government. Leon could visit them, but the chances of winning them over to his side at this point were slim at best.

He had to focus now on the Lions, Harts, and Ravens, and if he lost even a single one of them, his cause would be in serious trouble. With six Tribes, and especially the Lions among them, then his military potential would at least rival the Thunderer’s, with his four Tribes and central army.

Losing even one of the three remaining Tribes wouldn’t guarantee his loss, but he could easily see it dooming his cause, depending on the Tribe.

“His passivity has changed?” Leon asked.

“Elders from the Tigers, Ji Spiders, and Booming Brown Bears also made their declarations of support,” the Jaguar intoned from further down the hall. “Lines are being drawn and it’s clear that they want the Lions, Ravens-of-Hail-Hall, and Ancestral Harts to know that they have more support than we do.

They're putting pressure on our fellow Tribes to move in the direction the wind appears to be blowing—to the Thunderer, in other words."

"But the Thunderer isn't only doing that," Exallos added. "He departed from Stormhollow last night on course for Raichaiti."

Leon knew Raichaiti to be the capital of the Lion Tribe.

"Then we don't have much time, do we?" Leon said as he hopped down from the dais. "I will make my way there now."

"Without any rest?" one of the Eagle elders asked.

Leon simply replied, "No."

He'd left the Thunderer on his own for long enough. While he didn't regret heading home to shore up his alliances and see to the Hesperidic Apple harvest, he did lament that it practically ceded the initiative to the Thunderer. He needed to get it back.

"There is one more thing, Your Majesty," the Jaguar gravely stated, bringing Leon to a halt just a few steps from the dais. "The Booming Brown Bears continue to gather on our border. A messenger was sent to Raikos indicating that they want to meet with our Tribal council. And you."

Leon scowled. "Do we know what they want?"

"Isn't it obvious?" another Eagle elder practically roared. "They want war!"

"If they want war, then that's what they'll have!" a Jaguar Chief responded.

"If they try, they'll be pushed back across the river with ease!" another Jaguar shouted. "If they challenge us, they will come to regret it!"

Many of the other elders in the room began to murmur and stamp their feet in agreement, but before they could descend too fully into warmongering, Leon shouted loudly enough to silence the entire hall, "ENOUGH!"

His command was followed swiftly enough that he couldn't help but stand a little straighter and glare around the room with more confidence.

"If they attack, then we will respond," he said to the hall much more quietly than he'd commanded their silence. "We will not attack first! Nor will we provoke them to attack! I want the Ten Tribes to remain united!" He paused and looked to all the Eagles, remembering what they'd told him when he first arrived on the island. "Is peace not a duty borne by all of us?"

Some angry mutterings began, but they were fewer in number than before. For those that still muttered, the Jaguar spoke for them all when he replied, "Unity is only achieved when all parties agree, Your Majesty. Our hand may be forced, and with the way they've been building up their army on our border, it's looking more and more likely that it will be. And there are some who might consider a pre-emptive attack wise."

"It's only wise against one's enemies," Leon retorted. "Right now, on paper at least, the Booming Brown Bears are our allies. And again, if that is to change, it will be they who change it. I won't condone any attacks on the Bears while the Lions, Harts, and Ravens remain undecided! Defend your territories as best as you can, but I would be King of a united realm, not one torn apart by internecine conflict!"

"And if our allied Tribe wishes not to submit willingly?" the Jaguar asked, a look of deadly seriousness on his face.

"We'll cross that bridge when we get to it," Leon replied. "But I won't rule anything out. Whatever happens, we'll be ready. But we will not be the side actively pushing disunity!"

Silence fell upon the hall for a few moments before Exallos quietly said, "We all hope you're right, Your Majesty."

Leon glanced back at him, and when no follow-up came, he simply said, "Good. Now, while I expect all measures to be taken to ensure we're defended against any potential hostilities, I will be making for Raichaiti. Who will join me?"

Naturally, all of Leon's retainers, including Eirene and Cassandra, fell in behind him. At the same time, the Jaguar stepped forward, indicating he'd join Leon, as did Cloud-Runner and Rain-Dancer. Exallos indicated that he'd return to Raikos to coordinate defense with Nikolaos, but Ipatameni, one of the other three ninth-tier mages in the Eagle Tribe, would join him, along with a delegation of other Eagle elders and Chiefs.

And so, Leon left Raimondas less than an hour after arriving, bound for Lion territory. And the Thunderer had a head start.

Chapter 874 - The Lion Tribe

Lion territory was what Leon had been told to expect, but more besides. Lion cities were sprawling places, with wide streets separating dense clusters of tall buildings. The Lions built out of stone, having established quite a few quarries throughout their territory, in which many of their people Leon could see working, though hardly as laborers. Instead, most of their civilian population worked out in the fields while the Lions sent their earth mages out into the quarries to efficiently carve off great chunks of stone for further use.

More of note, as Leon flew over the Lions' land, he noticed numerous flat plains boxed in with thin stone walls that were only so tall as to brush against his chest were he to stand in front of them. After questioning the Jaguar about these plains, Leon learned that they were mustering and training grounds for the Lion Tribe—combat was such a huge part of their culture that all members of the Tribe had to be well-versed in it. Every single Lion was given two years of formal, organized combat training and had to undergo refresher training for several days out of every month.

When Leon learned that, he began seeing such training grounds everywhere, not just in boxed-off fields. The cities had wide, grassy parks and large amphitheaters. Most homes had large front yards in which Leon saw during his journey thousands of Lion tribesmen teaching their children to fight.

This training, as far as he could tell, wasn't done communally, and the Jaguar confirmed it. The Lions lived in 'Prides', small family units centered around the father and primary wife. Polygamy was the norm

in the Lion Tribe, with men being expected to have a handful of wives, though rarely more than four. That left many men without potential mates, Leon realized, and it was explained that due to their martial culture, it was hardly a problem—men had three or four wives in large part because seventy to eighty percent of them would die before turning thirty, the age at which they were allowed to legally marry.

Being clued into what to look for, Leon found himself trying to watch every mustering ground and every home he could see. The mustering grounds remained largely empty since the Lions' army was still on the Sword, but children were constantly being trained in the yards, male and female both, but Leon noted the boys undergoing a significantly harsher training regimen. He even found himself bearing witness to the end of several young men's lives in an amphitheater as they fought to the death for some reason he couldn't fathom.

It was a bloody and martial welcome, and it was largely the only one they received. At the border of Lion territory, they'd only had to announce their arrival and several Lions escorted them further, but they hardly spoke to anyone in Leon's party and maintained their distance. They were hyper-focused on making sure that Leon reached Raichaiti without stopping anywhere else.

Leon honestly wished he could stop and enjoy the Lions' cities, taking the opportunity to learn more of the Tribe whose support he wished to win, but with the Thunderer likely already in the Tribe's capital, he ensured that their escort found no reason to hurry them along.

Raichaiti itself didn't take up any more of a footprint than any other Lion city, though Leon noted that their buildings were constructed much taller. In the center of their city, a massive arena had been built—or so Leon had first assumed until he noticed not only the Tribal Totem in a granite forum adjacent to the arena, but a large group of uniform-clad followers of the Thunderer standing outside of the building's main entrance.

"Looks like he's already meeting with the Tribal Council," the Jaguar observed as they drew closer.

"Then we have little time to waste," Leon replied as he kept pushing them onwards. It had taken them days to reach the city, and he was eager to get started. The Lions' support was critical, and he refused to lose it to the Thunderer.

Meeting his group at the outskirts of the city was another group of Lion mages who were led by an eighth-tier mage who looked barely thirty years old by mortal standards, her actual age being impossible to tell. She exchanged few words with any in Leon's group, simply making it clear that anyone who didn't follow her would be considered hostile and be dealt with accordingly. With that, she turned around in the air and led Leon's party down to the entrance of the arena.

"Warm welcome," Leon heard Alcander murmur a little bitterly not too far behind him.

"Are they always like this?" Gaius asked one of the Eagle elders accompanying the group.

"No," the elder replied. "They've never been... welcoming, but they've never been this hostile."

"They'd be foolish not to notice what's happening," Ipatameni said in response. "A man's come to the island claiming to be the inheritor of the Thunderbird's legacy and now the Tribes are picking sides. Everyone is nervous in such times."

Leon agreed with Ipatameni's assessment and did his best not to judge the Lions too harshly for their curt treatment, though there was a part of him that didn't think it was a promising start.

On their descent from the sky, the Lion elder steered them directly to the arena, bypassing the Tribal Totem altogether. Leon felt some disappointment in not being able to stop to pay his respects, but in this case, he felt that respecting the wishes of their escort was more important than showing respect to their Ancestors—and his own.

The arena itself was immense, able to seat a hundred thousand at least. It was covered by a massive, gilded dome, and its outer walls were buttressed with great statues of men and women who Leon didn't recognize. What he did know was that all those depicted were Lions, easily recognizable after flying over their lands for days by their long, mane-like hair, the lack of armor, and the two-handed weapons that he was learning the Lions favored.

Upon landing in front of the arena, Leon's group attracted quite a bit of attention. The Thunderer's people were out in force, and upon closer inspection, their group consisted not just of the man's uniformed soldiers. Leon noticed three men standing together, all seventh-tier, all dark-skinned and clad in rich silks and velvets with cloaks of black fur. Another small group of mages stood not too far away, also clad in furs but fairer skinned and with long red hair. The men of the second group also sported bushy red beards.

From what he knew of the Tribes, these were the Bisons and the Bears, respectively.

Also standing off to one side were several mages tending to winged horses—pegasi—led by an eighth-tier woman with severe features and a serious expression. A couple of these people seemed about to approach Leon's group, but with a quick gesture, this woman held them back.

Beside him, Leon heard the Jaguar growl in a low tone, and he realized the man was staring at these people, too.

He was about to ask what was up when one of the red-haired Bears strode forward, blocking their path, and arrogantly shouted, "The usurper shows himself at last! The man who would have all Ten Tribes walk under the yoke!"

Leon gave the man a quick once-over, noting that he was eighth-tier and bore gold rings upon every finger and a gold chain hung about his neck. His clothes were likewise trimmed in gold—and made of silkgrass if he guessed correctly.

"Get out of the way," the eighth-tier Lioness leading Leon's party into the arena demanded.

"When the enemy of all our Tribes is here in front of me?" the Bear asked indignantly. "What kind of man would back away after seeing one who would destroy all he's worked to preserve?"

"You preserve nothing but your own power!" the Jaguar angrily responded, but before he could continue, Leon shot him a look that silenced him immediately, though he didn't look happy about it.

"Ah, so quickly the whelp has broken you in, Lysander. It al—"

Before the Bear could continue in his tirade, the Lioness darted forward and slammed her fist into the man's jaw, sending the man flying several dozen feet. The Bear hit the ground hard enough to crack the stone beneath him, but he easily rolled up to his feet, a violent glare in his eye.

"I said get out of the way," the Lioness furiously repeated. "You are not in your Tribe. Remember that."

Several strong Lion guards came sprinting out of the arena and, without another word, the Lioness escorted Leon's group into the arena proper.

Leon had to suppress the urge to smile as they passed the Bears, now silent and silently fuming, and found it easier once they were inside. The arena's atrium was spectacular, being a massive chamber with statues and frescoes everywhere, colorful scenes depicting Lions victorious in battle that were designed to overwhelm the senses and put the human imagination to shame. It was easily equal to any of the Imperial palaces he'd been inside of, in both beauty and magic for he sensed vast quantities of magic flowing through the arena's walls powering, among undoubtedly many others, defensive wards that not only prevented him from using his magic senses but also settled about him like a cloak. His aura was suppressed and he suspected the use of his magic here would, at the very least, be severely hampered.

"The Ravens-of-Hail-Hall and the Lions have a good relationship," the Jaguar said as they were led further into the arena. "They've established an anti-magic field around this entire gathering hall. Only down in the sand of the central hall is the use of magic allowed, and even then, only when the Lions allow it."

"They're always fighting," Ipatameni noted.

"Indeed," the Jaguar agreed.

Through several more opulent halls they were led, gold the most prevalent color and metal that Leon could see used in the arena's décor. At every door were two sixth-tier guards dressed in golden plate armor, their long, equally golden hair spilling from the back of their helmets, while throughout the halls more guards were stationed in alcoves. Every here and there were seventh-tier Lions, as well, though, unlike the guards, they weren't obviously armored, dressed as they were mostly in simple tunics, pants, and sandals. All, however, watched Leon's group passing through their halls with such intensity and scrutiny that despite Leon's party having no less than six ninth-tier mages in his entourage, he still felt both small and unwelcome.

But he walked with his back straight and face set in stony dispassion, and such was how he walked out into the sands of the arena, to his concealed shock. He wasn't entirely surprised that it was to the arena itself that they went, rather than some hall or other in the back, but to be out on the sands themselves rather than on an adjacent platform was surprising.

More surprising even than that was who was already there: the Thunderer himself, as well as about two dozen or so his adjutants, not including the woman who'd accompanied him to the Jaguar Tribe just several weeks ago. But that didn't mean his people were weak by any means; there were several more Bison and Bear elders, all eighth-tier, while there were two pale, skinny men with pitch-black eyes standing with, who Leon identified as likely elders from the Ji Spiders. In total, the Thunderer's people with him in the sand were of roughly equal number to Leon's entire party.

Also down in the massive arena's sand were the stronger Lions in the entire arena. The stands were lightly filled with fifth-tier to eighth-tier Lions, but down in the sand were three men and one woman, all ninth-tier, along with a handful of other eighth-tier women.

As Leon's group entered, they drew the attention of all in the arena, including the Thunderer and the Lions in the sand. The Lioness escorting them ordered them to wait just a few dozen feet away from the Thunderer's people and joined one of the ninth-tier Lion men, a hulk of a man with a true mane of golden hair stretching down to the back of his knees, and a full beard covering almost his entire face. He was dressed as simply as all the others, with only an unadorned tunic, pants, and sandals covering his body, but his clothes did nothing to hide his immense musculature or his tremendous aura.

All the other Lions had fanned out behind or around him, with the other ninth-tier Lions to his right and left, but half a step back from him, so Leon assumed he was the Lion's Lawspeaker. His escort here notably walked past him and stood with the three eighth-tier women directly behind him.

"Ahh, so here he is at last," the leading Lion said even as the Thunderer's people glared daggers at Leon's party. "The last remaining scion of the Thunderbird—or so he claims... I'm glad you're here, Leon Raime, I've been looking forward to seeing you for myself."

"You could've come to Raikos," the Jaguar of the West growled.

"Lions are not dogs; they don't come when summoned," the Lion Lawspeaker retorted with a decidedly unfriendly smile, his teeth practically bared threateningly.

"Leon Raime," the Thunderer gracefully said, cutting off any further responses from either the Jaguar or the Lion. "It's good to see you again, for whatever that's worth. And it pleases me to see Jaguars, Screaming Eagles, and Heart-Stabbing Hawks accompanying you. We're only missing a few Tribes from this impromptu meeting of the Elder Council."

While the Thunderer's people continued to stare at Leon's party with little warmth, the Thunderer spoke with all the warmth that his people lacked. He smiled at them welcomingly, apparently not at all unhappy with their presence.

"We've been waiting for you," one of the eighth-tier Bears growled.

"My kinsman speaks out of turn," the Thunderer growled, throwing a glare the Bear's way, who immediately backed down. "We heard that you were on your way and prepared to greet you."

"Thank you for your welcome," Leon finally replied. "I've been looking forward to coming to visit my Clan's old friends, not just the Lions." He paused a moment and glanced up at the fresco adorning the massive dome sealing the arena from the outside world. It had been enchanted to resemble the sky outside, though the sun was in the wrong position and the colors of the sky were unnaturally saturated—but it was the edges where the dome met the wall where the enchantment truly revealed itself, for they gleamed with gold and glittered with innumerable gemstones. "This place is truly spectacular."

"Your words honor us," the leading Lion replied. "Now, I believe introductions are in order, aren't they? I am Menander, and I speak for my Tribe."

The other ninth-tier Lions introduced themselves as well, the two men naming themselves as Creon and Thraso, while the woman was Xanthippe, though Leon wasn't sure how much they'd be speaking since all seemed to be deferring entirely to Menander.

What followed them were several long minutes of Leon's entourage separating themselves into his retainers and the Tribes who'd followed him, and everyone introducing themselves to the entire arena.

Leon felt like he almost had a heart attack when it was Cassandra's turn, but to his immense relief, she only spoke her name and that she was his wife, along with Maia and Valeria. He'd yet to properly introduce her to his supporters, wanting to do that in the safety of Raikos, and he didn't want anyone blurting out that she was an Imperial Princess here of all places.

"Now, then," Menander said once all of that was done, "now that we all know each other, let's get down to business, shall we?"

"Is everyone here?" the Jaguar asked as he cast his gaze around the arena. The seats of honor were in the front, made of marble and trimmed in gold, and that was where everyone in the stands were sitting. However, they filled only a fraction of the available seats.

"Most of our Chiefs and elders are on the Sword," Menander replied. "That's where they belong, leading our armies. That's where we'd be, too, if we didn't have responsibilities to our Tribe back here."

Leon detected no small amount of accusation in the Lion's voice and hoped it was directed at the right person.

"Your attention to duty honors all Ten Tribes, and shames all who do not live up to such standards," the Thunderer replied.

"I'm not trying to fucking honor anyone," Menander loudly replied as he began to pace around in front of his comrades. "What I'm trying to do is deal with two people who've come to my Tribe seeking our support!" He spread his arms and, addressing those of his Tribe in the arena's seats, he said, "A would-be King, and... a claimed descendant of our old Kings!"

"I am not—" the Thunderer began, but he was interrupted by Menander.

"SILENCE!" the Lion roared. "YOU HAVE COME TO MY TRIBE! YOU STAND IN MY TRIBE'S MOST SACRED GATHERING PLACE!" He paused and took a deep breath. In a more subdued tone, though with no less anger, he said, "I have no care for the nuances of what you two intend for the Tribes. The Lions follow the strongest."

With a gesture, the massive doors leading out of the arena were shut and magically locked, while anti-magic enchantments powerful enough to completely overpower Leon were activated over the sand, causing everyone but the Lions to gasp and sway on their feet or fall to their knees from the sudden weakness.

"If you wish for our support, then you will fight!" Menander declared. "We would see who is strongest! Whose conviction will carry them to victory! Who will honor us more with blood!"

"How... are we to fight... each other when... we can't use magic!" a Bear elder shouted.

Menander smirked at him. "You'll not be fighting each other. Not yet, anyway. But we'll get to that in a moment. For now, I'll warn everyone here: there will be no negotiations after today. My Tribe follows the strongest, so prove yourselves stronger here and now, and win our support.

Chapter 875 - The Lion's Loyalty I

From the moment Menander decided that to win the support of the Lion Tribe, each side would have to fight, both Leon and the Thunderer's respective people began to square up. Leon's side had more ninth-tiers, but since the Thunderer himself was tenth-tier, the odds were hardly skewed in either's favor.

Fortunately, even though it was apparent that both sides were more than willing to throw down, Menander stepped in to provide some clarification and structure to their 'duel'.

"I see that we're all eager to begin!" the Lion Lawspeaker loudly observed. "It warms the heart to know that those who have come to my Tribe are not toothless cubs! However, here in the Lion Tribe, we are not barbarians, fighting chaotically and without care! Withdraw to the stands and let us prepare! We will truly begin in an hour!"

The tension wasn't fully dissipated, but both Leon and the Thunderer, without looking away from each other, silently ordered their followers to back down, which they slowly did, though not without some grumbling and minor posturing.

Finally, the Thunderer smiled and said, "Let's not let this come to unpleasantness. If this is what is required, then let us prove who's the better man."

"Easy to say for someone a full tier stronger than me," Leon replied. "I'm willing to see what Menander has in mind, though." He glanced at the Lion in question, who was busy getting the other Lion elders up into the stands—specifically, to a platform at the far end of the oval arena where Leon guessed the highest-ranked elders sat.

It didn't take too much longer for Leon and the Thunderer to wrangle their people up to the platform, which Menander had covered to shield them from the sun.

"Now, then," Menander boomed as Leon with his family, retainers, and supporters arrayed behind him, and the Thunderer's likewise, stood before him, "let's have us a contest, shall we?"

"I find it interesting that you're deciding the course of your Tribe simply by force of arms," one of the Bear elders said.

He was only eighth-tier, so when Menander fixed the elder in his gaze, the man did his best to put on a brave face, but he quickly paled and stumbled back until the Thunderer interposed himself between them.

"There have been enough distractions," the Thunderer calmly stated. "I'm just happy that you're finally going to speak with me, let alone give me a chance to make my case."

Leon raised an eyebrow, interested in what exactly the Thunderer meant by that.

'Have the Lions not been negotiating with him?' he wondered.

“Just keep your people in line,” Menander growled. A moment later, he was back to what seemed to be his usual boisterous self. “Strength is measured in many ways! From one’s magic power to the literal strength of their arms! But what I’m more interested in seeing today is—in addition to physical and magical strength—the strength of your ability to assess your followers! I will have all of you duel each other to first blood—and first blood only!”

Menander went into more specifics, but it was clear that what he wanted was essentially a tournament, and had all of Leon and the Thunderer’s people separated into brackets. The Thunderer’s followers slightly outnumbered Leon’s, but on the whole, Leon’s people were stronger.

That gave Leon some confidence, but he couldn’t relax fully since Menander didn’t place him or the Thunderer in any of the brackets. It seemed that he was going to base his decision entirely on who’s side made it to the end.

Once the brackets were set up—the Lions did it so quickly and efficiently that Leon couldn’t help but think they did this often—each side separated to prepare themselves. The duels would begin in an hour.

Leon made the most of it, strategizing with his people about their opponents, going off what he could sense from their auras. He could make some educated guesses about what element they used, but nothing would be guaranteed. He just thanked their luck that the Thunderer had brought enough followers for most of his people to get equally-matched opponents.

Before that hour was over, however, Menander went to both Leon and the Thunderer and invited them over to the railing of the platform for a private discussion. The other Lion elders quickly set up some sound-dampening enchantments that ensured their conversation would be private, taking Leon by surprise.

“Surprising. Most enchantments of this nature are made around the entire box, not just a small part of it,” he said aloud.

“This place is the center of my Tribe,” Menander explained proudly as he affectionately rubbed the stone railing. “I met all of my wives in this hall. This is where we settle our disputes and plan our policies. We don’t talk like many of the others here, we decide how to proceed by way of arms! The truest expression of power in the universe!”

“Is this why you made me wait for days?” the Thunderer coolly asked.

Menander laughed and stared at the Thunderer like he was a child. “Our elders weren’t present upon your arrival. We weren’t waiting for you, we had to set aside our other business to come to this city. If you haven’t noticed, we are still at war...”

“You had assembled all elders present on the island two days ago. Yet you still denied me a meeting.”

“Is that true?” Leon asked curiously.

Menander scoffed. “Expecting us to drop everything for him and be ready for unexpected arrivals is the height of arrogance. It becomes hubris when one expects us to ‘support’ anyone over anyone else when all one brings is words. Do you have more than words, inheritor of the Thunderbird?”

Leon grinned and let silver-blue lightning dance across his body.

“Good,” Menander replied.

“If this is how it has to be, then this is how it will be,” the Thunderer stated neutrally, though Leon noticed a slight clenching of his jaw as his statement finished.

“The two of you will fight down there,” Menander said. “As will those of your supporters even if there are tier differences. This will be a test of skill as much as power. If there is a difference in tier, then we will activate our anti-magic field.”

Leon and the Thunderer exchanged a look. Though Leon couldn’t tell if the attitude was mirrored, he certainly felt his stomach drop at the prospect of fighting a tenth-tier mage. He’d fought such powerful beings before in both the Keeper and Tusk and both times he’d not come out particularly well.

But if the Thunderer’s magic was going to be blocked, then there was at least a chance. From what he could tell, they would still have access to the magic within their bodies enhancing their physical capabilities, but they wouldn’t be able to manifest it as elemental magic. That would level the playing field somewhat, but the Thunderer would still have the advantage in their own duel.

Fortunately, the duel was only to first blood.

‘... Assuming no one cheats...’

“I have to say,” Leon said to the Thunderer, “I’m surprised that you’re going along with this. Isn’t this the exact sort of thing that you’ve been trying to stamp out?”

“With little success,” the Thunderer growled. “We should not be solving our problems with violence. Such methods ought to be reserved for our enemies and our enemies alone.”

“And who is our enemy?” Menander interjected. “The warriors across the sea, to be sure, but who else? Are we all friends here? It doesn’t seem that way to me. If someone comes into my halls and demands that I set aside my way of life to fit their notion of ‘civilization’, then they seem quite antagonistic to me. Why, someone who demands that I set aside my Tribe’s traditional methods of administering ourselves makes themselves an enemy of all Lions.”

Leon smiled at the man. “You and the Jaguar have much in common, I think.”

“Lysander is a good man,” Menander replied. “An honorable man. I look forward to seeing how he acquits himself in my arena.” He narrowed his eyes and focused much more fully on Leon. “He’s not the only one I look forward to assessing...”

“Why not fight him yourself, then?” the Thunderer asked as he leaned against the railing and stared down into the arena in what Leon took to be performative casualness. The Thunderer was trying to make himself seem nonchalant, but he kept both Leon and Menander in the corner of his eye the entire time.

“Crossing blades is one thing, seeing how one treats their enemy is another,” Menander replied. “He seeks my support. How one fights someone they’re trying to win over will be different to how they fight against a true opponent.” Menander grinned at the Thunderer, and Leon saw the ghost of a scowl cross the man-formerly-known-as Iron-Striker’s face.

“So be it,” the Thunderer whispered.

The rest of the hour of preparation passed quickly, and Leon and the Thunderer's people were allowed to sit in the stands. Leon and the Thunderer themselves, however, sat with the Lion elders on the platform. Not even the Jaguar or any of the elders Leon or the Thunderer brought were afforded such privilege, though they sat next to the platform. There weren't any private boxes in the arena, so being by the platform seemed to Leon to be the most prestigious and honorable place visiting guests could sit.

Once the time came, Menander stood up from his seat and addressed the small crowd. The Lions who'd been in the arena from the start had stayed, but there were less than a thousand of them, so the audience for these duels would be relatively small. The arena was large enough that Leon guessed even ninth-tier mages could fight in it comfortably, so even with hundreds of people, the place still felt practically dead.

"IT'S TIME!" he roared, his mane-like hair practically rippling as he seemed to throw his entire body behind his declaration. "IT IS TIME FOR US TO RESOLVE OUR CONFLICTS IN THE OLD WAY! IN THE TRUE WAY! IN THE WAY OF THE LION!"

The Lions in the stands began stamping their feet and shouting like elders of the other Tribes Leon had visited showing their approval in their gathering halls.

"WITHOUT FURTHER ADO, LET THE FIRST MATCH BEGIN!"

Menander took his seat as a projection of light appeared over the arena showing the current bracket: Alcander and a Ji Spider. Each was seventh-tier.

Alcander let out a full-bodied, "YES!" and leaped down to the sands, a look of glee writ large upon his face.

"I like that one," Menander said. He made no such statement when Alcander's opponent jumped down with much more grace.

Together, Alcander and the Spider turned to the platform, waiting for the signal to begin.

Silently, Leon smiled at his retainer and reached out with darkness magic, feeling grateful that with the opponents being of equal tier, the anti-magic hadn't been activated.

[No matter who wins, I know you'll bring honor to us all,] Leon whispered. [All the same, don't lose.]

Alcander grinned and gave the platform—and Leon specifically—an exaggerated bow, which his opponent sneered at.

"THE DUEL ENDS AT FIRST BLOOD!" Menander repeated, his voice practically shaking the entire arena. "NOW GET TO IT! SHOW THE LIONS WHO'S STRONGER!"

Leon smiled as Alcander immediately went on the offense. He rocketed at the Spider with his ax already drawn and sparking with fire. Alcander brought his weapon down, and though the Spider dodged, the ax erupted in a torrent of flame that still enveloped him. However, a moment later, a shadow sped out of the fire and across the sand, and the Spider leaped out of it without anything more than a single singed hair.

Alcander swung his ax horizontally and sent a wave of fire at the Spider, which the Spider countered with a tendril of darkness whipping out from his shadow to cut the wave in half and slice across

Alcander's body. Alcander was thrown back, but his wyvern scale armor easily held and he remained on his feet.

Not wanting to give up the offense, Alcander surged forward again, his body seeming to ripple with the heat pouring off of him, and he unleashed a flurry of strikes at the Spider, each one sending another wave of fire at him. The Spider dodged and weaved, but even though he tried to strike back a couple times, he was forced to dive back into his shadow.

"Your spider doesn't seem that experienced in battle," Leon quietly said loudly enough for the Thunderer to hear above Alcander's summoned explosions. "He'd be doing better if he were more aggressive."

The Thunderer sighed, but to Leon's surprise, he said, "He would be. The Ji Spiders don't often fight, so their warriors are less experienced than those from other Tribes."

Menander snorted in amusement.

"I hope all your people aren't going to be like this," Leon said as Alcander caught up to the Spider's fleeing shadow and plunged his hand into it, fire coursing over his skin. As Alcander tore the Spider elder from his shadow, Leon added, "It wouldn't reflect well upon anyone if this is too weighted towards one side."

Alcander threw his opponent down, blood pouring from a deep gash upon his cheek and numerous burns along his neck where Alcander had grabbed him.

"WELL DONE!" Menander roared as he went to his feet, the rest of the Lions in the stands screaming in excitement. "THE FIRST FIGHT GOES TO THE THUNDERBIRD!"

Again, the Lions in the crowd roared, and Leon's supporters added their voices to the mix.

A moment later, it was Marcus' turn, and he went down into the arena fully armored and armed with his thunder wood bow. His opponent was to be a seventh-tier Bear, and Leon felt some apprehension at seeing just how armored the Bear was. Alcander's Spider opponent was inexperienced and too defensive for his own good, especially because his armor wasn't up to Leon's standard. This Bear was covered in enchanted steel from his toes to the crown of his head, though.

Menander announced the beginning of the fight, and Marcus followed Alcander's example by immediately attacking. However, he didn't use his light magic but instead loosed a lightning arrow at his opponent. It seemed the Bear had been waiting for just such a move as he dodged with more agility than the thickness of his armor and muscled bulk would imply, and stamped on the ground, causing the ground around Marcus' feet to open up and cause him to stumble.

The Bear exploited this opening by charging, though moving so slowly that Marcus had more than enough time to leap into the air and continue shooting lightning arrows as the flight enchantments in his armor took over. He held nothing back and used large amounts of his power in his attacks, and every lightning arrow exploded with tremendous force upon the sand, turning much of it to glass. The Bear, however, was only hit a couple of times, and each time, Leon didn't think the lightning penetrated his armor that well.

A silver lance appeared in the Bear's hand, but instead of brandishing it or throwing it at Marcus, the Bear instead slammed the butt of the weapon into the ground and seized control of the arena's sand. A twister appeared below Marcus and enveloped him in an instant, the raging sand interfering with his bow's ability to form and loose lightning arrows.

So, Marcus charged forward, pulling the bow into his soul realm and conjuring a spear to match the Bear's. His spear, forged by Leon over several days, glowed with white light, and the steel blade was augmented by a blade of light ten feet long. Marcus slammed his spear down upon the Bear, but to Leon's surprise, the blade of light shattered upon making contact with the Bear's silver spear, and Marcus had to hurriedly retreat as the Bear summoned a hand made of stone from the ground that almost caught him as he swooped down for his attack.

The Bear grinned and pulled the stone of the hand fully out of the ground and hurled it after Marcus. The stone exploded in the air, thousands of pieces of stone shrapnel filling the air around Marcus. Leon could hear each hit upon the armor he and Sid had made, and though he had full confidence both in it and in Marcus, he couldn't help but clench his fists in anxiety.

A moment later, however, Marcus conjured a shield of light around him that blocked the Bear from hitting him with any more stone shrapnel, though the Bear certainly tried as every piece of stone that had been launched at Marcus came back around for another pass. Withstanding this fusillade, Marcus raised a hand and conjured an orb of white light that rapidly grew to several times the size of his head, and tiny beads of light began peeling themselves off of it to hover around him until he seemed to be the center of his own small universe. With a snap of his fingers, thousands of light beads fired themselves at the Bear, and not content to let his attack stay at that level, Marcus brandished his spear again and activated another enchantment, causing a beam of white light to erupt from the spearhead and slam into the Bear.

The Bear's armor held up quite well, and as Marcus conjured his beam, the Bear summoned a wall of stone to block it and the rest of the beads. Marcus' beam of light sliced clean through, but by then, the Bear had time to swing his own spear and conjure a wall of darkness that seemed to eat all of Marcus' light. The wall only lasted for several seconds, but it was enough for Marcus to call off his attack.

As the wall of darkness fell, though, Marcus didn't remain idle and instead threw his spear at the Bear, taking his opponent by surprise. The Bear dodged, but the spear altered trajectory and tracked him, not losing any force behind it. The Bear was forced to raise an arm to block, and the spear was only partially deflected, biting into the Bear's armored forearm and coming away with a hint of red upon its blade.

The entire arena stared at the spear. It was clearly a superficial wound, but blood was blood. Menander got to his feet and before Marcus or the Bear could continue their contest, declared Marcus the winner.

Leon sighed in relief. Two rounds down, and both had gone his way. But the Thunderer didn't seem too worried at this point, and his relatively relaxed demeanor had Leon worried. He had the impression that this tournament was going to get harder sooner than he'd like.

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