

Storm King 691

Chapter 691: Princess Cassandra

The Princess sat upon her throne, the seat wrought of plain gray stone that lacked any real ornamentation. The thing looked as if it were just several slabs of stone thrown together. The Imperial Princess herself cut a much more impressive figure, and one that stood in stark contrast to the rest of the delegation from the Sacred Golden Empire.

Most of the delegates were women, Leon noticed, and they dressed in the style he was becoming more familiar with: a lot of gold, green, and white, fairly form-fitting, with bare arms and legs. Sandals adorned their feet, while those that seemed of higher rank wore as much gold jewelry as they could fit onto their bodies. This style continued for what few men were present, as well.

Princess Cassandra, on the other hand, was dressed in ornamental armor that covered her entire body from foot to collar. A fitted cuirass that emphasized her sizable bust; interlocking plates along her arms; an armored skirt; greaves that covered her from knee to foot. All of it was shining, polished white, and trimmed with what Leon could only guess was actual gold.

The Princess' hair was rather noteworthy, too; the sides of her head were cut into a fairly short chin-length bob. The rest of her hair was incredibly long and had been pulled into a tight ponytail that hung down her back. Most eye-catching was the color: her hair was a vivid purple, right down to her roots.

She was quite beautiful, Leon had to admit. Her blood red eyes were striking, and she had long, sharply-defined features that gave her an aggressive look—Leon could tell that she was a warrior, not a Princess that was used to sitting around doing nothing more than looking pretty. Her eighth-tier aura only served as confirmation of this impression. From Talal's short brief on her family, Leon knew that Cassandra was younger than him, and he had nothing but respect for someone who could reach that amount of power so young. He'd done so, too, of course, but he knew that he'd had a lot of help in that regard, and he couldn't ascribe all of his progress to himself alone.

What he found most interesting, though, was the fact that Cassandra had Sunlight at her hip, the weapon utterly unmistakable to Leon's eyes—he'd labored for a month designing and forging the thing, he knew his work when he saw it, even when it was almost stashed away almost out of sight.

It took him several long moments, but he was eventually able to pry his eyes away from Princess Cassandra and better take in the chamber built within the canopy of Cassandra's palace-tree. Immediately, he found himself frowning, for while she wasn't on the pyramidal platform upon which Cassandra's throne sat, Penelope still stood at its base in what was clearly about as prestigious a position as anyone from Heaven's Eye could reasonably accept, surrounded by a number of high-ranking matrons from the Sacred Golden Empire.

For a moment, Leon and Penelope made eye contact, and he could swear that he saw her smirk as if she'd won some competition between them that he wasn't aware of, but then she turned away and focused back on the delegates around her.

As they approached the throne platform, Talal hurried in front of Leon's group and, after the Princess' crier gave him a quick nod of her head, he hurriedly introduced Leon's party.

As he did, Leon turned his attention back to Cassandra and found that her ruby eyes hadn't seemed to have wavered at all after they made eye contact on his approach; she still stared at him so intently that he almost felt like she was about to bore holes into his skull.

He stared right back, feeling rather competitive despite the Princess' aura remaining calm, unperturbed, and devoid of any killing intent. He barely even registered it when Talal finished with their introductions and the rest of his party quickly bowed. He and Maia were the only ones that paused, but Elise seemed to know they were going to do so and had grabbed one of their hands each and jerked them downward, forcing them to bend just enough at the waist to satisfy decorum.

Leon guessed they looked quite comical.

Once his party straightened up, the Princess began to speak, and everyone else in the fairly noisy chamber immediately fell silent.

"It pleases me," she began, her voice loud and authoritative, yet somehow still soft and pleasant, "to see two of my Empire's citizens doing so well within the arms of Heaven's Eye." She was clearly speaking to Helen and Anna, but her eyes didn't once drift from Leon.

"The pleasure is ours, Your Highness," Anna replied without a moment's hesitation, "to receive your regard."

"Please stay for a while," the Princess continued, her stony expression not changing in the slightest, her ruby eyes still locked upon Leon. "Avail yourselves of my hospitality. Speak with my attendants, let us know how our people are treated in lands far from our borders."

"Yes, Your Highness," Anna replied, punctuating her acceptance with another slight bow.

"I'm also pleased that so many representatives of Heaven's Eye have chosen to accept my invitation," the Princess continued, her eyes narrowing slightly as she leaned forward a little bit. "The relationship between my Empire and your guild is long and storied. It will be an honor to hunt at your sides in the coming weeks."

Elise squeezed Leon's hand, but he didn't need that to know that it was his turn to respond. He could even sense Penelope's eyes upon him, perhaps hoping that he was going to make a fool of himself. He didn't spare her even a casual glance, instead keeping his attention squarely focused upon Cassandra.

"We are honored, in turn," Leon replied. "To hunt dangerous creatures is one of the greatest pleasures I've found, and to have such illustrious hunting partners is a joy without compare."

He smiled and spoke the expected platitudes, and it seemed his words were received well enough, no one looked offended. Penelope's eyes had narrowed, but it was Cassandra that Leon was still focusing on.

"I've heard," the Princess said, "that you and Lady Penelope have a wager going on..."

Leon cocked an eyebrow in surprise, and replied, "Yes, I suppose we do."

He finally pried his gaze away from the Princess and spared Penelope a quick glance. He found that she seemed just a little confused. He assumed that she told the Princess about their wager, but he guessed she didn't know why Cassandra was bringing it up now.

That confusion was put to rest when Cassandra continued, "I'm intrigued by the terms of your wager—Lady Penelope has indicated that your bet was an enchanted gemstone, yes?"

Leon nodded and pulled his enchanted agate out of his soul realm for the Princess to see. He held it out, putting it on display, and the Princess leaned forward again, her ruby eyes glittering as she took in the clearly enchanted stone.

"A beautiful piece," she eventually remarked. "The enchanter who made it must be quite skilled."

Leon shrugged and didn't say that he'd made it himself. He wasn't so much interested in hiding that information as he was in not wanting to appear like he was bragging here in the Princess' court.

"And Lady Penelope?" Cassandra firmly inquired as she turned her imperious gaze in the direction of the Director's daughter. It was obvious what she wanted to see, and it was just as obvious that she wasn't merely asking.

With only a moment's hesitation, Penelope retrieved her massive diamond from her soul realm, and much of the court was filled with the sounds of audible gasps. Leon hadn't quite gotten around to asking Elise about that diamond, yet, but this served as proof more than anything else that the seemingly mundane piece was more than a shiny rock.

"The Bright Heart of Promise?" Cassandra said in wonder, and Leon's surprise and confusion grew.

'Apparently I'm the only one who doesn't know what this thing is?' he thought in frustration as more gasps rippled through the court.

"I'm surprised," Cassandra said, "I certainly wouldn't be wagering such a rare piece like this..."

"It's hardly a wager, Your Highness," Penelope confidently stated. "I have no doubt who'll be winning this bet..." Her eyes flitted back toward Leon for just a moment, but long enough for her to flash him a confident smile.

"Still," Cassandra continued as she stared down at the glittering blue diamond in Penelope's hand, "I must admit to some curiosity: is this wager open for anyone to participate in?"

Leon was surprised, but if Penelope was as well, she hid it behind a stony mask. She replied, "I wouldn't say *anyone*, Your Highness, this *is* just a personal competition..."

"I want in," Cassandra demanded, her tone brokering no argument. However, while that may have worked with anyone who might've been from the Sacred Golden Empire, neither Penelope nor Leon were her subjects.

"To join a wager, Your Highness, would mean wagering something," Penelope whispered, though her words carried as far as they needed to.

Cassandra's eyes flitted between Leon and Penelope again, but for once, Leon agreed with Penelope. If the Imperial Princess was going to try and force herself to join this bet, then she'd need to bet something equally as valuable as what was already on the table.

However, he had to admit that after seeing the reaction Penelope's diamond elicited compared to his agate, he had to admit to feeling some amount of inferiority already. He didn't think Cassandra was

going to just let this matter go—her ruby eyes were burning with a familiar competitive spirit that he'd felt himself many times—but he also hoped that she didn't pull something out that blew his offering even further out of the water.

His certainty that she'd join the bet regardless was vindicated not even a second later when Cassandra lifted her hand and, with a flash of light, pulled something from her soul realm.

It was a mask. It was made of polished gray metal—some kind of steel-ish alloy as far as Leon could tell, though with a little something extra mixed in to give it an odd silvery shine—and shaped into the image of a serene androgynous face. There weren't many other details, though, as the face was smooth and without prominent features. It was as if someone had set out to make the most neutral face possible and succeeded quite handily.

However, Leon's eyes narrowed as his eighth-tier eyes picked out the presence of runes inscribed upon the inner surface of the mask. He couldn't quite tell what they did from this angle, but he could tell that there was much more about that mask than was immediately apparent.

"How about this?" Cassandra asked as she held up the mask for the entire court to see.

Leon felt Elise's hand in his tighten slightly, and when he glanced at his wife, she quietly whispered to him, "That's an enchanted mask that's supposed to help one focus on their tasks. *Very* valuable, *very* expensive. Heaven's Eye can't make them as well as the enchanters in the Sacred Golden Empire can, and the northern Imperials don't usually let them out of their control..."

Leon's was certainly intrigued, but if all the mask did was aid in focus, then he didn't think it would be quite that valuable. Still, if he were pressed, he would have no problem accepting it as a match for his agate.

"What do you say?" the Princess asked with a smug smirk.

Penelope responded with a welcoming smile, though one without much warmth. "If Your Highness wishes to join this wager, then I have no arguments."

Cassandra turned her gaze toward Leon.

"Neither do I," Leon replied. "May the best of us win."

"Indeed," Cassandra drawled with pride and anticipation.

The three of them then worked out the same details that Leon and Penelope had hammered out on the ark. Cassandra had nothing to change, but she demurred at handing the mask over to anyone else.

"We're all honorable people, and this wager is now public," she said. "None of us would be so gauche as to renege if we lose, would we?"

Leon and Penelope agreed, and the three dispensed with the need for an impartial handler.

Once all of that was finished, Leon didn't stick around for much longer. He took his family and retinue and left after only about an hour of mingling with the court. There was food present, validating the gathering as a banquet, but there just wasn't much to do there except mingle with dignitaries from the

Sacred Golden Empire. Not a waste of time by any means, as Elise reminded Leon, but it just wasn't what Leon was interested in right now.

What was captivating his attention more was the upcoming hunt, the wager, and his untested gear.

Just as he was leaving, though, Leon felt someone's attention fall upon him, and at the edge of the stone courtyard, as the rest of his retinue and family were walking ahead of him, he paused for a moment and glanced backward.

His golden eyes met Cassandra's ruby gaze. She gave him an intense look, her lips pulling upward in a mysterious smile, and then the moment was broken; she turned away. Leon, slightly unnerved, wondered what that was about, but didn't stick around to find out. He hurried after his people.

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"So," Leon said as he cleared a bit of space in the courtyard of his modular villa, "what in the hells *is* that 'Promise of the Heart' or whatever that diamond is?"

Sitting nearby were Elise and Valeria. Maia was nearby, as well, but her nose was buried in a book, and she wasn't paying much attention to their conversation. The rest of Leon's retinue were getting some rest in while they could—once the hunt began, they'd be moving fast and quick, and there wouldn't be much time to stop and catch their breath until the hunt was over.

Elise, as the one most knowledgeable in these sorts of matters, replied, "The Bright Heart of Promise was a gem that was said to have come from a huge trove of treasure from the Isle of Empty Promise."

"What's that place?" Leon asked, recognizing the name from having seen it on maps before, but having little idea of what else it was supposed to be. There didn't seem to be any human settlements there, at least.

"No one really knows," Elise replied with a shrug and a laugh. "The place is constantly shrouded in fog, and everyone who goes in always finds themselves coming back out without any memory of what transpired within. No one knows what's on that island, and many people have tried. A Sunlit Emperor even tried to scout the place out before, using both his own power and the power of his Empire, and we still know nothing."

"Then what's this Bright Heart thing supposed to be?" Valeria wondered.

"Some souvenir from the island," Elise said, shrugging again. "It's a valuable piece, for sure, but its origins are uncertain and shrouded in myth. Some say a sage found his way through the fog, had some adventures with island natives, and managed to steal the diamond from them. Some say an island native escaped and tried to use the diamond as a bribe to anyone who would follow him back to wreak vengeance upon his enemies. Ultimately, it's just a famous diamond that a lot of people tell stories about. It's pretty and has a well-known name, but that's about it."

Leon scowled slightly as he judged the cleared space in his courtyard to be sufficient for his testing purposes.

"That's... kind of anticlimactic," Valeria observed.

“Not everything is some long lost treasure,” Elise replied with resignation. “The diamond is very pretty, but it’s just a diamond. Probably made by a Heaven’s Eye jeweler millennia ago or something.”

“I think it would look good around one of our necks,” Valeria said with a smile as she stared pointedly at Leon.

“Help me kill wyverns, then,” Leon replied, his interest in the diamond fading rapidly as it became clear enough that it was mundane.

“Did you bring that weapon you were working on?” Valeria asked.

“That’s the first thing I was going to test,” Leon responded, a smile of his own spreading across his face. He waved his hand, and the weapon appeared, this time without the sheet covering it to protect it from dust. At the same time, he reached out with what little mastery over earth magic he possessed and caused much of the soil in the courtyard to rise, forming a narrow half-oval around the weapon.

Valeria’s sapphire eyes glittered as the weapon appeared, but Elise’s response was more subdued.

“It almost looks like a small Flame Lance,” she said.

Indeed, it did. It was essentially the skeleton of a Flame Lance barrel—two parallel steel rods, each one longer than Leon was tall. They were connected to each other with half a dozen heavily enchanted copper rings. Its base was fairly large, but not nearly as large as that of a Bull Kingdom Flame Lance, being large enough that Anzu could’ve curled up on it if the barrel were to be taken off. Tracks, levers, and rails had been attached to the base, allowing the barrel to be aimed in just about any desired direction. Long lines of densely-packed runes spiraled around the base, and it was covered in copper and silver wire. Near the back of the base was a slot filled right now with a small glowing emerald, packed full of magic power.

If Leon’s calculations were correct, and he had legitimate cause to think they weren’t, the weapon he’d designed *should* be capable of firing an iron projectile about the size of his finger at tremendous speeds, perhaps even enough to knock a wyvern out of the sky. The emerald in the back had sufficient magic stored within it to power five shots at full power if all went well.

It worked with an incredibly complex series of enchantments woven together as best as Leon could manage, and while lightning was the primary magical element used, it also incorporated many earth enchantments, which exacerbated Leon’s uncertainty in the weapon’s capabilities.

“How likely is this thing to explode in our faces?” Elise asked with obvious caution, looking like she wanted to do nothing but shield herself from the activation of this thing.

Leon couldn’t blame her, it looked incredibly haphazard and jury-rigged. It *was* incredibly haphazard and jury-rigged, he had to admit. He’d always wanted to build something like the Flame Lances for himself, and when he read a book from his family’s archives that went into some detail explaining the strange relationship lightning had with iron, copper, and several other metals, he’d figured that building something like this was starting to come within reach.

The weapon before him now was the result of many man-hours spent pouring over books, notes, and consulting with Nestor and the Thunderbird. But in response to Elise’s question, Nestor said from Leon’s soul realm, [Pretty high, really. That thing will *not* perform well under pressure.]

"I kind of figured that," Leon replied, tapping his chest and making an irritated face to Elise and Valeria, telling them that he was speaking with Nestor.

"Please aim that thing away from the house," Elise pleaded, not comforted at all with the idea that Nestor was now speaking with Leon.

Leon replied, "That's what the dirt's for," and pushed the cumbersome weapon into position, aiming the weapon right down the center of his dirt oval.

It took him several minutes to ensure everything was properly aimed and the base was set, and while Nestor didn't say anything, Leon could feel the dead man's embarrassment and mortification. Several times during the construction, he'd decried what Leon had made as a profane mix of something reasonable by his standards and unconscionably primitive, but Leon soldiered on anyway.

He'd never learn if all he did was imitate, anyway.

He then retrieved from his soul realm a single piece of iron and loaded it into the weapon. He took several seconds to ensure that it was aimed at his target and that the weapon had been tuned to its lowest power setting, and then paused to look back at his lovers.

"Anyone want to press the button first?" he asked with a wild and almost mad grin on his face, his heart thumping in his chest with excitement at finally, *finally*, getting to test his creations.

Valeria looked like she was about to jump up and rush forward to fire the thing herself, but Elise stopped her with a hand on her arm, and with an almost apologetic look to Leon, pulled Valeria behind their chairs and channeled a bit of her own earth magic to create stone that not only gave them some cover, but also reinforced Leon's dirt wall.

"Be careful!" Elise cautioned Leon. She then whispered more to herself than anyone else, "This is a *really* bad idea..."

"It's fine," Leon said with more confidence than he felt. "Should be fine. Should be safe."

"You're not very convincing," Elise quipped.

"It's on the lowest power setting," Leon explained. "Wouldn't even penetrate the walls around us, let alone wyvern scales or something more robust. Ten feet of dirt should be more than enough to stop the bolt."

"*Really* bad idea," Elise repeated.

That statement broke through Leon's enthusiasm, and he paused a moment. The enchantments he'd worked into this modular house were robust, and he was certain no one outside was in any danger. The projectile fired from his Lance couldn't penetrate the walls of this place, not with his safeguards in place.

Still, he ran through the power calculations in his head again, just to be certain. When he was, he leaned down and triggered the Lance.

There was a quiet whine as the stored magic was drained from the emerald, and then a flash of magic power. The weapon sputtered and sparks of lightning arced across the barrel. The runes that covered the weapon glowed with light for one brief moment, the weapon shook, and with a loud crack, fired.

And then snapped as most of the magic that ran through the weapon overwhelmed the enchantments and bled into the environment. The iron bolt was flung from the barrel, but only went about thirty feet, hitting the dirt mound with a rather unimpressive splash and only sinking an inch or two in.

“Damn,” Leon muttered in disappointment.

“Was that it?” Valeria asked in disbelief.

[Hah, knew it wouldn’t work!] Nestor gloated.

Ignoring the dead man, Leon just replied, “I guess... Damn. Looks like there’s still quite a bit of work to do to get this thing to a usable state, but at least it worked... kind of?” Leon’s statement was punctuated with a groan, but he wasn’t too surprised if he was honest with himself. Too many unknowns involved with this thing, too much earth magic. At the very least, he was glad to see that the bolt had left the barrel.

He had many other things to test, though, and those tests, he thought, were much likelier to be successful. And so, eager to move on from this relative failure, Leon began to test his brand new armor.

Chapter 692: Southern Nymphs

After the lackluster testing of his new lightning weapon, Leon was much more gratified to find that his armor was in far better condition—for the most part, at least. Nearly all of the enchantments that he’d placed upon the armor that were self-contained functioned exactly as he needed them to, strengthening and quickening him immensely. The modular gems designed for his gauntlets and his tau pearl were a little iffier, but for the most part, he was well-pleased at their performance during his testing.

The tau pearl was a curious thing, he’d found. He’d tested its power before, but not with these enchantments, and while he’d noticed how peculiar its power was, it wasn’t until he began putting its functions through their paces that he started to get a good enough idea of it that he could start to put it into words.

The pearl’s power was extremely gentle, something that wasn’t suited for dealing death. Despite light magic being suited well enough for offensive magics, the tau pearl didn’t seem capable of it; the shield that his armor could project was about the extent of its combat capabilities, while its healing effect was far more profound and powerful than Leon had ever given it credit for. The tau pearl was a potent defensive item, and as he tested it, Leon found that it seemed to be almost reluctant to give up its power when he called upon his armor’s shield.

He couldn’t help but wonder if the pearl had some kind of will within it, if not outright intelligence. The shield *did* come when he called it, but the healing power came much more readily.

He resolved never to try and weaponize the pearl. That wasn’t something he wanted to poke too hard, for fear that the pearl would simply break or cease supplying him with power.

Most of his other new enchantments worked much better and much more reliably. His flight belt ensured that he’d be able to fly with great speed even when he called upon his other magic powers, while most of his other modular weapons worked as he’d intended.

The only one that was giving him much trouble was the black opal. He was able to use it to shroud himself in darkness, rendering him invisible, but the opal continually failed to make his body as intangible as he'd been hoping for. It might be enough to aid him in travel—especially over rougher terrain—but in combat, the opal's enchantments wouldn't be able to help him in avoiding damage.

Once his testing was done, Leon turned his attention back to his Lightning Lance. To say that he was disappointed in its performance was to greatly understate his feelings, but there wasn't much he could do about it at the moment—though it was certainly destined for more vigorous evaluations over the next few weeks. He supposed before any tinkering could be done, he could crank up the power and see how it performed, but he didn't feel comfortable doing that within Vyrias. That would have to wait until the hunt began and his retinue could get out into the Scorched Fields where there'd be fewer people around who could potentially be hurt.

For the time being, Leon did some calculations with Nestor, testing the Lance by firing it at its lowest power setting a couple more times, and trying to figure out where its limits lay without really approaching those limits, while also keeping his magic senses trained upon the weapon, doing his best through observation to try and figure out where the enchantments were failing him, or where any inefficiencies lay that might be responsible for its poor performance. He wasn't able to find much that he could immediately adjust, unfortunately.

Once all of his testing was completed, Leon put all of it away to spend some time with his family. Elise and Valeria had stayed with him during the testing process, boosting his ego a bit by fawning over his armor, but neither were in much of a mood to do a lot of complicated math or analyze enchantment schemes, and so had tuned out well before he was finished.

However, once he was finally done, he found that they'd not spent their time idly chatting about nothing in particular; they were both just as electrified as Leon about their bet with Cassandra and Penelope.

The specific words that Elise spoke were, "We *can't* lose this competition under any circumstances."

Valeria agreed, and they had poured over a map of the Scorched Fields, searching for any potential advantage that could be found.

"Find anything useful?" Leon asked once they finished explaining what they'd occupied themselves with.

"Nothing of much promise," Valeria admitted. "We're working with publicly available information, anyway, so it's not like staring at a map of typical wyvern haunts will do much to help us win. We're working with the same information as everyone else..."

"We should definitely head west with all haste," Elise said. "I can't imagine we're going to stumble upon some great advantage without taking some risks, so we should just head straight for the aeries. Better to find wyverns by getting closer to their homes, right?"

"Also *much* more dangerous," Valeria pointed out. "Wyverns are tough monsters, a typical team will only bring down one or two during the hunt."

"A team as well-equipped as ours will bring in four or five," Elise countered, looking to Leon for some confirmation.

Leon nodded in agreement. His retinue had brought down four wyverns during the previous hunt, and to his knowledge, that was fairly typical for a team from Heaven's Eye or one of the Empires. Wyverns were powerful, but the sheer size of the Scorched Fields were the main reason for such numbers, as even with thousands of wyverns descending from their aeries in the west, they'd be quite spread out after even a single day.

'With fewer Imperials participating, though, then there may be less competition...' Leon mused.

"It won't be enough for the bet, though," Leon said aloud as he focused on the map.

"Then we—" Valeria began before Maia's voice resounded through their minds.

[There's an easier way to get information...] the river nymph said as she approached, looking like she'd just woken up from a refreshing nap. She didn't pull up a chair around their table, instead choosing to collapse right into Leon's lap, laying her head across his shoulder and draping her long legs over his arm rest.

"What way might that be?" Leon asked as he wrapped his arms around her.

[My people live in this area,] Maia explained. [Under another Pleione, with other Naiads. We don't typically get along or interact all that much, but I'm sure they know quite a bit about the wyverns. We just need to ask.]

"And they'd just give up that information?" Valeria asked skeptically.

Maia smiled. [We have some leverage.] She snuggled a little further into Leon's embrace as she said this, giving him a glowing look. Leon could feel a few hotter and more intense emotions coming through their connection simmering just under the surface, and he knew exactly where this conversation was going to end, but it seemed that Maia wasn't quite ready to head for the bedroom, yet.

"I hope you're not talking about Leon," Elise said with a hint of warning in her voice. "I love you now, but that won't hold true for any of your people who might want to take Leon away from us."

"Yeah," Leon agreed a little distractedly, as Maia's hands were wandering over his body a bit. "I'm not all that keen on being just... *given* to anyone..."

[Then it's good that's not what I'm suggesting,] Maia replied as her hands paused on Leon's chest. [The cure for Gorgonism. It should work even without your blood so long as they find a proper catalyst. We can give the cure to them, and in return ask for any information on wyverns.]

A smile crossed Leon's face, reflected in the faces of Valeria and Elise across the table.

"Where are your people?" Leon asked.

Maia leaned up a bit, freeing herself from Leon's embrace as she did, and marked several locations on the map. [They might be hard to find, but there are a few lakes in the area that we can check, first. There's quite an extensive network of underground rivers and tunnels below these fields, and somewhere down there are my people. They still need humans, so these lakes where all that water comes to the surface will be our best bets for finding them.]

"Then we should visit these lakes," Elise said with only a hint of reluctance.

[We should,] Maia said. [But first, I need Leon for a while.] She stood up, taking Leon's hand and pulling him to his feet.

Leon knew that this was the result of those emotions that Maia was concealing, so he threw Valeria and Elise an apologetic shrug and let Maia pull him toward the bedroom.

For their part, Valeria just smiled and waved as they left, while Elise looked like she was tempted to join them, but decided to just give them some alone time. The two ladies turned their attention back to the map, plotting out more concrete details about visiting the lakes that Maia had marked, while Leon focused all of his attention on his river nymph, ensuring that she received all the pleasure she craved, and more.

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Leon and his retinue didn't wait around once morning came. He left behind the camp that he'd set up, knowing that there was still enough time for them to come back before the hunt began. Besides, equipped with various generations of his flight gear, his retinue could travel quite quickly, and the lakes that Maia had pointed out were located relatively nearby—the river nymphs still needed some access to humans for procreation purposes, so they weren't that deep into the Scorched Fields.

So, when dawn broke, Leon assembled everyone, had them check their flight gear, and took off from his camp's courtyard, leaving only Talal and Elise behind to keep an eye on things. The two weren't particularly skilled in combat, and there were some bureaucratic things with Heaven's Eye they could help deal with here.

Leon himself wore his armor as he led the way, followed first by Anzu, and then Valeria and Maia, and then the rest of his retinue. They drew some attention, as anyone might expect taking off so blatantly in such a crowded and busy camp, but with Leon in the lead, no one challenged them.

They made good time, flying above the grassy fields and between the massive native trees. There were predators and other wildlife in the Scorched Fields, but none of the creatures that were large enough to harm them had the temperament to do so. There were huge, fat, tusked creatures with mottled gray fire-resistant skin, but despite being large enough to destroy a carriage by themselves, they were skittish by nature and tended to run when confronted by things they didn't recognize. These things were the only creatures that Leon considered even remotely a threat, but they couldn't fly, so his retinue with their flight gear had the run of the Scorched Fields.

They reached the first lake by late morning. Once they touched down, Leon and the rest set up on the lakefront while Maia dove into the lake and vanished. She was looking for her people, Leon knew, and as a Naiad herself, there was little for her to fear except from perhaps another Naiad.

He couldn't help but feel some anxiety seeing her vanish beneath the sea-green waves, but their connection was strong, and he could check up on her whenever he needed some reassurance. He never needed to, though, and about an hour later, Maia resurfaced with the unfortunate news that she couldn't find any river nymphs in the lake.

"Are you sure that your people are around here?" Anna had asked as they prepared themselves to take back to the sky.

[Without a doubt,] Maia replied. [My mother has told me many stories about my cousins to the south. There are a few other places where my people live, too. It's just that I've only ever heard stories, so I don't know their exact locations.]

"That... makes sense," Anna replied.

There weren't many other questions from his people, so Leon and his party took off again, and by midafternoon, they'd reached another of Maia's lakes.

Again, Leon's party got settled in on the lakefront while Maia dove into the water.

It was a good place to relax, and Leon's retinue took the opportunity to do so. Rolling, grassy hills surrounded them, and the gigantic trees added quite a bit of charm and texture to the environment. Moreover, the sky was clear, the sun was shining, and there was a pleasant breeze in the air. Leon didn't blame his retainers for getting comfortable.

It took Maia a little longer to return this time, but when she did, she was smiling. She hadn't gotten the information that they wanted, but she had contacted some lesser nymphs. They weren't her subordinates, though, so they could only relay her message to their Naiad. Leon's group would have to wait for the response.

"Looks like we'll be spending the night here!" Leon called out to his people.

"Oh no!" Alcander cried out, his voice thick with sarcasm. "What a terrible turn of events!" His sarcasm perfectly complimented him as he reclined on the slope of a hill, his hair blowing in the breeze, Marcus, Alix, and Gaius in similar poses nearby. Leon might've taken a bit more umbrage with their incaution, but he knew that now that they were all fifth-tier mages, they could be ready for violence at a moment's notice.

"Yes!" Marcus agreed. "How unfortunate we are to have to spend more time in such a place as this!"

Leon laughed, and joined in their banter, willingly playing the villain. "Stay vigilant!" he called out, the smile on his face showing his lack of seriousness. "If our enemies successfully creep up on us, then I'll have all of you scouring this countryside clean by hand!"

"Won't someone save us from our vicious taskmaster?" Alix called out. Her head turned slightly toward Anshu, who was standing near the water's edge. "How about you, sailor? Care to help a helpless damsel facing down death at the hands of this vicious wrongdoer?"

Anshu, while not sneering or outright refusing to engage with Alix, simply shook his head, clearly not in the mood to partake in their game.

"Oh well," Alix sighed. "How about you two? There's a damsel over here in distress!"

Anna and Helen, the targets of her shout, shrugged.

"You're on your own!" Anna helpfully called out.

"There're some herbs over here that I need to see to, sorry!" Helen added, the two colorful ladies waving to Alix.

"Damn," Alix whispered. "I guess I need to work on my damsel act."

"I don't think any acting will be convincing unless you lose some muscle-weight," Gaius said as he poked Alix in her shoulder, well-toned by daily physical training.

"Oh!" Alix cried out. "Woe is me! I have been felled by the worst villain of all!" She dramatically collapsed back onto the grass, and the group of four continued their banter.

Leon, however, turned back to the lake, and waited with Valeria and Maia for whatever would come next. Anzu, meanwhile, spent some time frolicking around the lake, scaring off some of the smaller animals that had come to drink. After about an hour, he returned to the group, his face and claws bloody, with the reason why clutched in his beak: a huge rodent the size of a housecat.

Without much care, Anzu dropped to the grass near Leon and his lovers and began to tear into his kill. However, he'd only gotten started when Valeria pulled away, looking just a little sickened.

"Come on, Anzu," she chided the fourteen-year-old griffin. "You should know better, by now: don't eat where you're going to rest! It makes a mess!"

Anzu, clearly understanding her words, looked sufficiently scolded as he rather sheepishly took his kill several dozen feet away to finish in peace.

"Don't blame him too much," Leon said as Valeria returned to his side. "He's just excited to get out and hunt for a bit."

"Don't spoil him," Valeria replied. "You do that too much. He's going to develop bad habits."

Leon just smiled, unable to argue since he knew that he did give far too many allowances when it came to Anzu.

And so, his party settled in around the lake until an hour or two before sunset, when Leon started to feel a welling of power surging up from the lake. He looked to Maia, who nodded and rose to her feet. Leon was only a moment behind her, and the rest of his party got themselves ready, too, sensing the same outpouring of magic power.

The water of the lake began to bubble and churn, and Leon couldn't help but summon his armor and prepare himself for battle. However, Maia took a few steps forward, and a moment later, heads began to poke out of the water, followed by the familiarly nude bodies of lesser river nymphs. Unlike most northern nymphs—Maia excluded—that he'd seen, though, Leon noticed that these nymphs were generally much darker skinned.

At the head of their group rose a more powerful nymph, gorgeous and self-assured as she stepped out of the lake and onto the grass, her lack of clothing not all a concern. She strode toward Maia, the two eighth-tier equivalent beings smiling and not saying a word aloud.

It was a rather surreal meeting, in Leon's mind. The two Naiad's barely even looked away from each other, and Leon kept his party at a reasonable distance, about as far away from Maia as the other Naiad's nymphs were from her. Not a single audible word was spoken between the two, but Leon did notice their auras flickering a bit and subtly coiling around each other, acting almost like body language to complement their mental communication.

After about ten minutes, the other nymphs retreated to the water, and Maia turned back toward them, her smile now even bigger.

[I have a lead,] she said. [If it pans out, then that bet will be won, without a doubt!]

Chapter 693: The Hunt is On

Leon and the rest of his party, as soon as the meeting between Maia and her Naiad contact ended, returned to Vyrias to link back up with Elise and Talal, their plans to spend the night out in the wild scrapped with the success of the mission. They returned not long after sundown. Elise and Talal were both still up as Leon had used his mental communication technique to inform them that the team was on its way back.

Once they touched down, everyone met in the dining room to go over what Maia had discovered.

“So,” Leon said as everyone took their seats, “you said that you were told something useful?”

[I was,] Maia replied with a dark smile. [This region is very well known to my people, and their influence stretches all the way to the far coasts of your Raj.] Maia pointedly looked at Anshu, who looked a little surprised. Though, Leon wasn’t sure why, because he already knew that Maia’s father, a famous war leader in the Free Cities of the Tam south of the Raj had been taken by Maia’s mother, so the presence of river nymphs that far west certainly didn’t surprise him.

Maia continued, [The wyvern aeries are generally avoided, being too dangerous. However, my people know quite a bit about them, including many hidden routes and passages through the mountains we could take.]

Leon smiled in anticipation and excitement. He’d seen the aeries himself, though he’d never gotten close. Five years ago, his hunt had taken him within a hundred miles of the foot of the mountains that the wyverns laired within, and they were incredibly imposing. Tall, steep peaks that could give the Frozen Mountains that he’d grown up in a run for sheer ruggedness. As far as he knew, there were no routes that humans could use to get through those mountains, the wyverns were simply too numerous and territorial to allow for that kind of travel. Knowledge of relatively safe ways to get through the mountains, or at least to some of the aeries, would be worth his weight in gold to the right people.

And his party just so happened to be the right people.

“What kind of routes are we talking about?” Leon asked. “Are they routes that all of us can use, or are they underground rivers that are only accessible to your people?”

[Most of the underground rivers reach the surface before the foot of the aeries,] Maia informed him, and Elise helpfully pulled out a detailed map of the Scorched Fields for Maia to use as an aid.

Maia then indicated a place on the southern end of the mountain range, tracing it with a bronze finger.

[Here,] she explained. [There’s a pass through the mountains that’s well-shaded by trees and boulders, offering plentiful cover from any wyverns flying above us. The pass doesn’t go all the way through the aeries to the Raj on the other side, but it cuts through a valley with several wyvern lairs that should be relatively deserted once their eggs start hatching and the adults go out hunting.]

“Do you know how deserted?” Gaius asked with some concern. “I can’t imagine that all wyverns everywhere leave their young vulnerable as they head out to hunt...”

“That’s something that’s actually pretty common,” Anna countered. “A lot of creatures will hide their young while they hunt or keep them in secluded nests. Wyverns don’t really make family units, only coming together to mate, generally speaking. Once all the mothers leave the aeries, there shouldn’t be many surprises in those aeries for us to stumble across.”

“And, if all things go well, we’ll be able to snatch up all those young and the eggs yet to be hatched!” Alcander exclaimed excitedly.

“Maybe,” Leon cautioned. “Let’s not get carried away. For the most part, the mothers leaving their aeries forces nearly all of their males to hunt further afield. However, sometimes, they’ll stick around to opportunistically snatch up some of the young.”

“Why would they do that?” Alcander wondered. “What use could they have for doing that?”

Anna answered, “Eating their own young can be a good way to avoid having to hunt. Plus, with all the females gone from the aeries, there’ll be more food to be found in the mountains. People like us might be heading up there to look for eggs, too...”

“Making matters more complicated,” Leon added, “is that the females will be constantly returning and leaving again with their catches. The aeries are going to be ‘relatively’ deserted, but we’ll still have plenty of opportunities to snag a few heads on our way.”

Alcander fell silent as all of that sank in., though he put on a brave smile. There’d be a few male wyverns hanging around the aeries, along with a few mothers who would strongly disagree with their attempts to take the wyvernlings and yet-to-be-hatched eggs. And though most of the wyverns would be out hunting, the Scorched Fields were huge, bigger even than all of the Bull Kingdom. That meant that while there would be a massive number of wyverns out hunting, their density was going to be fairly low. There’d be comparatively fewer wyverns in the aeries, but Leon and his party, if they decided to make this assault on the aeries, were almost guaranteed to encounter more wyverns than any other team out hunting in the Fields.

Judging by the looks many of his retainers wore, Leon knew that this information was not lost on anyone. Still, he decided to give voice to it anyway, just to be sure they were all on the same page.

After some deliberation, however, they all agreed, regardless of the risk. Wyverns were powerful and ferocious beasts, but Leon and Maia were eighth-tier mages with powers greater than the average wyvern. It was natural for everyone to feel confident in their chances, and once he got over his initial surprise and shock, Alcander went back to his usual boisterous attitude, bragging about how many wyverns he was going to bring down.

They soon broke for the night, their plan set. For the moment, they had nothing to do but wait for word of the first wyverns to start coming down from aeries, which could be as long as a month away. Their greatest challenge at this stage was just finding something to fill the days they’d be spending at this camp, but for that, Leon had a few ideas...

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“... and adjust it a *little* more this way...” Valeria whispered, crouching down and fiddling with some of the enchantments that Leon had inscribed upon his Lightning Lance.

In keeping with the focus of his enchantment research over the past decade, much of the weapon’s enchanted components could be swapped out, replaced, or adjusted, giving a much greater degree of control over the weapon than any others that Leon had ever used.

It had been two weeks since the meeting with the local Naiad, and Leon and his party were still waiting for the wyverns to start their great hunt, and to fill his days, Leon had taken to adjusting his Lightning Lance. After the first lackluster test, he *really* wanted to get it working as well as he needed, and in these two weeks, he’d spent enough time adjusting it and testing it that he didn’t even need to actually fire an iron bolt through it to know if it was working—he’d just observed the magic flowing through it enough times to get a good idea of what was going on.

He’d made some progress in bringing the power of the weapon closer to what he wanted it to be, but that also threw off many of his calculations regarding the weapon’s magic power requirements. He needed both force and efficiency, and to do that, Valeria had taken to spending much of her time not spent training helping him adjust the Lance. That was where Leon now found himself, listening to Valeria run through her own theories regarding the weapon’s shortcomings.

Once Valeria finished adjusting a small dial inscribed with more than a dozen runes on the side of the weapon—one of several that helped Leon to adjust the weapon’s power—she stood up.

“The magic power you’re pumping into the Lance is getting caught up in an amplification loop,” Valeria explained, and Leon immediately crouched down to see what she was talking about. Valeria continued, “The power was having trouble getting out of that loop, and eventually just bled out of the Lance over several hours.”

“Ah, shit,” Leon whispered. “How did I not see this?”

“Too focused on smaller and more technical problems?” Valeria suggested as Leon rose to his feet, a look of self-admonishment adorning his face. “I’ve seen you work enough to know that, when it comes to enchantments, at least, you get caught up in the little details. Tends to blind you to more basic problems. I’m guessing you assumed most of the problems were coming from the more complicated enchantments you made, and never really examined the amplification loops?”

Leon scowled and didn’t immediately answer, but he was hardly upset at Valeria for this. She was a fresh pair of eyes seeing what he couldn’t, and it was an extremely dangerous problem she’d pointed out.

“Good thing I wasn’t testing this thing too frequently,” Leon whispered with some worry.

The specific problem that Valeria had pointed out and adjusted was one where magic power was supposed to flow into and loop through an amplification array several times, and then flow into the weapon’s barrel, where the meat of the Lance’s enchantments lay. However, the magic power wasn’t flowing out of the array, and was instead just being amplified endlessly.

In the worst case scenario, power trapped like this would eventually cause the enchanted object to explode. Leon had placed some safeguards against this by ensuring the amplification array was only

active for a short time, but that didn't stop the problem of power getting trapped within it. The enchantment wasn't completely lossless—fortunately, in this case—so that trapped power did eventually bleed off into the environment at a rate slow enough that he never noticed, but if he'd tested the Lance frequently enough, then that power might've built up faster than it could bleed out, eventually causing the very explosion that Leon's safeguards were meant to prevent.

"Shit..." Leon whispered as all of this ran through his head, knowing just how close the weapon had been to his family and retinue.

"We got a bit lucky there, didn't we?" Valeria said, her voice just a little shaky.

"Yeah," Leon replied as he pulled her into a quick hug. "Good thing you noticed that, because I think it would've taken me a while longer to see it, and who knows what could've happened in that time?"

"You would've seen it before that happened, I'm sure," Valeria said with a glowing smile. "I have faith in your abilities. As far as I can tell, the more technical and specialized enchantments in the rest of the weapon are working fine, it's just that magic power was getting trapped in that loop—"

"—And not traveling to those specialized enchantments," Leon finished. He crouched back down to look at the amplification array and the adjustments Valeria had made. She hadn't done much, merely twisting a dial just a couple of degrees, but it was enough to improve the array significantly. He'd still need to re-enchant that dial, or replace it entirely, but her adjustment was probably enough to make the weapon far more functional than it was.

Leon reached out to perform a few more adjustments to other dials and control enchantments, hoping to increase the weapon's efficiency just a little bit more when Talal suddenly ran into the courtyard.

"Leon!" he shouted, and Leon's head snapped in Talal's direction. "Wyverns have been sighted in the west!" Talal shouted. "The hunt is on!"

—

Leon's camp was back in his soul realm, his family and retinue were at his side, and he sat astride Anzu in full armor. Everyone else he was traveling with was in their armor and wore their flight gear, ready to follow him into the sky. However, they just needed to make a few last arrangements before they could leave, which Talal was seeing to not too far away, where he was locked in conversation with the Heaven's Eye representatives who were *actually* in charge of the delegation, rather than serving as the nominal leaders that Leon and Penelope were.

To ensure the safety of not only Leon's party but Vyrias as well, constant communications between the strongest mages taking part in the hunt and the hunting city had to be maintained. It was also best for Heaven's Eye to know where Leon was at most times. He instinctively balked a little bit at this, not wanting his whereabouts to fall into Penelope's hands, but he figured that the safety of himself, his family, and his retinue was far more important than winning the bet.

That certainty was challenged when Penelope and her retinue emerged from her camp and made their way down the road. Most of her retainers were riding on the sides of horseless and wheelless carriages, but Penelope herself rode with three others in a wheelless chariot pulled by four huge horses that Leon

recognized as being the same breed of ruinously expensive beasts as those that had pulled Emilie's carriages during their move to the Central Empires.

Saternan horses. She'd be able to move quickly with those things.

Penelope's group rode right past him, the woman herself smirking at his group as she passed, and Leon was rather unpleasantly surprised to see that she was wearing one of *his* flight belts. He'd only recently sent the design to Heaven's Eye and didn't know that they were being manufactured, yet.

"I look forward to receiving that stone of yours, Leon!" Penelope shouted at him. "I'll be sure to put it to better use than you ever could!"

Speaking for him, Alix muttered just loud enough for all of them to hear, "Bitch..."

Leon fought the urge to chuckle, and responded to his people, "If we lose to her, none of you will see the outside of my training room for a year."

"Sounds like a win-win to me," Alcander growled.

"I'll pass on that, husband," Elise said. "But I'll do what I can do ensure our triumph, anyway."

Leon warmly smiled at her. She and Talal would be maintaining communications at their camp wherever Leon decided to establish it while Leon and the others actually went out to hunt.

"Are you so sure that you want to pass on it?" Leon asked as his smile widened mischievously. "That could be quite fun, in more ways than one..."

"Is it the kind of *fun* that I would be interested in?" Elise replied as her eyes narrowed coquettishly.

Before Leon could respond, Gaius loudly coughed and said, "Perhaps not right now?"

"Yeah," Alix added. "All of us use that room. Maybe don't make us think you're fucking in there?"

"We haven't fucked in there..." Elise replied. "... *Yet*, anyway. How about this, Leon? If you lose this bet and cause our family that dishonor, then you do what I want for a day."

"A blank check?" Leon inquired with faux-incredulity. "I'm not sure I can agree to that..."

"Who said anything about agreement, husband?" Elise asked. "How about this, then? If you lose, then you owe me a night on the town!"

"I don't need to lose a bet for that," Leon replied. "How about the night after we get back to Occulara? We'll go out and do something fun?"

"I like the sound of that," Elise replied as her tone turned playfully flirtatious. "But if I agree, then what incentive can I give for you to do well in this bet?"

Before Leon could respond, Talal walked back over, a comm stone in hand. "We're good to go!" he called out as he made one last quick check of his flight belt.

Leon stole one last quick glance at Elise, then one at the back of Penelope's head, already fairly far in the distance. "I have incentive enough to win this thing," he growled.

Elise climbed up onto Anzu's back behind him and wrapped her arms around his midsection. She didn't say a word but gave him a quick kiss on the cheek and a bright look.

Thusly encouraged, Leon ordered his retinue, "All right, let's get going!"

A moment later, he and his retinue were rising into the air, Leon and Elise riding Anzu for a short distance before letting their flight gear take over. The rest of the retinue followed behind.

They went due west for a long way, flying just high enough over the massive, sparsely-positioned trees to duck back down below their canopies if they had to. While the Scorched Fields didn't have many predators that could strike them in the air under normal conditions, with the wyverns coming down from their aeries, that was about to change, so they had to fly with a little more caution than they could when they ventured out to meet with the local Naiad.

With a destination in mind, they made good time for the first day, but as night began to fall, they were able to start to see the haze in the distance had turned a dull orange: the wyverns were out in force, and parts of the Scorched Fields were already burning.

Leon had them head for the ground as the sun started to dip below the edge of the plane far ahead of them, casting long shadows across the ground. They were fortunate that wyverns were daylight hunters, so Leon wasn't too concerned about their camp being found by any of the flying beasts. Still, as he quickly set up the modular house for his retinue to shelter in for the night, he resolved himself to stay awake the entire night, just in case. Besides, there were other groups of hunters out that he could see with his magic senses, having moved almost as quickly as he and his retinue did, and if any of them were attacked in the night, he was willing to step in.

It would be a good way to grab a wyvern head, if for nothing else.

It was a fairly fitful night even with the exhaustion of having flown so far. The excitement of finally starting the hunt had permeated the entire retinue, and everyone was just waiting for the first encounter they'd have with a wyvern.

They wouldn't have to wait long. Just as dawn broke, Leon hurriedly woke everyone up and got them ready: a wyvern was flying straight for them.

Chapter 694: First Kill of the Hunt

The wyvern bearing down upon them was large, sixty or seventy feet from snout to the tip of its tail. Its two massive bat-like wings stretched well over a hundred feet, and its two huge claws were each big enough to carry off a full-grown bull with ease.

And it wasn't even fully grown. It radiated the magic power of roughly sixth-tier, but wyverns could grow much bigger and stronger. Still, that power wasn't anything to disregard. More dangerous, however, was the wyvern's sheer size and physical power, for such a large creature, despite their power difference, could likely crush Leon to death.

"EVERYBODY UP!" Leon roared, waking his sleeping family and retinue. "WYVERN INCOMING!" He didn't try to remain quiet, for the wyvern's bright orange eyes were turned in their direction, a predatory look on its face as it flew above the fields, the light of the rising sun causing its deep red scales to sparkle like

rubies. If Leon had to guess, this was probably a female looking for food for her hatchlings, as her head was fairly smooth and lacked many of the brutal ridges that characterized male wyverns.

Leon's people were on their feet in a matter of seconds, everyone wearing their armor. Talal and Elise were the only ones who weren't going to participate, so Leon had them go with Anzu and fly into the branches of the closest tree.

He barely had time to see them off before the wyvern was almost upon them. Already, Leon could sense her magic rising to the surface and fire leaking from her lips as she prepared to dive over them, showering them with fire.

A quick bolt of lightning fell from the sky, courtesy of Leon's magic, and interrupted the beast's fly-by. The wyvern had to dodge to prevent herself from being hit—not an easy feat in the air and with such mass and momentum. The wyvern had to call upon wind magic instead to save herself from pain, and her fire dissipated as a result.

"Range!" Leon shouted, though his retainers already had their ranged solutions in hand. Gaius, Alcander, Anshu, and Helen all wielded crossbows that Leon had personally enchanted. Alix and Marcus wielded longbows, likewise enchanted by both Leon and Valeria. Valeria, Maia, and Anna all called upon their magic instead, with icy javelins forming around Valeria and Anna's hands glowing with her light magic, but it was Maia's magic that was far more eye-catching. Her aura spilled forth, inundating the surroundings in her power. All the water magic in the air was soon seized by the river nymph and began to coalesce in the air above the wyvern as she flew back in a loose circle, eyeing them warily.

"Get ready!" Leon shouted as he stared at the wyvern, the monster seemingly weighing whether it was worth trying to make another pass.

Wyverns weren't stupid, but they weren't particularly bright, even when they were stronger. They tended to fight instead of run, and from his experience in the last wyvern hunt, Leon knew that they also tended to bite off more than they could typically chew. Case in point, he didn't think this wyvern had a chance in any hell of taking on his group, but it seemed like she wasn't as sure.

"Give her something more to think about!" Leon shouted as the wyvern continued to circle them at a fair distance, but not out of range of their magic, bows, and crossbows.

Arrows, crossbow bolts, and magic were unleashed from his retinue, a great amount of power fired off in the wyvern's direction. Leon briefly thought about joining his power with theirs, but he decided to watch over them, instead. He felt like his lightning could make short work of the beast, but his retinue needed the practical experience of taking one down, in his mind.

Anna's power, being a ray of light, impacted practically immediately, but the bright white light ray seemed to almost reflect right off the wyvern's sparkling scales. Valeria's ice javelins hit with greater physical force, but as far as Leon could tell, of the four that hit, none more than scratch the wyvern's scales.

The arrows and crossbow bolts were a little more dramatic in their impact, all of them exploding as they hit the wyvern's red scales, but the monster was a creature of fire, and the flames that resulted from the detonations did little to stop her.

The most consequential attack was from Maia. Her magic that suffused the air finally solidified all around the wyvern, with three small water dragons appearing in the air in an instant and wrapping themselves around the wyvern's limbs like snakes. The wyvern roared in surprise and tried to shake herself free, but Maia's water dragons were resilient, and sank their icy teeth into the wyvern, using their leverage to snap and tear away at her scales.

But then fire erupted from the wyvern's maw, and one of Maia's water dragons began to boil. Despite this, it remained intact, and continued to twist and wrap itself around the wyvern, trying to force its way through her scales.

All of this extra water weight which the wyvern couldn't get rid of soon brought her crashing down to the grassy fields.

"Let's go!" Leon shouted, leading his retainers in a charge against the downed creature. "Be ready for her fire!"

Alcander, being a fire mage, and Maia, being eighth-tier equivalent, didn't do anything, but the rest of Leon's retainers pulled small, sealed vials from their soul realms, the vials each containing a mouthful of glowing red liquid cooked up by Helen in her workshop. It wasn't much to down them, and Leon could feel the subtle change in their magic auras as the magic in the potions settled into their stomachs, providing something like a natural shield against fire magic. The potion would eventually be digested, but so long as it remained in their stomachs and interacting with their mana directly, his retainers who weren't already were now fairly resistant to fire magic.

Such potions could only be taken one at a time, as any mixing of potions in the stomach could ruin their effects, but Leon didn't anticipate needing any more than one or two every day. Each wyvern could wield different magic powers, but even with less Imperial competition for heads, he couldn't imagine they'd run into any more than one or two per day—at least, until they reached the aeries.

They moved quickly, the wyvern only going down several hundred feet away. Up close, she was an intimidating beast, but the effect was diminished as she struggled to pry Maia's water dragons off her body. Her roars were interspersed with cries of pain as the water dragons started to rip off scales and rend flesh, but even then, the wyvern continued to breath fire from her toothy, reptilian maw, so Leon didn't let his guard down.

About a hundred feet away, Leon shouted, "Halt! Open up from here!"

His retinue obliged, firing off magic and missile alike. This time, the explosion spells were swapped out for some of Leon's old Thunderblast spells, and the wyvern was inundated in lightning explosions, Valeria's ice, and Anna's white light.

She didn't last long under such a barrage. The wyvern did an admirable job struggling, though, and Leon could fully understand why the Pegasi States organized these hunts every five years. If they didn't, the wyverns would completely overrun everything southwest of the Empires, with only the Indra Raj potentially standing in their way. As it was, the sixth-tier wyvern had such a powerful body and such strong, effective scales that it took more than ten seconds of sustained bombardment for her to finally fall still.

“Enough!” Leon called out, halting the barrage when he realized the wyvern was no longer struggling. Despite all that had just hit her, her body was still largely intact. The explosions had done little more than to tear apart her outer flesh and strip her of some of her scales. Otherwise, she seemed almost unharmed.

Leon and his retinue stood there, staring at the wyvern corpse for several long seconds, waiting for any movement that might indicate she was still alive.

[Maia,] Leon whispered to his river nymph lover.

[Leon,] was her response.

[Use your dragons to jostle her a bit, flip her over. Make sure she’s dead.]

Maia acquiesced, and her water dragons went to work pushing the massive body over onto her back, exposing her belly to the sky.

Leon had seen many plays and read many stories while in the Ilian Empire that featured wyverns, and in nearly all of them, they had relatively soft underbellies. It was as if the wyverns were treated like normal lizards that couldn’t fly.

In truth, Leon knew that a wyvern’s underbelly was its toughest feature, where its strongest defenses lay. Huge bands of muscle covered the large chests that the beasts needed to flap their wings, and extraordinarily thick hide covered in scales so tough that they were almost magic-resistant coated their entire bodies. Given that wyverns were apex predators, had no natural predators of their own, and their primary threats were from below, it surprised Leon not at all that the toughest part of a wyvern was their underside.

But that wasn’t why Leon turned the wyvern over. They’d grounded the beast and opened up on it with powerful magics and equipment. That meant that most of the wyvern’s injuries were to her back. Turning the beast over would plug at least some of those wounds using the wyvern’s own enormous weight, giving them more time to harvest wyvern blood and mana.

Once he was sure the wyvern was dead, Leon shouted, “Let’s get to work!”

“All right!” Marcus roared in jubilation.

“That’s how it’s done!” Alcander agreed.

“A good start to the hunt!” Alix added.

Leon’s retinue charged toward the wyvern, intent on getting to work.

There honestly wasn’t much work that specifically *needed* to be done, though. Dismantling the creature completely could be done later, but the collection of blood and loose scales was of paramount importance. To that end, Leon summoned the two labor golems. They weren’t at all suited to combat, but for something like this, they’d excel.

He ordered them to lift the wyvern corpse, and as they did, Helen, Anna, Anshu, and himself ducked beneath the corpse, all of them pulling various buckets from their soul realms as the corpse was steadily lifted. These containers were left beneath the wyvern’s various wounds, filling with its blood and mana.

However, for as strong as the golems were, the wyvern was *very* big, and even their strength could only partially lift her, with much of her bulk still unavoidably remaining on the ground.

If this were the hunt five years ago, that would've been all they could've done. But this wasn't the hunt five years ago, and Leon had more tools at his disposal. With the aid of the labor golems taking up much of the wyvern's weight, Leon reached out with his magic power, wrapping it around the wyvern's body like his magic was his own fingers, and then began to lift the beast into the air.

She was a *heavy* beast, but Leon was an eighth-tier mage, and his magic reserves were practically endless after ten years of relative peace. He lifted the wyvern off the ground quite handily, though not without some mental strain, letting much of her weight rest on the labor golems while he and his people went to work. While his group used their containers to catch the blood leaking from the corpse, the rest of Leon's retinue collected the wyvern scales that they had torn from their hapless attacker. As they worked, Elise and Talal came flying back in on Anzu.

"That was quite something," Elise said, sounding a little shaken.

When he heard her anxious tones, Leon immediately left his retinue to the rest of their business and went to her.

"Are you doing all right?" he asked, despite knowing that she was fine, physically speaking. None of his family or retainers had sustained any damage during the short fight.

"Yes..." Elise said, sounding a little unsure. She explained, "I'm not usually this close to violence... I don't think all of this excitement agrees with me."

Leon pulled her into his arms and said nothing more, just letting Elise shiver in his arms as her adrenaline coursed through her system. After a few minutes, she started coming back down from the panic-high, and her composure returned.

"Get back to work, husband," she mock-ordered as she pulled herself out of his arms and gave him a glowing look of gratitude.

Knowing that she was mostly just playing around and not being serious, Leon just smiled at her, nodded his head, and replied, "As my Lady commands..."

Once all was said and done, his party, over the course of about an hour of clean-up, managed to collect several million silvers worth of wyvern blood—more than enough to keep Helen experimenting for a long time—and enough scales for a few dozen suits of armor. Unfortunately, the scales, while more than hard enough to act as armor, lost much of their magic-resistant properties once removed from their owner, but they were still valuable armor-making material, so Leon happily pulled all of the scales into his soul realm.

Then came the harder part. It took some work given the creature's massive bulk, but Leon was just barely able to squeeze the thing into his soul realm.

"Ughhh," Leon groaned as he sank to his knees once the process was done, feeling like he'd just tried to stuff an entire chicken down his throat.

"Damn," Alcander muttered as the rest of his retinue closed ranks around him. "I wasn't sure you were going to be able to do that. I have a hard enough time just fitting my ax into my soul realm, I can hardly imagine pulling an Ancestors damned *wyvern* in there..."

"Thanks for the confidence, I appreciate it," Leon sarcastically mumbled as he straightened himself out.

"Maybe try chopping them up next time?" Marcus suggested.

"Next time, for sure," Leon replied, still a little winded. "Let's get back to the villa and wrap things up. I'll give everyone two hours' rest, and then we've got to be off again."

Speaking for the others, Valeria said, "Got it!" and started shepherding the rest of the retinue back toward their camp and the modular villa.

Walking at a slightly laxer pace, Leon waved Talal over. "Did you send a message back to Vyrias? Let them know what happened?" Leon already knew the answer, having seen Talal with the comm stone while everyone else was busy with their collection duties.

"Of course," Talal replied, not looking at all upset that Leon felt the need to ask. "The Guild has to know of our actions if we're to get the proper credit."

"And what of Penelope and Cassandra?" Leon asked with a sly smile. Both women were in regions of the Scorched Fields so far away from him and his retinue that he wasn't able to keep an eye on them with his magic senses.

"Lady Penelope managed to bring down two wyverns yesterday," Talal grimly informed.

"Ancestors damnit," Leon cursed, his eyes flitting in the direction of the sun as it inched ever upward. "I'm sure they're working on their third already, if they haven't already bagged it... And the Princess? Do we know how she's doing?"

"The Imperial delegations don't typically deign to inform the Guild of their progress," Talal responded. "Princess Cassandra, however, went out of her way to make sure that a message was passed along to both you and Lady Penelope the next time we checked in..."

Leon felt his heart start to sink for a moment, not thinking that this could be anything good for his prospects of winning the bet. "What is it?" he asked when it seemed like Talal was hesitating.

"There was some... *provocative* language used," Talal explained. "But the gist is that she wanted both you and Lady Penelope to know that she'd managed to bag four wyvern heads yesterday..."

"*Four?!!*" Leon shouted incredulously. "She brought down fucking *four* of them yesterday?!"

"So she claims," Talal replied with a resigned look. "We won't be able to verify that until everyone returns with their heads..."

"Damnit," Leon repeated, muttering with a little more self-control after his previous outburst. "I wonder how she did that. I suppose we'll have to see if she manages to keep that pace up for the rest of the hunt..."

Leon thought about that Princess with her purple hair, glittering red eyes, and powerful, commanding presence. He thought back to her demand that she be included in his and Penelope's bet, and the way she'd looked at him—it was as if she considered herself the winner from the moment she forced her way in.

'I can't *lose to her*,' Leon thought to himself, feeling competitiveness fill his heart. This was bigger now than just a private wager between himself and the conceited daughter of the Director, this was now a public competition between himself, Penelope, and a Princess of the Sacred Golden Empire. He didn't consider himself a proud person, but he didn't think he'd be able to hold his head high if he didn't at least put in a good showing.

Leon barely managed to relax during the two hours he'd given his retinue. He still wanted his people fully rested given where they were planning on going, so he didn't cut back on the allotted time, but that he was deeply aware of every second that passed while his party was resting. When exactly two hours had passed, he was on his feet motivating his people to get moving again. With little fanfare and much hurry, Leon pulled his modular house back into his soul realm, it sliding into his soul realm with comparative ease after the wyvern.

And then he took back to the skies, a new certainty in his heart. He needed to get a little more involved, now. He needed to do more than simply watch his retinue do the work.

And for that, he needed to use all of his tools.

For the past ten years, Leon had largely only transformed into his avian form on rare occasions. He could fly with his magic power alone, and he didn't want the wrong kind of attention, so while he didn't much like it, he tried to make sure that he never transformed where other people could see.

But other people couldn't see him here. So, as his retinue donned their flight belts—and Elise chose to ride Anzu instead—Leon started to pull off his clothes behind a modest barrier of ice that he'd conjured for himself.

A moment later, he took to the skies on feathered wings once more, with his retinue flying at his side. It was time for them to get serious.

Chapter 695: Eagle Scout

[Finally assumed *proper* form, have you?] the Thunderbird drawled as Leon, for the first time in a long while, spread his wings and took flight, his family and retinue at his side.

[It was about time,] Leon replied, agreeing with her sentiment. [There's only so much I can do on foot, and it seems fitting to show these wyverns that they're no longer the rulers of the sky—at least, so long as I'm around.]

[Wonderful,] the Thunderbird breathed. [Just the attitude a descendent of mine should have. Spread your wings, young Leon, and dominate the skies just as I once did. Fly like this realm belongs to you, and to you alone. Make the sky yours with both power and presence and not even these mighty creatures will have a chance to stop you...]

The Thunderbird waxed poetic for a little while longer, but Leon had already found another wyvern to take his attention.

Channeling his darkness magic—not an easy feat in his avian form, but Leon was still capable of calling upon enough darkness for his mental communication technique—he ordered his retinue, [Keep going to the pass, I’m going to bag another head...]

Without waiting for any acknowledgments, Leon banked hard to the right, his wind magic and powerful wings flinging him onward with great speed.

He delighted in his strength and freedom in this form. He’d let himself go too long without really letting loose with it, but now, with the wind under his wings, lightning surging through his veins, and prey in his eyes, his blood sang with delight. It felt like all the magic of the world was at his wingtips, just waiting for him to use...

His target was a dark green wyvern, only sixth-tier. It looked to be male given its angular head and fairly sizable body given its magical strength, and it wasn’t paying any attention at all to what was above him. Instead, he was busy breathing waves of razor wind down at a group of hapless hunters, each gust ripping and tearing at their armor, clothes, and flesh. The hunting group was about ten strong and had several sixth-tiers themselves, but Leon could see that three of their number were already motionless on the ground, covered in blood.

Without a shred of hesitation, Leon rose higher into the air, preparing to swoop for the kill. He reached a height of more than a quarter mile, much higher than the wyvern which was only a hundred or so feet off the ground. Then, Leon curled in his wings and began his dive.

Wind whipped past him, curling around his winged form with ease, his feathers dampening all sound that he made. The wyvern didn’t even realize he needed to look up.

In an instant, it was over. Leon descended like a lightning bolt, his talons only stretching out a moment before striking the killing blow, then sinking into the wyvern’s neck a few inches behind the base of his skull, digging in, piercing through scales and cutting clean through almost everything they touched, stopping only once they’d sliced right through the wyvern’s neck bones, almost severing the beast’s head.

At the same time, Leon’s head, following through with the dive and still carrying that immense momentum, stabbed downward, his golden beak crushing its way through the back of the wyvern’s skull, piercing right through the monster’s brain.

The wyvern didn’t shriek or call out. Instead, he just went limp in the air, crashing to the ground with Leon still digging in with beak and talon. As the beast hit the ground, Leon called upon his magic power, and from one of the fluffy white clouds above, a bolt of golden lightning fell, striking Leon, coursing through him without so much as singeing his feathers, and flowing right into the wyvern’s body.

The beast was thoroughly dead, slain in one strike. When the wyvern came to a stop, having slid across the ground for dozens of feet after impact, Leon removed his beak and talons from the dead beast and turned his eyes toward the hunters.

Most of the hunters were staring at him in speechless shock and abject awe, some brandishing their weapons and magic despite their obvious fear. One of the hunters—the strongest, as far as Leon could tell—was busy seeing to his fallen comrades. Unfortunately, of the three who’d fallen, two were clearly dead, and the last was only a few moments from joining them.

Leon's golden eyes flashed with light, and a healing spell fell upon the last living fallen hunter, softly glowing with white light. As most of the hunters turned to gawk, Leon sucked in a breath, pulled the wyvern corpse into his soul realm where the labor golems could see to it, and then took off again without a backward look.

He quickly caught up with his retinue, feeling fairly confident now that he'd evened the score just a little against Penelope and Cassandra, and ecstatic at his expression of power. Wyverns were dangerous creatures; so quickly laying low even a sixth-tier wyvern was a coup that had him beaming with pride beneath his feathers.

Adding to his pride came the Thunderbird's comments. [Well done, Leon,] she said as Leon fell back into his retinue's flying formation. [I have a few nits to pick, but overall, that was a well-executed dive.]

[Thank you,] Leon responded. His beak couldn't smile, but he still tried to, anyway. [That was exhilarating!]

[Dives always are,] the Thunderbird agreed. [Few things are more joyous than feeling your feathers flatten in the wind or sinking your talons into the neck of your prey. And when such prey is as large as these creatures, then the feeling is magnified. It's a confirmation of your power.]

Leon hummed in contentment, then decided to ask about the nitpicks the Thunderbird had. As high as he felt, if she could help him in rising even higher, then he was going to take that help. He spent the next hour or so listening to her lecture about proper dive speeds and postures, absorbing as much as he could.

The lesson had to end when his retinue reached the foot of the aeries. The entire mountain range belonged to the wyverns, and under normal conditions, they would be swarming with the beasts. This far out, most wyverns would be male, with the females lairing further in to protect their eggs and freshly-hatched young.

Now, however, Leon and his party landed on top of a rocky hill that had been swept clean of vegetation by wyvernfire long ago, and they could look out at the mountains only a few miles away in relative safety. Leon could see several other wyverns in the distance, but three of them were flying in a pack, another was beset by another group of hunters, and the last one was flying back into the aeries with huge animals in either claw. None of them seemed like threats or good targets, so Leon put them out of mind and focused instead on what they were here for: searching for the pass.

The local Naiad had given Maia specific directions to this narrow pass, and did so with the promise that many wyverns laired in a valley at the pass' end further into the mountains. Now, they just had to find it, and they should have an easy way to win their bet. Bringing back clutches of eggs and possibly even a few wyvernlings would be worth more than bringing back wyvern heads, no matter the size or color.

Leon didn't return to human form on the hill. Instead, he remained in his avian body as he retrieved the specific rooms he'd prepared for occasions such as these, when his party might have to camp in dangerous areas. When he was finished, half a dozen rooms lay adjacent to each other on the hilltop. There were no courtyards here, such things were dangerous wastes of space if a wyvern attacked. Instead, these rooms had to fulfill both the function of a camp while also carrying with them some manner of fortification.

And these were about as fortified as Leon could make them. They were made mostly out of concrete that had been reinforced with steel and covered in stucco. There were no windows and only a single door, but light and air enchantments ensured that the rooms were bright and comfortable instead of dark and dingy. Heavy structural enchantments ensured that a full-grown wyvern could land on top of the rooms and they wouldn't even shudder, let alone buckle or collapse. Other enchantments ensured that if a wyvern did attack and found its physical might lacking, the magical might it would fall back upon would suffer the same result.

This region was known as the Scorched Fields because the most common wyvern was colored red and could breathe fire, leading to the entire region burning every five years. However, wyverns came in all different colors and could wield all seven magical elements, so Leon hadn't been able to get away with just fire-resistant enchantments—not that he'd want to, if he wanted this fortified house to be at all useful in other situations.

Once all of that was complete, Leon addressed his retinue. [Get settled in and rest up,] he said into their minds. [I'm going to scout out a bit and look for this pass. Talal, be sure to get back in contact with Heaven's Eye.]

"On it!" Talal responded, already walking into the villa. The rest of Leon's retinue followed suit, though with a little less alacrity. Leon could understand their lack of energy, and as eager as he was to beat Penelope and Cassandra in this wager, he also knew that he couldn't sacrifice his own people to do so. They'd been flying for a long while and needed to rest up before they entered the mountains in the likely event that they ran into any wyverns during their search for the females' lairs.

Returning his attention to the task at hand, Leon stared back out at the wilds with his magic senses.

The first direction he looked was back toward the female wyvern he'd seen hauling her kills back into the mountains. He located her again and did his best to track her movements as he started searching in other directions. At the very least, she'd lead him to her lair.

Then he took back to the skies and started evaluating the mountains from both the perspective of an eagle, and of an eighth-tier mage.

He found that the mountains were rugged, filled with blackened rock and sheer cliffs. There was little to no vegetation, and what was there was small, barely more than a few sparse weeds. The mountains themselves were dotted with caves of varying size, though none that he could see were warded against magic senses. He could see remains of abandoned lairs here and there, with little bits of eggshells and wyvern nest padding. He didn't see a single nest with intact eggs, though he supposed if such lairs could be found with such a rudimentary scan, then they wouldn't have lasted that long against the predations of other wyverns.

After about a quarter hour, he noticed another wyvern flying back into the aeries, this one passing within ten miles of his camp. She was a large, powerful thing, being much bigger and stronger than the first wyvern he and his retinue had taken down. She was a seventh-tier beast, and she was clearly a fighter, if the patches of slightly discolored and scratched scales were any indication. Her scales were as red as the sunset, so Leon knew she breathed fire, and her slitted reptilian eyes burned orange. Clutched in her claws was another massive antlered animal—an iruk, if Leon guessed rightly, which looked like

some strange cross between a bovine and a deer. It was huge, requiring the red to use both claws, with more than enough meat on its bones to feed quite a few wyvernlings.

He watched this wyvern from a distance, his power ready and roaring beneath his feathered skin, just waiting for the wyvern to turn toward his camp or make any other threatening moves. He was sure she'd seen him, he wasn't exactly being subtle as he flew about, but this wyvern seemed at least a little smarter than the last red one, choosing not to attack him. If anything, she seemed to be maintaining a fairly comfortable distance between them, flying just a little bit further away when Leon tested her mettle by flying a little bit closer.

Feeling somewhat amused, Leon pulled back to let her gain some more distance, resolving to keep an eye on her, too. However, not even ten minutes after she left the Scorched Fields and entered the mountain range, she came down hard upon the flat edge of a wide cliff that overlooked a deep gorge. The gorge continued downward, going deeper even than ground level, eventually vanishing into darkness.

Leon hadn't paid much attention to the gorge, reasoning that, as interesting as it may have been, no wyverns would've laired within given the less ready access to the sky it had.

His belief was immediately proven wrong when a gigantic black wyvern came soaring out of the gorge—though gigantic didn't really do it justice, it was a true monster more than three hundred feet from snout to tail, and with a wingspan that almost doubled the red's. Its angular skull shape indicated it was male, while its aura was at the human equivalent of eighth-tier.

Leon's heart skipped a beat when he realized that. He'd never seen a wyvern quite so large or powerful before. Given their sheer size and physical might, a wyvern could prove dangerous to even mages that were a tier higher.

He immediately turned around and put a little extra distance between himself and that monster, but watched, enraptured, as the black wyvern flew upward, and then landed on the same cliff as the red.

Once it touched down, the black let a rumbling growl escape his throat, his eyes a matching orange to the red. The red seemed cowed, lowering her entire body and tucking in her wings. The black growled again, and the red slunk backward, leaving the huge carcass that she'd carried back with her right there on the cliff.

The black seemed to glare—though given the shape of his head, every look seemed hateful and threatening—but he crawled forward like a bat on claw and wing and took the iruk carcass in his jaws. With barely a glance backward, he leaped off the cliff and dove back into the gorge, leaving the red alone on the cliffside.

Leon watched the black fall into the gorge's darkness, not making the same mistake as to ignore the place again. And so, he watched as the wyvern seemed to vanish from view as the darkness on the walls reached out, responding to his magic and wreathing him in shadow. Leon didn't even see him reach the ground, he simply seemed to vanish in midair.

After seeing this, Leon watched further as the red seemed to vent some frustration by breathing some fire on the rocks around her, melting them slightly in the heat of her power, and then take off again, flying back toward the Scorched Fields—undoubtedly to search for more prey.

What she would feed with that prey, Leon wasn't sure. It seemed like she'd come directly to that cliff to deliver the iruk carcass directly to the black wyvern, not even making a token gesture to prevent him from taking it. He guessed that maybe she wasn't a nesting mother, and maybe was just feeding the black wyvern.

But that left the question of just why she was doing that. As far as Leon knew, wyverns didn't form familial relationships, and even a mother's wyvernlings would be kicked out of the lair as soon as they could fly. They didn't mate for life, and they didn't typically mate with any specific partner.

So he had to wonder at the relationship between those two.

[Hey,] Leon said for anyone listening in his soul realm, [what are the chances that wyverns develop sapience?]

[Wyverns?] Nestor inquired. [Slim to none, I'd say.]

[Though it hurts like a kick between the legs, I have to agree with the ghost,] Xaphan concurred. [Wyverns are brutish, and have fairly small brains, relatively speaking.]

[But not impossible, right?] Leon asked.

[Anything's possible,] Xaphan replied. [The sun could rise in the west tomorrow, if the Grave Warden willed it to. The Great Black Dragon could forget just what kind of a successor you are and let you have your power. And wyverns could develop sapience.]

[What about at higher tiers?] Leon asked, ignoring Xaphan's jabs. [At, say, the eighth-tier?]

The Thunderbird's voice boomed through his soul realm and echoed in his ears, [All creatures have some chance of achieving sapience as they gain in power,] she explained, though Leon already knew that much. [Wyverns are no different. They're closely related to dragons, but lack a dragon's gift for intelligence. Still, that doesn't mean they can't develop sapience. Why are you asking?]

[I just saw a couple of them acting strangely,] Leon replied, narrating what he'd just seen to those who hadn't been paying attention.

[Be careful, Leon,] the Thunderbird cautioned. [Those beings with the power to blend with the shadows are difficult to deal with.]

[I remember,] Leon whispered. [The thing is strong and probably vicious. But still, what a catch it would be! With his head alone, I think I could win that bet!]

Leon alighted down on the closest mountain peak to his camp and continued to watch that gorge for several more hours. And what he saw left him stunned and left no doubt as to whether that black wyvern had merely stolen something or if that red had brought him, specifically, that iruk carcass.

First, a brown wyvern came flying in, two smaller iruks clutched in her talons. She was smaller and weaker than the red, but she was still large for a wyvern and radiated an aura equivalent to the seventh-tier. She seemed meeker, too, and left the iruks at the side of the cliff before preemptively backing up and prostrating herself. Not much longer later, the black emerged from the gorge, snatched the iruks in his claws, and vanished back into the gorge with nary a glance at the brown, who promptly flew off as soon as the black disappeared again.

Leon watched this repeated with four more wyverns, each one representing another of the magical elements. He saw a blue, a white, a green, and a gold all leave their offerings on the cliff, cower from the black, and once the food was taken, fly back off into the distance. All were female, and all were seventh-tier.

The black didn't react to any of them nearly as dramatically as he did to the red, though none were nearly as protective of her kill as the red had been.

Leon was fascinated, and though he did eventually find what he thought was the path the Naiad had indicated—a long, narrow valley that wound through the mountains and over which Leon saw several wyverns flying—his mind was now taken by those scenes he'd just witnessed. And with some feeling that seemed a mix of dread and anticipation, Leon saw that the pass forked off in several places, with one branch carving deeper into the mountains until it merged with that black wyvern's gorge.

It was with some reluctance that Leon turned around and began to fly back toward his camp. He wouldn't be sleeping this night, so he figured he might as well work on adjusting his Lightning Lance. They were going to be operating in close proximity to that black wyvern, so he needed to have all of their weapons in working condition, just in case.

Chapter 696: Ransacking the Aeries

Leon's retinue left their camp early the next morning. Only Elise and Talal stayed back in the safety of Leon's magically fortified villa, everyone else accompanied him out into the mountains.

The pass was fairly narrow on the whole. It widened and narrowed in certain places, but in general, the mountain slopes and cliffs to the right and left of Leon's retinue only afforded them enough room for one or two people to fight comfortably side-by-side, if the need for fighting arose.

They moved slowly and quietly. With Leon's revelation that eighth-tier and multiple seventh-tier wyverns were lairing in the area, everyone was extremely circumspect and cautious—at that level of power, not even Leon or Maia could stop a wyvern from killing any one of them if the monsters moved quickly enough. That meant that stealth would be paramount to their success, and with stealth came a much slower rate of movement.

It grated on Leon, but not so much that he ever considered speeding them up. Talal checked back in with Heaven's Eye the prior evening, as was protocol, and learned that Penelope had slain three more wyverns that day, and Cassandra had bagged another two. The Princess was now in the lead with six kills after only two days, Penelope was in second with five, and Leon was last with a meager two—incredible numbers that showed him just how seriously the other two were taking this wager.

His competitiveness was certainly stimulated, but he wasn't allowing that to overrule his judgment. They were walking into the literal lair of the beast, and so caution was for the best. If he lost the bet, after all, it would only cost him some pride and an enchanted stone he wasn't even using. Compared to the lives of his retainers, those were small prices to pay.

They advanced in a long line with plenty of space in between themselves, so a surprise attack by a powerful wyvern would have less of a chance of hitting them all at once. Leon took the lead, advancing in his human form to stick with his retinue. He was stronger in his avian form, but that would force him

to be more distant, and he didn't want the protection of his own people to fall on Maia alone. The river nymph herself had taken the rear of their formation, so that both of them protected the front and back.

Leon kept his magic senses projected, constantly on the lookout for any wyverns that might be trying to hunt them, in turn. He'd already seen several female wyverns flying to and from some of the wider parts of the pass far ahead, but fortunately, none of them seemed to either notice or care that his party was traveling through the pass.

Most of all, though, Leon kept his eyes open for any of the powerful wyverns he'd seen the day before. Running into that huge black one would be a nightmare to deal with, though a part of him couldn't help but wish that that monster revealed himself and tried something so that Leon would have an excuse to bring it down.

They pressed on silently, using nothing more than old Bull Kingdom Legion hand signals and Leon and Maia's mental communication to remain stealthy. For miles and hours they continued, only once having to stop when a wyvern started flying in their direction. A stray lightning bolt from Leon was all that was needed to chase the creature off, which was only a little disappointing—Leon had initially hoped that he'd be able to add another head to his score, but the beast was too smart to get close after his display of power.

Eventually, the pass began to widen, the cliffs and mountain slopes peeling back from the pass to form a deep vale in the center of a maze of mountain paths and gorges, including the one that within dwelled the huge black wyvern.

[All right,] Leon said, calling his people to a halt. [We're here. These are the aeries that we were directed to...]

His retinue cast their gazes all around, taking in the rocky landscape. As with the rest of the mountain range, nearly all vegetation had long been burned away, but dotting the cliff walls all around them were caves of all different sizes. Hundreds of caves, far too many for them to search. Unfortunately, wyverns were solitary beasts, and so only a few of these caves would have the potential for eggs and young.

Luckily, they had Leon and Maia, both of whom had kept their magic senses covering this region for a while, watching the comings and goings of various wyverns as they brought food back to their lairs. Leon had a dozen different caves for them to check out, and that was after less than a day of observation.

But they couldn't begin quite yet, they had to make some preparations first; there were still wyverns in the vale, and more could come back at any moment. If their rearing grounds were disturbed, Leon imagined it was likely that they'd be swarmed with the giant flying lizards in a moment, and his party would take casualties. He couldn't allow that.

[Marcus, Alix, Helen,] he addressed his three best marksman and pointed up the steep slope to their left. [I'm going to set my Lightning Lance up there. You three will watch the skies, shoot anything that tries to come in.]

The three nodded their assent, but didn't yet move, waiting as they were for Leon to finish his quick briefing.

[Gaius, Anna, Anshu, Alcander, Val,] he said to the other five in his retinue. [You'll be looking for eggs and wyvernlings. Use Helen's stealth salves. Don't take risks, always look to yourselves first.]

Those five nodded, and then the former four turned to Valeria. She was, in effect, Leon's second-in-command for his retinue, so their group would answer to her while they were apart from Leon.

Finally, Leon addressed everyone. [Naiad and I will be making distractions and providing cover from the sky. We should be enough to keep any wyverns off your backs, but don't let that dull your caution.]

His entire retinue nodded to him. They knew the risks, they'd all accompanied him on the last wyvern hunt. But none of them begged to leave. Alcander and Alix, in particular, were grinning like mad, clearly looking forward to this. The retrieval of wyvern eggs was a terribly dangerous accomplishment, and one rarely done. If they pulled this off, it would be quite the feather in their caps.

Leon smiled, appreciating their determination and, in some cases, great anticipation. [All right,] he whispered to them. [Let's get to it.]

Leon quickly pointed out to Valeria the caves they needed to search, watched as they first tied some ropes around their wrists to connect themselves so they wouldn't lose each other, then apply Helen's stealth salves which caused their bodies to mostly fade from sight—Valeria using her invisibility necklace instead—then saw off her group as they started quietly moving through the rocky vale.

Then he turned back to his Lance crew and escorted them up to the top of the ledge he'd noticed earlier. It was at the top of a long slope that rose about halfway to the top of the ridge that flanked that part of the vale, giving commanding views of the entire vale. With Leon's Lightning Lance, they should be able to provide some fire support if it was to be needed, but even if the Lance failed, they could still fall back on their magic and ranged weapons.

As soon as he reached the top of the ledge, Leon pulled the Lance out of his soul realm. It was a complex weapon, but one that was fairly easy to use. Once he set it up, it just had to be aimed, loaded, and fired.

Once it was in place, though, Leon made sure to give it one last quick check up. He'd adjusted the enchantment scheme so that power wouldn't be caught in the amplification loop anymore, so the weapon *should* be fully functional—and as far as he could tell, it was. He was nervous as all the hells that it would fail, though.

After confirming that his retainers could fire the weapon, he then turned to Maia.

[Let's take the skies,] he said to her with a deep smile, the statement alone bringing him no small amount of joy.

Maia smiled and nodded, then mounted Anzu. She had a flight belt of her own, but it was better for her to conserve her magic power for any wyverns that might poke their heads out of their lairs. Fortunately, Anzu was much faster than most wyverns.

'All right...' Leon thought to himself as he conjured his enchanted black opal into his left gauntlet. *'Let's see if this works as well outside of a controlled environment...'*

He channeled his magic power into the opal, and his body darkened like it had been swallowed by darkness. He was disappointed to see the opal still failed to make him intangible, but as the shadows that covered his body had him fading from sight, he couldn't fault it too much.

Once he was completely invisible, he activated his flight belt, rising into the air above the lance emplacement. From a greater height, he was able to see a few promising places for ambushes, if he could find the right bait...

The reason wyverns were leaving their lairs was to find food for their young, and many hunters who preyed upon them used that against them, using food as bait to lure the beasts into traps. Leon generally avoided such tactics when he was hunting as he was usually more interested in the hunt itself, not just waiting around for prey to come to him. He didn't deny the efficacy of the tactic, however, and he wished that he'd brought some kind of bloody meat with him to use in this instance. As it was, he had little more than preserved food, mostly the kind of stuff that he doubted wyverns would look twice at.

However, he figured he might as well give it a try; in his experience, most wild beasts wouldn't skip a free meal even if it wasn't something they'd usually consume.

So, after a quick search, he found what seemed like a good place not too far away from one of the inhabited caves he'd noticed. He hadn't seen any wyverns coming out from there since he'd last seen a brown wyvern enter, so he was assuming there was still at least one mature adult in there.

[I'm setting a trap in the northwest,] Leon whispered into his retainers' minds. None save Maia could respond, of course, and most were invisible, but he did see the Lance crew slowly turning the weapon in his direction several miles away. To his river nymph lover alone, he said, [Get out of the air, I don't want you to give away that this is a trap...]

Maia sent back a feeling of acknowledgment, though without any words. Leon saw her steer Anzu toward the ground where they could disappear among the rocks of the vale floor.

When he reached his identified spot, he dropped enough dried meat on the ground to last a mortal for weeks, though was little more than a mouthful to a wyvern, and placed a couple of explosive spells within the pile. Around the pile he arranged several additional alchemical explosives of Helen's design.

And then, he sent a wave of wind magic careening into the wyvern's cave. It was ludicrous to think such a thing would cause any damage, but it should be enough, Leon hoped, to get the attention of anything within and maybe draw it out far enough to notice his bait.

Sure enough, not even five minutes later, the large brown wyvern he'd seen entering the cave came slinking out, her orange reptilian eyes narrow with caution, though standing proud on wing and leg. Her aura was that of a sixth-tier human mage, and Leon could feel it permeating the stone around her, just waiting to impale anything that jumped out at her.

But, of course, nothing did, and after a couple seconds of her looking around, searching for whatever had made that gust of wind, she seemed to relax slightly.

And that was when she noticed Leon's bait. It was hardly appetizing, but it was close to her cave and clearly edible.

She advanced toward it slowly, cautiously, her instincts telling her that there was no such thing as a free meal. But she kept creeping closer, her eyes on her surroundings rather than on the meat itself.

She finally reached it, and after confirming for the thousandth time that she was alone, she bent down a bit to sniff at the bait... and was immediately enveloped in flame. The shockwave of the explosion rocked the entire valley, proving to be a far greater explosion than Leon had been expecting. The explosion was beyond deafening, probably alerting every wyvern for fifty miles that these lairs were under attack, and Leon noticed that Valeria's invisibility dropped, though everyone else's remained intact.

The wyvern herself vanished in fire, but when it cleared, she was lying upon the ground, trying to breathe, but the holes in her chest were bleeding profusely and squeaking as air slipped through with every ragged breath.

She struggled to rise, a few weak whimpers escaping her snout, but her strength failed her. She was going to die, her wounds were too serious, but Leon wasn't going to wait for that. He felt terrible seeing such a magnificent beast rendered to such a state, but his years as a hunter had largely shattered any hesitation he might've felt in this situation. Without missing a beat, he positioned himself above the wyvern, and dropped from the sky.

He hit her like a meteor; lightning burst from his body, flowing through his armor like it was his own skin, peeling back even more scales from the wyvern's head and killing her instantly.

Leon sighed when it was over, the beast dead beneath his feet. Such was life, but he couldn't help feeling some type of way as he collected her body and did his best to pull her into his soul realm as quickly as he was able with something so large. As he worked, Maia and Anzu took back to the skies, making sure he was covered from any other threats.

He wasn't even halfway done when a roar was heard resounding throughout the valley. Another wyvern came barreling out of her lair about two miles away, this one green, rage in her eyes as she searched for whatever had made that explosion. Her eyes locked upon Maia flying upon Anzu, but she barely had time to roar a challenge before a water dragon materialized around her, wrapping its long, slender body around her neck and snapping it hard and fast.

Like that, another wyvern fell.

But then a third came flying out of her lair a mile to the north, red in color, and a moment later, another red showed herself only half a mile to the east from a lair high up in the mountains that Leon hadn't noticed before this moment. Of these two, the first one was sixth-tier, but the second appeared to be equivalent to a newly-ascended seventh-tier.

Leon, just finishing up wrapping the brown wyvern in sufficient magic to pull her into his soul realm, did so, and then turned to face the stronger of the two wyverns. Both had noticed him and Maia, but his river nymph was closer to the weaker one, so he left that one to her. The stronger one came diving down the mountain, bestial madness in her eyes. She wasn't as large as the red Leon had seen the evening before, but she was filled with the wrath of a mother whose home was being threatened.

Leon didn't let her express that wrath and conjured a lightning bolt in his right hand. The Thunderbird's silver-blue lightning coursed through him, forming the bolt, and when he hurled it, the bolt streaked across the sky faster than the wyvern could react to.

For just a moment, right before it slammed into her body, the bolt seemed to curve slightly, as if it were forming the beak of a raptor, then exploded upon the red.

She fell, not quite dead, but heavily injured anyway. Leon flew toward her, intending to finish her off, but on the way, he spared a moment to check up on the others and saw that Maia had the other red in hand, while Valeria was fading back into invisibility as she led the rest of the retinue to secure the first of the caves.

But then, the red that Leon downed rose again, fury blazing within her as she opened her toothy maw, pointed it at Leon, and summoned what power she had remaining. Fire appeared ready to stream out of her, and Leon, not worried at all about her power, began to conjure another lightning bolt.

Before he could finish, *something* flew past the head of the wyvern so fast and with such force that her head was whipped around from the shockwave alone, and her magic power was dissipated. Leon hurled his second lightning bolt, and that one killed the red on impact.

Then he glanced back toward his Lance crew, for the projectile that had so affected the wyvern had been fired by them. They hadn't landed a direct hit, but Leon couldn't say they'd completely missed, either. Mostly, he was glad their aim was accurate enough at a distance of almost three miles to have gotten that close, and that the weapon was functioning as it should be.

He sent the Lance crew his congratulations, and then turned his attention back to the matter at hand.

Over the next two hours, he and his retinue brought down five more wyverns who either emerged from their lairs or returned while they were working. They found more than a dozen eggs, though only two wyvernlings that they had to wrangle and subdue. Wyvernlings were almost adorable, being pale white in color and having round, innocent features. They were only the size of large dogs and made little chirping sounds when they tried to roar. They couldn't use any elemental magic, yet, and wouldn't be able to do so until they were bigger, and their scales' color came in, but Leon's retainers still treated them delicately and with abundant caution.

However, their work was only halfway done when the ninth wyvern was felled by a combination of Leon's lightning and Maia's water. None of the wyverns had been any of those that had given the huge black wyvern his offering.

Still, as the ninth wyvern hit the ground, an earthshaking roar filled the vale, and Leon saw the huge black wyvern hauling himself out of his gorge, look around with wrathful eyes, and finally turn toward the vale. They were separated by dozens of miles and Leon was still invisible thanks to his black opal, yet Leon and the black wyvern seemed to lock eyes, both eighth-tier beings sharing a moment where they recognized each other as profound threats.

The black wyvern didn't roar, but Leon felt his killing intent even over all of that distance. The wyvern then took flight and made a beeline toward them.

A smile broke out over Leon's face. He was worried about his retainers, to be sure, but there was still a large part of him that wanted this fight. And it seemed he was going to get it.

Chapter 697: The First Round

Leon, still wreathed in darkness and invisible to all senses—or so he was supposed to be—rose into the sky, the air all around him under his complete control. However, for all his supposed invisibility, the eyes of the black male wyvern that now rapidly approached were locked upon him too unerringly to be a coincidence.

'He can see me!' Leon realized. He supposed the wyvern's natural power over darkness magic allowed him to see past Leon's shroud, but his theories aside, the result was beyond doubt in his mind.

[Heads up!] Leon roared into the minds of his retainers. [Big one incoming! Eighth-tier! Darkness! Less than five minutes!]

He didn't get too detailed, trusting in his retainers' judgment to prepare accordingly. Sure enough, he saw those of his retinue that were visible quickly quaffing potions to increase their defenses against darkness magic. Leon did likewise, briefly removing his helmet in order to do so.

He felt the magic take effect within him, the potion settling into his stomach where it interacted with his natural magic to form an almost protective sheen over his skin. Darkness magic wasn't that dangerous in direct attacks, but that didn't mean it *wasn't* dangerous. Leon still felt much more secure once his helmet, heavily enchanted as it was against darkness magic, was back upon his head.

At the same time, he was summoning his anti-magic enchanted stone that countered darkness magic into the slot on his left arm, while he pulled the black opal out of his right slot and summoned his white topaz to replace it. This rendered him fully visible, but against the black wyvern, that appeared to already be the case, so it hardly mattered.

Then he quickly evaluated the surroundings once more. Against the black wyvern, there weren't many fancy tactics he could immediately think of to use, but he wanted to be sure that the monster was in range of the Lightning Lance. He'd need that weapon's power.

Leon positioned himself about two miles north of the Lance and turned to stare down the rapidly approaching wyvern. Not too far away Maia came flying in on Anzu. She nimbly leaped off the griffin's back and joined Leon in the air, her flight gear taking up the work that Anzu had been doing until now.

To his griffin, Leon ordered, "Get to Alix and the Lance crew!"

Anzu squawked in complaint, but he did as Leon ordered, flying as quickly as he could toward the Lance emplacement. Fortunately, the black wyvern, as far as Leon could tell, didn't even spare the griffin a single look. Instead, the monster's eyes were fixed solely upon Leon and Maia.

Leon stared back, his golden eyes burning with fighting spirit as the wyvern advanced. His aura towered, his killing intent was strong; he was ready, and had to fight the urge to fly out to meet the wyvern.

He didn't have to wait long for the monster to reach the vale. As soon as the beast made it through the pass that connected his gorge to the vale, Leon charged, surging forth with lightning filling his body.

The wyvern gave an earth-shaking roar, but Leon was undeterred. The monster opened his maw to unleash his power, but Leon was faster, and a burst of lightning exploded out from him, projected not just by his body but by his armor, too. Dozens of silver-blue bolts raced across the sky and raked across the wyvern's scaled body in groups of three, almost like talons. At almost the same time, Leon punched outward with his right fist, and a beam of pure white light lanced out from his knuckles and struck the wyvern's tongue.

The wyvern shrieked in rage and pain, though it seemed the former was the stronger emotion. Instead of using his magic, the wyvern barreled through Leon's assault and snapped toward him with his massive jaws.

Leon nimbly tumbled out of the way, and as he turned, he saw a water dragon materialize out of the air and wrap itself around the wyvern's massive head, locking his jaw tightly shut.

Unfortunately, at the same time, Leon noticed that his barrage of lightning had done negligible damage, lightly scratching the wyvern's tough scales but little else.

But Leon was undeterred and shot after the wyvern. He summoned a lightning bolt in his right hand. He could feel his power bursting out of his skin beneath his armor and converging around his fingers. Unlike what he was used to, though, his armor, infused with his power at its creation, aided him greatly in channeling his magic. Leon barely lost a single aetos of magic power to the environment, leading to his lightning bolt coalescing in his hand with greater speed than he'd ever seen, and with greater power.

With a smile spreading across his face, Leon flew after the wyvern, the lightning bolt in his hand growing ever more powerful. With the wyvern's attention on trying to dislodge Maia's water dragon, Leon shot above him, then plummeted right back down, slamming the lightning bolt into the wyvern's weaker scales between his wings. He drove the bolt as deeply as he could, lightning pouring out of him, the wyvern's scales tearing away under the concentrated pressure...

But then a tendril of darkness snapped out at him, knocking him backward and disrupting his attack. This tendril attempted to snake around his helmet, but Leon felt his armor's anti-darkness defenses snap into play, and the tendril was unable to find purchase on the surface of his helmet.

Still, Leon was knocked backward right off the flying wyvern. But the wyvern wasn't done with him, and with timing and aim that Leon was surprised by, the wyvern's massive tail snapped backward and struck Leon with what seemed like the weight of a mountain, batting him aside like a horse brushing away a fly. All the air in his lungs was forced out, and he was rattled harder than he'd ever been before. He hit the ground like a falling star, shattering a boulder beneath his impact.

And then he rose, none the worse for wear. His armor had taken most of the impact—both of them—and prevented Leon from suffering much damage, the enchantments within saving him from a lot of potential pain.

Above, Leon saw the wyvern struggle a bit with Maia's water dragon, but the monster's face darkened and what almost looked like a hand of darkness slid off the wyvern's face, covering the water dragon and pulling it off. The water dragon resisted, but the clump of darkness enveloped it, and any purchase the water dragon had was lost.

This deep shadowy clump of magic hovered in the air as the wyvern shot past, then compressed and collapsed in on itself, vanishing and taking Maia's water dragon with it.

The wyvern then roared again, and a stream of darkness erupted from his mouth, aimed at Maia. Leon launched himself back into the air, his body blazing with silver-blue lightning, and his river nymph was already acting. She dropped, momentarily cutting off power to her flight belt before regaining control of the air around her, then sliding below the flying wyvern and his eruption of darkness magic.

The wyvern roared again, and a mass of darkness seemed to grow in his wake, with dozens of thin tentacles reaching down and entangling Maia in their grasp.

Leon shouted in anger and slammed into this darkness a moment later, punching out with his left hand. His anti-darkness magic gemstone filled with power, and then with a loud, dull thumping sound, expended all of it. The darkness magic that entangled Maia dissolved away, and she was freed again.

She looked a little haggard, her clothing slightly torn, but she seemed free of blood, so Leon forced himself to calm down as the wyvern flew away, getting a bit of distance from both of them. Maia then rose up to take up a position next to Leon.

[I didn't do much,] she observed.

[Neither did I,] Leon replied a little dejectedly, noting the areas that he'd targeted with his lightning and seeing that they were a little scorched and scratched, but only the wyvern's wing-shoulders had suffered any appreciable damage.

That didn't dampen Leon's desire to fight much, if any, but he did feel a little bit of frustration. His light beam hadn't seemed to have done much, so he switched out his topaz for another gem, replacing it with his red onyx, hoping that his fire weapon would prove a little more efficacious.

The wyvern flew in a wide circle around Leon and Maia, eyeing them warily. He clearly wasn't done fighting them, for his killing intent still poured out of his scaled body, but he wasn't charging right in.

[Seems we've made him wary,] Leon said to Maia. [You go right, I'll go left. Make him choose targets, and whoever he doesn't go after, strikes.]

Maia sent Leon a quick burst of feeling, and then broke off to the right. Leon, only a moment later, followed suit to the left.

Leon wasn't sure if he was gratified or frustrated when the wyvern's head swiveled in his direction. It seemed that meant the wyvern was taking his threat more seriously, but on the other hand, it also meant he'd be doing much less damage against the monster.

Leon began tossing lightning bolts—nothing too powerful, but enough to force the wyvern to fixate upon him. As he did, Maia circled around behind the monster and raised her hand into the air. Leon felt almost every single bit of water magic within the vale immediately fall under her control, while her body radiated even more into the surroundings. All of that water magic instantly started to coalesce around her, then take on physical form.

She wasn't summoning a water dragon, though; instead, a fluffy white cloud, opaque to the eye, appeared, shrouding her from sight and growing mightily fast.

The wyvern turned and roared, but another bolt of lightning splashing across his face forced his attention back to Leon. The beast opened his maw and left loose with a great deluge of darkness, the black shadows erupting from between his fangs like a burst dam. Half of these shadows rushed toward Leon in a great wave, while the other half bent around and covering the wyvern's body. He didn't fade from view, but his already pitch-black scales took on a strange pearlescent sheen, like oily water.

Leon fell back while bringing his left hand up. Magic flowed through his arm and armor with equal ease, powering the anti-darkness stone in his gauntlet. A pulse of magic spread rapidly from his gauntlet and the wave of darkness that threatened to engulf him dissipated like vapor, all momentum arrested.

The darkness covering the wyvern remained, though the wyvern stared at Leon with what kind of looked like disbelief—it was extremely difficult for Leon to tell given the monster's draconic head and features.

Behind the wyvern, Maia's cloud continued to grow and surge toward him, prompting him to fly closer to Leon. Leon darted forward, lightning blazing in his left hand as his right activated his fire onyx. Fire balls shot from his right knuckles while lightning streamed from his left hand, stinging and biting at the wyvern's shining scales... and passing right through them.

Leon, realizing what was happening, immediately cut off his magic power. The wyvern had cloaked himself in shadows, and that made him largely intangible. He could still be reached, but it would be a little tougher to do so.

First, as Maia's cloud nipped at the wyvern's tail, Leon fired off another pulse of antimagic. A spot about his height in diameter lost its sheen, only to regain it as rapidly as it was lost. The wyvern grunted, sounding almost like a human chortle.

Leon gritted his teeth and fell back to his plan B. As usual for his plan Bs, he summoned his blade back into his hand and charged forth, intending to strike at the wyvern from closer range.

The wyvern roared and beat his massive wings, maneuvering to face Leon head-on. However, before they could get too close together, something flew past Leon so quickly he barely had time to realize what it was before it struck the monster on the body.

It was a shot from his Lightning Lance.

Leon spared a quick glance back with his magic senses, noting that his Lance crew had turned the weapon and were tracking the wyvern through the sky, with Alix hurriedly reloading another round into the barrel. The first had bounced right off the wyvern's scales somehow, and though it didn't pierce the monster, the wyvern still shrieked in more pain than ever, and turned toward the Lance.

Leon scowled and restarted his charge. Lightning blazed along the blade of his sword, glowing silver-blue, but the wyvern ignored him, choosing instead to begin a steep dive.

Confusion briefly flitted through Leon's mind, but he didn't slow down. Whatever the wyvern was doing, he had to stop it.

Maia's cloud spread far enough to enclose around the wyvern's tail, and Leon could hear a horrible scraping sound. The wyvern, as his dive picked up speed, escaped the cloud, showing his tail to be scratched worse from the cloud than from all of Leon's lightning bolts.

Leon crashed into the beast a moment later, attempting to stop him. He hit the wyvern's scales right between the wings, just as he'd done before, and he was rewarded with a huge crack in the beast's scales, and a fountain of bright red mana a moment later.

Leon then understood: the wyvern's shadow cloak protected him from magical attacks, but more physical strikes still got through.

With a dark smile, he pulled back just a little bit, intending to slam himself back into the wyvern, but a burst of darkness pushed him even further back. He cried out in surprise and had to take a moment to right himself in the air.

That one moment was all the wyvern needed to hit the ground. However, instead of splattering into blood and gore, the wyvern vanished into the ground like it wasn't even there. A deep black shadow appeared in the rocks roughly the size and shape of the wyvern, and it turned in the Lightning Lance's direction.

Realizing what the wyvern was doing, Leon, knowing that they weren't going to be able to hit the monster now ordered his Lance crew, [Run! Abandon the Lance!]

To their credit, not one of Leon's retainers hesitated. Alix, Marcus, and Helen dropped everything and fled from the Lightning Lance. Leon, meanwhile, darted after the shadow, raining lightning down upon it. He wasn't quite sure if what he was doing was having any effect, but the antimagic pulses he was using weren't doing much, either, doing little to the shadow other than make its edges wobble a bit.

Maia's cloud then surged past him, moving with much greater speed now. Leon caught short glimpses of sharp blades of water filling the cloud, along with razor ice and a few small water dragons.

Unfortunately, even this move failed to catch up to the wyvern, and the monster's huge head burst up from the ground right beneath Leon's Lightning Lance, closing around it with great force.

The Lance immediately shattered, Leon's hard work putting up little resistance against the powerful jaws of an eighth-tier wyvern.

Leon shouted in frustration and reached out with his magic power, his mood now transitioning from competitiveness to vindictiveness. The monster had destroyed *his* weapon, and that was an affront he couldn't abide.

Hardly a moment later, another cloud appeared in the sky, courtesy of Leon's magic power. From that cloud fell a lightning bolt, breaking through the wyvern's darkness shield and burning right across his face, opening a huge, bloody crack in the monster's cheek.

The wyvern screamed in pain and fury, then rose from the ground. He roared at Maia's oncoming cloud and a black cloud of his own shot out of his mouth to take her head on. Then he took back to the skies, his enormous wings nearly destroying the entire ledge that the Lightning Lance had been mounted upon.

His eyes were locked upon Leon, rage greater than any before burning in his slitted reptilian pupils.

The wyvern held nothing back with the cloud combating Maia, sparing none for Leon. Instead, he flew toward Leon, his wings beating furiously as he roared another challenge.

'Seems you want this to be a contest of strength...' Leon thought briefly. *'The time for that passed.'*

Another lightning bolt fell from Leon's cloud, slicing into the wyvern's flank and spilling more of his blood. The wyvern shrieked again, and pulled out of his charge, instead falling back to the ground. A third lightning bolt followed, striking the monster along the belly as he dove. This one didn't pierce his thick under-scales, but still left a deep scratch running from hip to the base of the neck.

But then the wyvern hit the ground and once more faded into shadow, his black cloud of darkness fading behind him. His shadow turned toward his gorge and sped off even faster than the shadow had moved before, leaving Leon and Maia behind, though they gave chase for a short while before pulling back.

[You all right?] Leon asked the river nymph as Maia's cloud dissipated and her body reappeared.

[Without injury,] Maia replied, holding her arms with a sly grin on her face before turning her eyes back down to the ledge where Leon's Lightning Lance now lay in thousands of bitty pieces.

With a deep sigh, Leon began to drop from the sky, his magic senses locked upon the wyvern and making sure the monster was retreating as it seemed he was. The vale now seemed safe, all of the wyverns who laired here either gone or dead already.

Pushing out with his magic power, Leon mentally shouted for his entire retinue, his voice backed with his wind magic and carrying to the vale's every corner, "Form back up on the ledge! We're done here!"

One eighth-tier wyvern attack was enough. Though they'd gotten the better of the exchange, Leon didn't want to take any further risks. Besides, they'd already secured some wyvernlings and yet-to-be-hatched eggs, so it was time to go. As unsatisfying as the final fight had been with the black wyvern's escape, their mission was over. It was time to turn in the eggs and wyvernlings and get back to regular hunting.

But as Leon's retinue began appearing among the rocks of the vale, he turned one last time to the black wyvern's gorge. The thing had been intelligent, showing a level of emotion, awareness, and presence that he'd not seen in any other wyvern.

He couldn't help but wonder if this was really the end of their battle, or just the closing of the first round.

Chapter 698: Wyvern's Retaliation

"All right!" Leon loudly said as he and his retinue spilled out into the main room of his fortified portable villa. "Let's see what we've gained!"

With a wave of her hand, Valeria summoned the eggs taken from the wyvern lairs. A dozen in all appeared, all a light, pale gray. Anshu, Anna, Gaius, and Alcander held between them a pair of large cages, within which lay two pale gray wyvernlings, still too young for their scales to have any color.

A great haul, as far as Leon was concerned, and a huge smile spread across his face. Turning to Anna, the closest thing his retinue had to a beastmaster, he said, "Make sure those wyvernlings don't die."

"Got it," she replied, and she immediately began pulling some food out of her soul realm to press through the bars of the cages.

Leon then turned to his personal assistant. "Tala! Get on the horn to Heaven's Eye. Tell them we've taken out eleven wyverns, and be sure to inform them of all this..." Leon waved towards the eggs and wyvernlings. "And tell Penelope to savor the taste of failure!"

"Ha!" Alcander shouted. "She can eat a dick!"

Tala looked a little uncomfortable after Alcander's outburst. To Leon he asked, "Do you... really want me to pass that sentiment along?"

Leon's grin slowly turned to a grimace and he felt Elise's presence at his side. "No," he said, his decision punctuated by a groan of disappointment from Alcander. "You don't need to use as many words. I think just hearing word of what we've done today will get the point across better than anything we can say directly."

Tala looked a little relieved, though the feeling clearly wasn't shared among Leon's retinue.

Alix, perhaps out of frustration, loudly declared, "That bitch could *use* a direct rebuke, though... or maybe a swift kick in the ass. Or *other* places..."

Leon shrugged, but it was Elise who responded with her usual cool, level-headed practicality. "Though that may be true, it's hardly our place. Just focus on winning the wager, that'll be rebuke enough."

Leon smiled as he regarded his wife. "I'd agree, but I think a little more rebuke may be needed. Maybe turning that Heart of Whatever It Was into wearable jewelry and parading it around in front of her?"

"Ooh, I like that idea," Alix responded. "Rub her loss in her face every time she sees you?"

"Or any of us," Leon said. "It's quite a big stone, maybe just to show her contempt I could have it cut up a bit and pass out some diamonds to us all?"

Alcander burst out laughing, but Marcus claimed, "Diamonds aren't really my thing, Leon."

"Same here," Gaius added. "If I had to choose, I'd rather not get involved in this little pissing match. I don't suppose it's possible to keep the nose-rubbing to a minimum? There's no need to constantly antagonize Penelope, is there?"

Leon leveled a playful punch into Gaius' shoulder. "Now why do you have to go and say that? Now I'd sound petty and vindictive if I were to disagree..."

"You *are* both of those things, though, aren't you?" Gaius asked with an equally playful smile.

Leon shrugged. "We can save our petty revenge for later. For now, I can't overstate just how proud I am you. Of all of you. We moved quickly, completed our objectives, and got out without so much as a single injury. That was no mean feat, especially after that black wyvern showed up. For now, how about all of you get some much-deserved rest, and we'll start heading back to Vyrias in the morning. This hunt isn't over, after all..."

Marcus and Alcander both cheered, and while they were a little quieter about it, the rest of Leon's retinue happily dissipated into his fortified villa with only Anna staying in the main room to see to the wyvernlings, while Leon, Anzu, Elise, Maia, and Valeria left for their private room.

Elise led the way, entering the room and immediately sliding into a lounge by the wall, pressing a runic circle on the wall as she did which caused light magic to create a few screens on the wall. These screens showed the outside in perfect clarity, acting as windows without introducing structural weaknesses into the building and projecting quite a bit of light into the room that was indistinguishable from natural light.

“So,” she said as everyone else, including Anzu, joined her on lounges of their own, “how did things go out there?”

She obviously knew how well things since she’d seen with her own eyes the fruits of their labors, but Leon knew she still wanted to hear from all of them how they’d achieved their triumph.

Leon wasted no time in regaling her with the story, enthusiastically telling her of their arrival and the initial battles with the wyverns who were there. Maia added a few details here and there, and as she spoke aloud, Anzu excitedly flapped his wings a few times and chirped in support and encouragement.

Then it was Valeria’s turn, and she told Elise of her plundering of the wyvern lairs.

“Were there any huge piles of jewels and gold?” Elise animatedly inquired, her emerald eyes shining with curiosity.

“Unfortunately no,” Valeria answered. “I don’t think that’s something that wyvern’s do, hoarding wealth. They don’t seem particularly intelligent...”

“That’s true, though there have been some stories I’ve heard about wyverns stealing gold and other shinies...” Leon hesitantly agreed, though his thoughts turned to the black wyvern and those six others who’d furnished him with offerings the night before. “That might just be a general thing, it’s not like they’re incapable of intelligent thought...”

Leon then told Elise of the fight with the black wyvern and the destruction of his Lightning Lance. He’d picked up all the pieces after the battle, but it had been thoroughly destroyed.

“... it’s no matter, I guess,” Leon said, though his expression clearly indicated otherwise.

“Is it really?” Elise asked, clearly picking up on Leon’s mood.

Leon shrugged and scowled. “That thing broke something of mine, and I don’t appreciate it. That Lance was honestly just a proof-of-concept, a thing that would’ve been replaced soon anyway, but it’s still annoying that it’s been destroyed. I’ll have to build another one, and the improvements I can make without a functioning version to test will be limited. Still, I *have* learned quite a bit about the magic involved in these past couple weeks, so... it’s no matter. Really.”

Elise laid a hand over his, giving him a sympathetic look before he launched back into his explanation of the day’s events. After the fight with the black wyvern, Leon had reorganized his retinue and led them out of the vale, not wanting to press their luck. They’d already acquired enough to launch them far into the lead against Penelope and Cassandra, so Leon led them back. The eggs and wyvernlings wouldn’t count if they couldn’t return them to Vyrias, after all. On their way out, however, they were attacked by two more wyverns carrying their kills back to the vale. They didn’t attack with much fierceness, so Leon didn’t think they were the wyvernlings’ mothers, but he and his retinue still struck them down, adding two more sixth-tier kills to their score.

At that point, the story came to an end, for the rest of their journey back to the campsite had been uneventful.

"And you're sure that the black wyvern didn't follow you?" Elise asked, sounding a little worried.

"I'm about as sure as I reasonably can be, given its power," Leon replied.

"As am I," Maia added. "We were not followed by anything I could sense, and few things can hide from me."

"That's good to hear," Elise murmured as Anzu happily chirped his agreement. Elise reached over and gave the griffin a quick head rub, eliciting a few more happy chirps. "The thought that such a powerful creature is out there and acting with such intelligence... worries me, I have to admit."

"Mm," Leon hummed in agreement. "Reminds me of that basilisk we rescued Anna from," he continued. "I haven't heard any verified reports about intelligent wyverns striking at cities around the Scorched Fields, so maybe that black wyvern is content with his lot and only came out when he saw us looting the aeries... but if he wanted to, he could do an incredible amount of damage to everything around these parts. It's hard to figure out why he might not be doing so, or what he might do now that he's been injured. Guessing at the logic of an alien mind isn't something I'm any good at, I'm afraid."

"Not like there's anything to really guess at," Valeria whispered. "He didn't stop to talk. Assuming he's even capable of it." She nodded to Anzu. "He seems to perfectly capable of recognizing speech, though his beak makes responding difficult."

If griffins could frown, Leon felt like Anzu would've done so. The griffin chirped somewhat depressingly and lowered his head and eyes until Valeria got up and hugged his head, nuzzling her cheek against his.

"Don't worry, Anzu," she said. "You'll find a human form someday, just like Leon found his bird form. You'll gain a mouth, and we'll talk then."

Anzu visibly cheered up and fluttered his wings in obvious joy, nuzzling Valeria right back.

However, Elise gasped with mock-shock. "Val!" the fire-haired woman breathed. "Are you trying to seduce Anzu right here in front of all of us! Think of the scandal!" To complete the picture, Elise held a hand up to her heart, and then began fanning herself with the other hand.

Valeria just stuck her tongue out at Elise for a moment, gave Anzu a loving—though not romantic—kiss on the head, and returned to her seat.

For his part, Leon saw Anzu reacting with what seemed to be embarrassment, and he reached over to run his fingers through the griffin's feathers. Doing so had never failed to calm the griffin, and that pattern now continued as Anzu deliberately folded his wings, laid his head down on his forepaws, and closed his eyes to sleep.

"I think it's time for a little celebration," Elise said, moving on from her brief teasing. With a wave of her hand, she conjured from her soul realm a bottle of the finest Ilian wine and glasses for everyone. "I know you don't much like wine," she said to Leon, "but at least drink something with us, all right?"

"You say that as if it's a strenuous task," Leon light-heartedly complained. "I don't care what's in the glass, just spending time with my ladies is enough."

“Aww, look at you, getting all sappy,” Valeria playfully teased. Maia added her own bit of teasing by lightly poking Leon in the cheek.

Leon acted like he’d just been attacked and almost dramatically threw himself out of his lounge, and once everyone had a laugh, they settled in for some quiet celebrations of a job well done.

Their quiet was soon disturbed when Alcander and Alix started a louder party in one of the other rooms, and after a few minutes, the four just got up and decided to join the rest of the retinue.

—

It was mid-afternoon when Leon and his party returned to Vyrias. Almost a week had passed since the beginning of the hunt, and during their return trip, they’d bagged three more wyvern heads. Penelope and Cassandra, meanwhile, seemed to have been kicked into higher gear, for they’d each brought down more than half a dozen wyverns in the past couple of days after Leon’s group’s success. However, since wyvernlings were worth far more than wyvern heads, and their eggs were worth even more than wyvernlings, Leon’s group was still comfortably in the lead. Not so comfortable that they could relax for the rest of the hunt, but certainly enough to take their time for what time remained.

On their journey back to Vyrias, they encountered greater evidence for how the Scorched Fields had gotten their name. The clear days had given way to perpetual clouds, and there was always at least the glow of fire lighting up the distance, if not closer. Much of the land between the pass they’d journeyed to and the temporary hunter’s city had been scorched, leaving the fields blackened and barren—though the gargantuan trees still remained, and even seemed to thrive in the heat. In those few places that still burned, Leon had noticed the trees absorbing some of the wyverns’ fire magic, though for what reason he couldn’t say.

Regardless, as soon as they returned to Vyrias, they made to turn in their hauls. Leon had their eggs turned in and their wyvernlings accounted for. However, those he didn’t turn in, and the reason why was Anna.

It seemed that she wanted to be more than just what passed as a beastmaster for his retinue: she wanted to be an actual beastmaster, the onyx bracelet and Attican Snapper that he’d given her lighting something within her, showing her what she wanted to devote herself to.

Leon was more than happy to have her be his beastmaster. She’d done splendidly well with the snapper, and he couldn’t imagine his retinue being anything but strengthened with the addition of two wyverns. So, once he rebuilt his modular villa, he helped her to take a few blood samples from the wyverns and add them to two of the gems within the onyx bracelet, which began to glow with arcane light, giving her perfect control over the wyvernlings. She still had three gems left, so Leon resolved to keep an eye open for any more interesting or powerful beasts that she might find useful.

Once they were dominated by the bracelet, the infant beasts could be let out of their cages so that Anna could better take care of them.

At the same time, Leon’s retinue, led by Leon and Helen, began to properly catalogue all of their other gains made during the hunt. Leon was going to wait until the end of the hunt to turn in his heads, but the rest of the wyvern corpses were fair game. His golems had largely processed the carcasses by now, though they hadn’t done so with as much finesse as Leon would’ve liked. Regardless, he had a small

mountain of wyvern scales of varying sizes, pools of their blood and mana, more bones than he knew what to do with, and hide enough to clothe his family for generations.

To properly process all of these raw materials would require the aid of Heaven's Eye, which Leon was more than willing to call for. Talal facilitated the hand-off of materials and returned with a timeline: Leon could expect all of his materials back by the end of the hunt. All of the hides would be tanned, the scales sorted, the bones either crushed or simply reduced in size, and the blood and mana properly bottled and preserved.

He was happy he didn't have to do any of that, as was his entire retinue, though everything *did* have to be counted first. Still, Vyrias was a city designed to provide exactly this kind of service for those taking part in the hunt, so it wasn't like Leon was imposing upon anyone with this.

Once his work accounting for all of his retinue's gains was complete, Talal came hurrying into the room he'd been working in, a look of extreme worry on his face. He drew the attention of all of Leon's retainers, but he remained quiet and made straight for Leon.

"Talal," Leon said in greeting as the Samarid drew close. "What's wrong?"

"Boss," Talal whispered as he leaned in to murmur into Leon's ear, "we have a bit of a situation on our hands. More than a dozen hunter teams have gone missing today. By all accounts, it seems that a group of powerful wyverns are behind this..."

Leon's eyes narrowed as he turned his head to look Talal in the eye. He felt like he already knew the group of wyverns he was talking about...

"An eighth-tier black wyvern," Leon whispered back, "and a seventh-tier of the other colors?"

Talal nodded gravely. "Lady Penelope and Princess Cassandra have already been informed. They're making all haste west to try and confront these beasts. Heaven's Eye is requesting we do the same. In just one day, almost a hundred hunters have been killed, and those were just the ones who managed to reach the western edge by now. This group is moving further east, and they'll encounter more hunters as they do so. The daily kill count will grow rapidly if they're left to their own devices. It seems a lot of other wyverns are pressing east, as well, following this group."

It was Leon's turn to gravely nod, and after a moment of thought, he took a step away from Talal and addressed his people. "Break time's being cut short!" he shouted. Most of them probably heard Talal despite the man whispering, but just in case, Leon repeated what he'd just been informed of. "... so we're going to head out as soon as we're able! These wyverns have to be stopped, and we're uniquely positioned to do something about it!"

"Let's do it!" Alcander roared, though his enthusiasm wasn't shared among any of Leon's retainers, not even Alix. This wasn't just an eighth-tier wyvern, this was six seventh-tier wyverns as well, and who knew how many others. Even with just the black wyvern and his group alone, that level of magical and physical power meant that even if Penelope, Cassandra, Leon, and Maia all worked together, most who understood the power of the wyverns would say the fight would be a toss-up, perhaps even favoring the wyverns.

But that wasn't going to stop Leon. If these wyverns were on the move, then he thought it was probably his fault. He was the one who stirred up this hornet's nest, and his blood had already run cold with guilt and panic.

"We need to move quickly," he said as he turned back to Talal. "Can we commandeer the ark we used to get here?"

"That might take some convincing, but I'd say we can," Talal replied. "It wasn't built for combat, though, so we can only use it to move, not to fight."

"Moving's enough," Leon replied.

He wasted no more time getting his retinue on the move. Not even an hour later, his entire party piled back into the ark, and it rose into the air and shot off to the east. They had wyverns to kill.

Chapter 699: Second Round

The ark moved quickly, and that speed was needed, for it had barely taken off before Leon's party received word that another hunting group of twenty-five had been wiped out by the black wyvern and his growing flight.

Talal spent the entirety of the flight on the comm stone with Vyrias, constantly coordinating their next moves with Heaven's Eye and the Imperial delegations. As a result, Leon knew that Penelope was already drawing close and would be waiting on them. Cassandra's hunting party had been picked up in her personal ark and was barreling toward them, as well, but she was further north and would probably only reach the rendezvous point as Leon's party did, or possibly a little later.

A number of other hunting parties, including those in the Ilian delegation were making their way there, but as far as Leon knew, they only had a few seventh-tier hunters, and none stronger. Complicating matters, much of the Scorched Fields were living up to their name, burning with enough intensity to carve the land up between great seas of fire that greatly restricted travel for weaker parties. More and more, it was looking more and more like the battle would be between the black wyvern and his seventh-tier companions against Leon's, Penelope's, and Cassandra's hunting parties, while all the other wyverns following the black wyvern would be dealt with by other parties.

Leon was fine with that, he wasn't of a mind to waste his time with the weaker beasts when there were bigger monsters to slay.

A couple hours passed as the Heaven's Eye ark blazed over the treetops and often-burning fields, and they were drawing close to the rendezvous point when Talal suddenly called out, "Leon! Penelope has made contact with the wyverns!"

Leon's eyes widened in alarm. "How far away from the RV are we?!" he shouted as he projected his magic senses. He then saw Penelope and her retainers already locked in combat with the wyverns about a hundred miles away in a part of the Scorched Fields already blackened by recent fire.

"About fifteen minutes!" shouted one of the pilots from the back room, barely audible over the roar of the magic engines.

“Fifteen minutes...” Leon murmured. He batted down his initial frustration and irritation because, as far as he could tell, Penelope hadn’t gone looking for the black wyvern without him or Cassandra, but it instead appeared as if the black wyvern had attacked her as she waited. “Find a landing point a mile or two away!” Leon ordered the pilots. “we’ll head out on our own from there!”

“If that’s what you want, we’ll not argue!” the other pilot shouted back.

It was a shame, but their ark didn’t have any weapons. Taking it into battle would not end well, so it had to be left behind. Elise would stay within, as she wasn’t a fighter, though she wanted to be fairly close. Talal would join them, but he wouldn’t participate—instead, he would only be going with Leon’s retinue to ensure he stayed in contact with Vyrias.

It was a nerve-wracking slightly-less-than fifteen minutes, and Leon spent the entire time watching Penelope battle the wyverns.

Penelope herself had taken to dueling the black wyvern. She was powerful, fighting with both light and fire and scoring several good hits on the huge monster. However, she was constantly being pushed back, barely able to compensate for when the black wyvern became intangible and faded into the ground. Despite her fantastic armor, she was injured severely and bled from many wounds sustained in the fight.

The rest of her retinue wasn’t doing all that much better. The white, green, and red wyverns were flying in the air, combating half of Penelope’s retainers who were equipped with some of Leon’s older generation flight suits. The brown, blue, and gold, meanwhile, were fighting on the ground. The brown’s control over the earth around them constantly kept Penelope’s retainers at a distance, while the blue attacked with scalding blasts of steam and the gold shot rivers of lightning from her mouth. Up in the sky, meanwhile, the green kept Penelope’s people at bay with huge gusts of razor wind, while the red burned with impunity. Any injuries that any of these wyverns took was soon healed by the white, with beams of white light shooting from her mouth.

Penelope’s people, while powerful, were completely outmatched by half a dozen seventh-tier wyverns, and that wasn’t even including the several dozen other sixth-tier and weaker wyverns that were harassing several other teams of hunters not too far away. None of the humans could get in many hits, and Leon could see that if they weren’t reinforced, they’d be completely overrun.

He was loath to help Penelope in normal circumstances, but in this case, as soon as his ark touched down in a clearing about one and half miles away, he was the first out of the door, pausing only for Elise to give him a quick kiss on the cheek and wish him luck. Maia received a similar goodbye from her, while Valeria got a hug.

Once all of his people were out, the ark wasted no time taking off again and retreating.

“Let’s get moving!” Leon shouted, not wanting to take a single second longer when lives were on the line.

Lives that he couldn’t help but think were in danger because of him. The black wyvern might never have launched this attack if not for Leon’s raid on the aeries...

He pushed those thoughts out of his head. Blame could come later, right now what mattered was stopping the wyverns’ rampage.

Leon led his people into the sky, flying with Maia, Valeria, and Anzu at his side, while his retainers followed.

[Stay at a distance,] Leon ordered Anzu and his retinue. [Target the wyverns on the ground. Keep the pressure on with spell arrows.]

He could see Penelope's retinue doing the same and not getting anywhere, but he hoped with a few extra bows and mages, they could force an opening and maybe do some appreciable damage.

To prevent that damage from being immediately fixed, he focused on Maia and Valeria. [Try and deal with that white wyvern. Its healing is a problem, keep it occupied.]

[On it,] Maia replied, speaking for herself and Valeria.

Leon's party flew as quickly as they were practically able, slowing only to fish a few potions out of their soul realms to quickly toss back in preparation for their fights—mostly potions to increase their resistance to various elements, but Leon and Maia chose instead to take potions to stimulate their bodies' mana generation.

And then, with little fanfare, Leon's party joined the fight.

Leon focused entirely on the black wyvern. The huge monster was driving the flying Penelope back to the ground as waves of darkness emanated from his gaping maw, and Penelope was only just holding him off with a shield of light projected from a bracer. Leon dove in, his anti-darkness magic gem already slotted into his left gauntlet. As he neared, he activated the gem's enchantment and a pulse of magic burst from his gauntlet and hit the wyvern's stream of darkness.

The wyvern made an almost strangled noise, as if something had seized him by the throat and physically forced his air tract shut. The darkness that he was breathing at Penelope immediately halted.

Penelope glanced up at Leon flew in, his sword appearing in his hand and glowing with silver-blue lightning. "You took your sweet time!" she shouted, her voice wavering a bit from pain and exertion. Now that he was closer, Leon could better appreciate just how ragged she looked, with blood leaking from the gaps in her armor and a gash opened just beneath her right eye.

As much as he disliked Penelope, this situation greatly exceeded his personal feelings. These wyverns had already killed more than a hundred, and Leon wasn't going to let them kill any more. The black wyvern had already recovered and fallen back a little bit, eyeing Leon and Penelope with extreme wariness, no doubt remembering the pain that Leon had inflicted only a couple days ago, so Leon took the opportunity to fly toward Penelope.

"You're injured," Leon observed.

"Just a few scratches," Penelope growled, sounding almost offended that Leon had pointed out her current state. However, despite her possession of light magic, Leon noticed that she wasn't healing herself.

So, with a great deal of reluctance and caution, but little hesitation, Leon activated the enchantments that surrounded his tau pearl and extended a hand toward Penelope. In an instant, a river of pure white light streamed from his gauntlet and into the Director's daughter, and her wounds closed a second or

two later. Her skin was left as unblemished as if she'd never been injured at all, and she even looked a little stronger, too, like the tau pearl had restored some of her magic power as well as stitch together her torn flesh.

"What...?" she muttered in confusion, and in that brief moment, the black wyvern took the opportunity to strike.

The black wyvern lunged forward, his mighty wings beating hard enough to cause the trees hundreds of feet behind him to shake, and his massive jaws split open. His fangs, gleaming in the light of the sun, nearly reached Leon and Penelope, but with a slash of his sword, still sparking with built-up lightning, Leon unleashed a tremendous lightning bolt right into the wyvern's mouth. His lightning forked as it passed the wyvern's lips, raking across the wyvern's tongue and the roof of his mouth like talons, something that Leon hadn't consciously attempted to do, but which seemed to yield great results, for the wyvern shrieked again, and though he didn't seem too injured by the strike, he was still forced to roll out of the way, breaking off his attack.

The wyvern broke off by flying lower, and Leon dove after him, Penelope on his heels, all confusion that she'd showed from Leon's aid having vanished. Only determination now showed upon her face, her almond eyes locked upon the retreating form of the beast that had attacked her party.

The wyvern wasn't helpless, though, and his massive tail, trailing smoky black darkness behind it, lashed out with great speed, striking Leon across the shoulder and throwing him away. Leon rolled through the air as Penelope threw a fireball after the wyvern. The fireball exploded halfway there, but instead of dissipating, the fire roiled, expanded, and took the shape of a huge, majestic-looking bird. That bird dove after the wyvern as Penelope slowed and glanced down at Leon. Her eyes weren't filled with concern—or at least, no *personal* concern, but she still clearly worried if he was still alive or not.

He was, fortunately enough. His armor had taken the blow completely, and while the wyvern's titanic strength was enough to throw him away like a ragdoll, he hadn't actually been injured. Only momentarily inconvenienced, and he was already flying hard to catch back up.

As he did, he saw the white wyvern struggling with three water dragons wrapped about her limbs, but after several seconds, she'd managed to free herself from Maia's dragons, force Valeria back with a needle of light fired from one of her eyes, and then breathe a stream of light at the black wyvern.

Leon's heart sank as whatever damage he and Penelope had done to the monster vanished as the light instantly hit the gigantic beast, and the black wyvern roared in triumph, staring back at Leon and Penelope with what almost seemed to be smugness. The firebird that she'd thrown after him was nowhere to be seen.

However, before they could begin their second round, the brown wyvern below roared in pain, and Leon saw that not only had Anzu attached himself to one of the wyvern's wings, but one of Penelope's seventh-tier retainers had thrust his lance up into one of her legs, penetrating her scales completely. Two more of Penelope's retainers closed in, their auras spiking, as Marcus and Alix peppered the brown wyvern with explosive spells. The spells weren't doing much to the wyvern's scaled hide, but each strike elicited another shriek of pain.

The black wyvern roared again, his smugness gone, and he immediately dropped into a dive. Leon and Penelope followed, realizing he was now more interested in intervening in the fight between their retainers and the brown wyvern.

Leon summoned a bolt of lightning from one of the clouds above while Penelope threw another firebird after him.

Both of their attacks passed right through him as a shroud of darkness enveloped his body, and Leon winced as his lightning bolt came perilously close to hitting Alcander as he charged the injured brown wyvern, his huge ax in hand. Penelope's firebird pulled out of her dive in time, though, and attacked the black wyvern again, but his intangibility remained.

Leon increased his speed as much as he could, his left hand outstretched, his magic flooding into the anti-darkness gem in his gauntlet, hoping that maybe he'd have better luck with disrupting the monster's magic resistance this time. But the gem's range wasn't infinite, and the wyvern had a head start.

The black wyvern roared, reaching the brown wyvern first. Darkness streamed from his mouth, and Anzu barely managed to pull himself off the brown wyvern, blood still trailing down his beak and claws, barely avoiding the black wave. One of Penelope's sixth-tier retainers wasn't so lucky, and as the wave washed over the brown wyvern, he vanished within. Everyone else, though, managed to pull back, and Leon breathed a quick sigh of relief as he saw that Anzu and all the rest of his retainers were safe.

[Light these things up!] Leon roared at his retainers. [Everything you have! The strongest magics you can call upon!]

Almost instantly, a beam of light lanced out from Anna and struck the darkness that still streamed over the brown wyvern. It didn't do much, but Leon could feel at least some of the black wyvern's magic having to expend itself to protect against Anna's damaging light. Leon saw the rest of his retainers on the ground pulling out their bows and nocking back on some of his most powerful Thunderblast spell-arrows, and just as he got within range with his anti-magic gem, they loosed their deadly missiles.

Leon felt his anti-magic gem go to work, and a moment later, the darkness spilling from the black wyvern's maw was halted, the beast making another strangled noise. A second later, the Thunderblast spell-arrows hit the brown wyvern, almost making her vanish within the light of hundreds of arcs of golden lightning. Anna's beam of light then sliced into the wyvern, cutting through some of her scales and spilling blood.

The brown wyvern shrieked again, but Leon had stopped paying attention to her.

Instead, his focus was taken by the black wyvern, and as the brown wyvern filled the air with the sounds of her pain, Leon was slamming into the black wyvern's back hip blade-first, driving his Adamant blade right through the monster's scales. His body sparked and burned with lightning, and he would've filled the wyvern's body with it, too, but a pulse of darkness magic threw him right off the monster only a moment after impact. He managed to keep a grip on his blade, fortunately, but he was thrown back.

A moment later, though, a firebird detonated right between the black wyvern's wing-shoulders, scorching and scratching as his scales.

The beast roared in anger and turned his head upward and backward a bit, focusing on Penelope. He turned his entire body around with startling nimbleness and snapped at her. She just barely managed to twist out of the way, letting the wyvern's teeth scrape right off her armor. Still, her flight suit was damaged, and she started falling.

Leon prepared himself to charge, but as he did, he saw the black wyvern's eyes dart to something behind him and widen with fear. Leon projected his magic senses a little farther than where they were, widening his focus away from the battle, and saw another ark cutting through the sky, racing toward them.

It was the very same gleaming white ark that he'd seen on the journey in: Princess Cassandra's personal ark. However, it looked a little different, as several sections of its armored hull had retracted, revealing a complement of three Imperial Lances per side.

Leon grinned, knowing the battle, already leaning towards them after his arrival, had now swung decisively in their favor.

The black wyvern seemed to realize this, and he roared and turned away from Leon. He was retreating to the mountains.

Leon glanced at Penelope and saw that she had righted herself in her fall. She was an eighth-tier mage, he didn't need to worry about her. So, instead of diving after her, he began to conjure lightning bolt and hurl them after the black wyvern. Each one slid right through his scales, but not in the way that Leon had hoped for. Instead, the beast had become intangible to magic again, and Leon was unable to do him harm.

Below them, the earth shook and broke apart as the brown wyvern took back to the skies, bleeding from a dozen wounds. Not too far away, the white wyvern was freed from more of Maia's water dragons by the green, and the two followed the black.

However, the remaining three, Leon noted, took a moment to follow. The red, in particular, stared at Leon, then at Penelope, and then at Maia. However, after another furious roar from the black, the red, gold, and blue followed the other four.

Leon almost gave chase, but they weren't the entirety of the wyvern attack: there were still a couple dozen weaker beasts running around in the area, making the lives of the other hunters much more exciting—and much shorter. Fortunately, it seemed that the primary group of seven were retreating toward the aeries rather than toward any other group of humans, and with two arks, Leon knew they'd be able to catch up quickly.

So, with some reluctance, Leon turned away from the seven and launched himself into cleaning up this mess. His retinue followed suit, as did Penelope and her people.

The clean-up didn't take long, not with the strongest wyverns remaining being only sixth-tier. Not the mention the Princess' ark reached the rendezvous point and her Lances lit up those who were left, striking them with preternatural accuracy. Dozens of wyverns fell from the sky, and the battle was over.

But even through the joyous rush of winning the battle, Leon noted the dozens of human corpses that also littered the ground.

Chapter 700: Preparing for Round Three

"I didn't need your help," Penelope vehemently claimed. Leon gave her an exasperated look, and a moment later, she added, "... Though, it was appreciated. Thank you."

Leon nodded in acknowledgment, unsure how to respond to such direct thanks.

It had been about an hour since he'd joined the battle between her and the black wyvern. The rest of the flight following that monster had been cleaned up, with both Leon and Penelope adding several more wyvern heads to their kill counts. Cassandra, too, added a couple, but for the most part, the battle was over by the time she left her ark.

"I'm sure you had everything well in hand," Leon eventually stated.

The two were walking together back to the rendezvous point as the rest of the hunters around were squabbling over their kills—Leon and Penelope had already taken their kills into their respective soul realms. Leon and Penelope's retinue had gathered in a shallow valley between two large hills, at the top of which grew a pair of trees, massive even by the standards of the Scorched Fields. In that valley, both the ark Leon had rode in on and Cassandra's ark had landed, and the Princess' followers were out in force, securing the area.

There were sixteen other hunter teams present in the valley, all gathered to help in bringing down the black wyvern who'd killed more than a hundred in the past day. Almost five hundred relatively powerful mages, though not a single eighth-tier mage among them. Only Leon, Penelope, Cassandra, and Maia were so powerful.

With barely another word between them, Leon and Penelope linked back up with their retainers and made for Cassandra's ark, outside of which the Princess waited. She looked rather bored standing on a small platform surrounded by her guards, her ruby eyes narrow with what looked to Leon like displeasure and disappointment. She stood still, but her fingers kept twitching toward Sunlight, which still rested upon her hip.

"Leon! Lady Penelope!" cried out one of her seventh-tier hangers-on, a young woman in gleaming golden armor that appeared to Leon to be beyond tacky next to Cassandra's clean white plate.

The Princess spared both of them a quick glance before turning her gaze out in the direction that the black wyvern and the six seventh-tier female wyverns had fled in.

"We cannot let this threat go unaddressed!" Cassandra declared before Leon or Penelope could offer greetings. "Such powerful wyverns... they slaughtered so many in so short a time, and rallied so many others behind them... Klea! Do we have casualty numbers yet?"

Another young woman, this one only fourth-tier and dressed in green silk instead of armor, replied, "Seventy-eight hunters died in this battle! A hundred and ninety-three more are currently being treated for their wounds! At least two days until they're all back on their feet!"

A scowl moved across Cassandra's beautiful face, and she finally turned to properly acknowledge Leon and Penelope.

"This was a bad day, I'm afraid," she said. "Many have died, but it's thanks to your efforts that those who now frolic in the Lands of Eternal Bounty were not joined by many more."

"Such is our duty, Your Highness," Penelope said with a tilt of her head that could be seen as the slightest of bows.

Leon mimicked the gesture and added, "Duty or no, I'd be here hunting the wyverns all the same."

Cassandra's scowl lightened for a moment as a smile tugged at her lips, her glittering ruby eyes almost flashing in the afternoon sun at Leon's statement.

The Princess asked, "Duty and desire... you two have strong motivation to hunt down this Black, then? And his harem?"

Without hesitation, Leon responded, "I was already considering going after him, I just hadn't yet spoken to anyone else about it."

"After today," Penelope added, "I have some personal business I want to settle with him. Duty and desire intersect for me, and I would relish the chance to kill that thing."

A slight spike in killing intent pulsed out from Penelope, her words ringing absolutely true to Leon. She was doing an admirable job of covering it up, but the state she'd been put in by the black wyvern had her *furious*.

Cassandra, after hearing their words, said, "Your words please me. I intend to hunt this monster down, and all of his consorts. So long as they live, the Scorched Fields and all its surroundings will remain in danger. These actions they have perpetrated over the past day indicate both their intelligence and will to hunt humankind, and once this hunt is over, if they've not been dealt with, then there'll be almost nothing stopping them from running right over the Pegasi States. They must be stopped!"

"How about this, then," Leon said in suggestion, not thinking that the danger was quite as severe as Cassandra was making it out to be, but also knowing that after riling the black wyvern up, he couldn't now leave this mess for someone else to clean up. "Let's all finish mopping up and meet again in two hours? I have some information that might prove useful to this hunt, but first I think we all need to check in with our own people."

He gave Penelope a meaningful look, and she gravely nodded. Leon had seen two of her people fall to the wyverns, and that was just when they were in sight. Penelope and her retinue had been fighting for longer than that, so he had to assume that she'd lost a fair number of her followers.

None of his had fallen, thankfully, but he could still see Alcander looking more than a little wobbly on his feet, and Alix had a healing spell wrapped around her arm. He needed to make sure that his retinue was in top shape and that the area was secure. Then they could get to planning.

"I don't want to wait too long," Cassandra declared. "One hour should be sufficient, no? Meet back here then."

"How about a more central location?" Penelope replied. "I'll see that a secure camp is set up between our arks."

Cassandra scowled again but didn't argue. Penelope and Leon weren't her subordinates, and while she could speak as imperiously as she wished, they were under no compulsion to follow her orders. Leon understood that while arguing over sovereignty and authority at this time would be nothing but self-destructive, certain distance and decorum had to be maintained. Cassandra couldn't just order them to appear before her in an hour, it was better to meet on more neutral ground.

"So be it," she growled, and the three went their separate ways.

Leon and his retinue met back up with Elise outside of the Heaven's Eye ark and Talal immediately got on the comm stone to send his report back to Vyrias. Leon was certain others had already informed the city of the battle that just took place, but every report had to be filed, and Talal was on top of his duties.

Camp was set up, and Leon left his retinue behind to rest after seeing to them with the tau pearl. The thing was startlingly powerful, healing their injuries with ease just as it had done with Penelope. Leon was incredibly pleased with its performance and felt like he was starting to understand just why the Director wanted one badly enough to send an eighth-tier mage to find one.

He couldn't wait to find out what else the thing could do.

Alix was all right, having only sustained a large gash on her arm. Alcander had been knocked about and had received a mild concussion, but it wasn't anything that the tau pearl couldn't fix. He was back to bragging about the fifth-tier wyvern he'd managed to kill—with some help from Marcus and Gaius—in no time.

Everyone else was fortunately uninjured, or their injuries had already been healed by spell or potion, and Leon's score for the bet had increased by a dozen, including those killed by the rest of his retinue.

After an hour passed, Leon left his retinue in his portable villa and made his way to the center of the main camp where Penelope had established something of a forward operating base. It was a relatively small, though luxurious and heavily secured, modular building with several of her personal retainers standing guard outside. The building was almost exactly in between the Heaven's Eye ark and Cassandra's ark.

Waiting outside, Leon noticed several of Cassandra's armored retainers, and realized he was probably the last of the eighth-tier mages to arrive.

When he walked in, he found that the entire building amounted to a single room with a large conference table in the middle and chairs lining the walls. The table had a large crystal as its centerpiece that radiated light magic.

Near one end of the table sat Cassandra, while Penelope sat to her right. About half a dozen others were sitting in the chairs at the edges of the room, though Leon largely ignored them as adjutants and assistants. Judging by their attire, though, he was the only one that showed up without his entourage, which was immediately pointed out.

"Leon," Penelope said as he walked in, "abandoned by your retainers? Have they realized they can do so much better already?"

"Keep talking, Penelope," Leon replied with a smug grin, "as it stands, you'll be handing that diamond over to me by the end of this hunt, and then it'll be *your* retainers in danger of desertion..."

Penelope went quiet for a moment, her mocking expression turning downcast before becoming more guarded and neutral. Leon internally winced as what he'd just said sank in—Penelope had lost several of her retainers in that fight, and Leon had likely just reminded her of that.

He wasn't going to apologize, not for an exchange she started, but he felt his cheeks burn in mild embarrassment and he hurriedly took a seat on Cassandra's left, though sat at such an angle that he hoped it was clear he wasn't making any tacit implications about their power.

"Retainers or not," Cassandra said as Leon got himself situated, "I thought that the other eighth-tier mage in your party would be joining us. Why is she not here?"

"She's tired," Leon replied. "She also has little interest in making these decisions."

Cassandra stared at him for a long moment, then seemed to accept what he said and moved on.

"Leon," she said, "you said that you had information for us regarding this beast?"

"Yes," Leon replied. "I happened to see something a couple days ago..."

Leon quickly caught up Penelope and Cassandra with what he knew of the black wyvern, informing them of his own fight with the monster and the tribute the wyvern had received from the six females who seemed to be following him.

"Dispel any doubt as to this thing's intelligence," Penelope stated as Leon finished his story. "It's clearly sapient and capable of making rational decisions. It fled when it realized it couldn't win the fight. The fight itself seemed to almost be a revenge strike against us for *your* actions, Leon Raime."

Leon shrugged. "Maybe, who can say with such a beast except the beast himself? I won't apologize, the idea that a wyvern taking revenge after my little sojourn into their lairs was hardly something I could've predicted. Besides, it's not like male wyverns seem to care that much about their young or their mates."

"Such things only matter with their weaker and dumber of their number," Cassandra said, cutting in before Penelope could fire back at Leon. "Regardless, what's happened has happened. We can lay blame later, right now we have to kill this monster. Are we in agreement on that?"

"I am, at least," Leon replied.

"As am I," Penelope added.

"Good," Cassandra whispered. "This thing is a danger to all of us. We need to do this carefully. Surgically."

She spoke with a certain degree of hostility to her tone, and Leon immediately picked up on what she was saying. "You want to leave the other hunters behind?"

"Yes," Cassandra replied with a brief smile of appreciation, her ruby eyes glittering as they quickly swept over Leon. "They took far too many casualties in that fight, they won't help us with this Black."

"Are you sure you're not just doing this to increase your chances of taking his head?" Leon wondered, only half-jokingly.

"Such a kill *would* bring me closer to the lead, wouldn't it?" Cassandra responded with a slight smile. "But no, right now I'm only thinking of how best to kill this monster."

"Let's just fly over this thing's gorge and collapse it right on the monster's head," Penelope bitterly suggested.

Leon instinctively disagreed, though he recognized that his desire to hunt this monster was playing a large part in that response. However, after a moment's thought, he was able to add a little reason to his instinct.

"It's a large gorge," he said. "Who knows how many cave systems it might connect to? Our quarry is powerful with darkness magic, and has eighth-tier power, besides. Simply collapsing the gorge won't kill him, or even his... mates? The other six with him."

"We need to do this personally," Cassandra said with intensity, her lips turning upward in an almost mad grin of anticipation, and Leon noticed her fingers curling around the hilt of Sunlight, which yet hung from her belt. He wondered why it wasn't stored in her soul realm, but he supposed she might just be excited about the new weapon and wanted to show it off a bit. "Killing this thing and bringing its corpse in will do much to ensure that this region remains at peace."

"Then let's head into that gorge and flush him out," Leon responded. "Him and his harem. Although..."

"What is it?" Cassandra asked.

"The Red, Gold, and Blue. Did you notice their general reluctance to follow Black as he retreated? White, Green, and Brown didn't hesitate, but the former three seemed to need a little extra persuasion. Was I just seeing things?"

"I can't tell what these things were thinking," Cassandra said almost dismissively. "Who knows what they were doing, or why. What matters is that they fall."

"I'm not so sure about that," Leon whispered in thought. "If Red and the other two aren't that willing to follow Black, and can be reasoned with, is it not worth a try?"

"You want to reason with a wyvern?" Penelope derisively asked.

"I'm wondering if it's possible, and if it's something *worth* trying," Leon retorted, a hint of indignation entering his voice.

Penelope seemed about ready to argue, but after a moment of thought, she held her tongue. Leon noticed that one of her hands briefly rubbed one of the places she'd been wounded by Black, and where Leon had healed her.

"Do *you* think it's worth trying, Leon Raime?" Cassandra asked, her expression neutral, giving away none of her thoughts.

Leon paused a moment, turning the idea over in his mind. It was a recent idea on his part, and one that he didn't think was fully formed. "It's dangerous," he began, thinking out loud more than he was explaining any specific idea. "However, I think we can handle three seventh-tier wyverns between us. But can we even get the opportunity to talk to them on their own without Black noticing? Or any of the

other three? We can't say why they follow Black, so how can I say if trying to turn Red, Blue, or Gold is even possible, let alone if it should be attempted?"

Cassandra regarded him with a thoughtful look. "I'm... open to the idea," she hesitantly responded. "But I'm not willing to waste too much time trying to get in contact with them. That said, Lady Penelope was already wounded by Black, and if you hadn't arrived in time, she might've even fallen to the monster."

"That's up for debate," Penelope murmured in disagreement.

"Debate it all you want, but it doesn't change that the situation looked bad for you, didn't it?" Cassandra asked.

Penelope scowled but didn't respond.

"Wyverns are dangerous," Cassandra continued. "They're stronger by far than a mage of equal power. And this Black having such powerful darkness magic only makes him that much more dangerous. Any and all assistance from powerful beings is a thing to celebrate when hunting him down."

"Then you think it's worth a try?" Leon asked.

"Assuming we get the opportunity," Cassandra replied with a slight smile. "No matter what, though, we have to bring down that black wyvern. He's already proven that he's willing to venture out and specifically hunt us down. If we leave him here after the hunt..."

She didn't need to finish her statement, they all knew that leaving Black and his wyverns alone was no longer an option. It wasn't something that would impact the entire plane or anything, but Leon wasn't leaving without bringing Black down.

The three spoke for a little while longer, running through the specific details of their plan. They had to get to the gorge, and they had to do so as quickly as they could. All of them had to remain alert for signs of any of their targets just in case they either hadn't fallen back to the gorge, or in case they left before the hunting parties could close the distance.

All the other hunting parties were to be left behind. They couldn't move as fast, nor would they be as useful in a battle against so many powerful wyverns.

And so, they decided to leave at dusk, using their two arks to move as quickly as they could into the wyvern's aeries. Once they drew close, their hunting parties would disembark and move on foot or by using their personal flight gear while Cassandra's ark would provide long-range artillery cover with its Imperial Lances and the Heaven's Eye ark would fall back several miles to where it was safer to wait for them.

Once they reached the gorge, they'd have to move a little more cautiously, but they couldn't exactly plan for what they didn't know. They'd have to play their clearing of the gorge by ear. At the very least, there were a few places to make camp along the cliffs overlooking the gorge, if the need for them arose.

When the meeting ended, Leon felt like it was a pretty solid plan, all things considered. As he left the meeting chamber, though, he felt Cassandra's eyes upon him, and he slowed for a moment, turning just as he reached the door and making eye contact with the Princess.

She was staring at him, a strange look on her face: one of intrigue, he thought, though why she might be intrigued had him guessing. It also had him flashing back to Anastasios' warning to him, proving that at least the Ilian Empire knew who he was, and who he was connected to.

He couldn't help but wonder if the Sacred Golden Empire, and Cassandra by extension, knew of his power, too.