

Storm King 731

Chapter 731: Narrowing the Search

Leon sat on the roof of his portable villa, his magic senses projected as he scanned the Prota Forest in as fine of detail as he could. He was initially on the lookout for anything that might've spoke of the presence of his Clan's research facility, but he couldn't see so much as a single broken brick let alone anything that resembled a large, highly advanced Thunderbird Clan installation.

He eventually widened his search to look for any of the strange and exotic creatures that he'd heard about before, but as he'd done on the flight in, he saw nothing. Not a single bramble from the floral giants, neither hide nor horn of goat men, and no signs that he could see of any manticores.

As far as he could tell, the Prota Forest was just a deep, dark, dense primeval forest, a place that looked like it hadn't felt the touch of mankind for thousands of years.

[Nestor,] Leon whispered into his soul realm once he lost all patience, [what did this research facility look like? It wasn't a small, easily missed place, was it?]

[By our Ancestors, no!] the dead man vehemently replied. [This research facility was operated by *our* Clan, not any of our vassals, and certainly not any of the worthless men and women who lived on this plane prior to our arrival. And our Clan doesn't think small when we build, no matter what we build. It all reflects back upon us, and so it must reflect our grandeur.]

[Have you ever been to this facility?] Leon asked, largely ignoring Nestor's pomposity.

[No,] Nestor replied.

[Even though it was under your purview?]

[I had other concerns.]

[Such as that moon fragment?]

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[Sounds like you'd have been better served keeping a better eye and a firmer hand on your other research stations. Maybe then you wouldn't have been poisoned, eh?]

[I would argue against that. My poisoning, while greatly painful and annoying, saved me from having to face the local planar lord. The Grave Warden killed the rest of my family, and I would've joined them in death if I hadn't already been dying.]

[You say that like it's a bad thing,] Leon observed, noting the incredulity in Nestor's tone at the mere thought of having to join his father and siblings in battle. [One would think that not joining your family would've been a great source of guilt.]

[Don't look too far into this, boy. For all that we've spoken over the past decade, you still don't know me. Don't pretend that you do.]

[Sure, sure. Anyway, this place. What else can you tell me of its location? I can't see it at all.]

[It's been eighty-thousand years!]

[It has?! I had no idea, why did no one tell me?!]

[Sarcasm is unbecoming.]

[I'd disagree, but let's not get into it. The research facility? Is it buried?]

[That would be my guess. No land is static and unchanging, and even just with the trees and other flora growing, living, and dying around it, our research facility would've been buried a long time ago. And that's assuming it wasn't destroyed before our vassals fled this plane.]

Leon frowned, recognizing the distinct possibility.

[Still,] he said both to point out the possibility and to reassure himself that there was still a chance of finding this place, [*something's* been making this forest so dangerous that even the Sacred Golden Empire can't tame it.]

[That's hardly surprising. Even on a plane like this, there're going to be threats and monsters that the powerless provincials can't deal with. And we didn't choose the location of this research facility for nothing; this forest was already known to harbor a large number of organisms that interested my subordinates who cared about such things. This forest has never been inhabited and has always been incredibly dangerous to these bumpkins. To be close to these organisms to study them is why the facility was built here.]

[So, what should I be looking for? A huge metal structure? Bricks poking up through the ground? Grand towers and halls, or something more boring?]

[First of all, because we're not stupid enough to try and build a secure facility entirely above ground, a significant portion of the research facility was built underground even back then. Helps to keep the more dangerous samples under lock and key, you see. So there wasn't much above ground to begin with. What as below ground would look quite similar to what you saw on the top floor of my lab.]

Leon nodded, remembering the underground lair that Nestor had constructed for himself. Perhaps it was their Thunderbird blood crying out in protest, but his Clan had always seemed to enchant their structures to appear to be outside, using light projections and even wind enchantments to simulate the outdoors. Building underground was undeniably safer for secure facilities, but Leon could easily understand the need to pretend they were outside—he wasn't that fond of boxing himself in, either.

So, his expectation of finding another facility with the shiny grey metal and trapezoidal hallways solidified.

Nestor continued, [The above ground of our research facility, however, would've been built out of more local materials, so as not to overly disturb the local flora and fauna. There would've been no roads leading to the research facility, with the only access open to it being the air.]

Ignoring the latter statement for the moment, Leon asked, [Am I looking for wood or stone, then?]

[A mix of both,] Nestor answered. [Both would've been used depending on the section of the facility that was being built.]

Leon frowned and asked, [Would anything wooden have even survived so long? It has been, as you so *helpfully* reminded me, eighty-thousand years...]

[Unlikely there would be much to find,] Nestor answered. [Everything would've been enchanted, so there's still a chance, but you should be on the lookout for stone. Get a look at the local stone and that's about to expect.]

Leon glanced at a few hills and rivers cutting through the forest, noticing that there were a few stones exposed to the air here and there, though he had to look pretty hard given just how thick the flora was. Just about everything he saw was either plant or dirt, and even the few stones that he could see were nearly entirely covered in thick green moss. It was hot and humid in this part of the plane, though as an eighth-tier mage, Leon was hardly bothered by either of those factors.

[I'm not seeing much here that would warrant building a research facility, though,] Leon observed. [Has the forest changed that much in these millennia?]

[Powerful things don't always advertise their power,] Nestor replied didactically. [Oftentimes, especially in the wild, many things of interest will hide themselves for protection.]

Leon nodded, not needing Nestor to explain that much to him. It had just been a passing thought, but as he turned it over in his head, the more sense it made. Back in the Forest of Black and White, he rarely saw powerful alchemical plants, and even rarer still were powerful beings. For the most part, such creatures and materials would either be discovered and eaten by something, or they'd find some way to hide.

He thought specifically of the Gorgon and the ice wraiths. He didn't think that he'd be able to find many ice wraiths even as he was now if the sun were in the sky, they didn't come out during the day. Likewise, the Gorgon was usually minding her own business, ruling her river nymphs while one with water—at least, as far as he knew. He had no idea what she might be doing now that she'd found the cure to gorgonism, but at least knew that she was probably out of sight.

It was an understandable defense mechanism. Advertising power was a good way to attract rival power, and out in the wilds, without the benefits of magical healing, every fight could be a creature's last, or at least leave it so injured that its future survival chances were diminished.

On the other hand, advertising power could be a way to keep oneself safe, as for the same reasons, something might be reluctant to eat or hunt something else that looks dangerous. Yet, as far as Leon could see, the entire forest was quite mundane. A few strong creatures running around, relatively speaking, but nothing that he could see stronger than the fifth-tier, and certainly no shiny alchemical thing that he thought might get Helen's blood pumping with excitement.

The Prota Forest just seemed like a mundane, if quite ancient, forest.

[So, you didn't pay much attention to what was being studied here,] Leon repeated to Nestor.

[Correct,] Nestor shamelessly replied.

[Do you have even the slightest clue what was being researched? Even if you weren't paying attention to progress reports?]

[Nothing specific,] Nestor said. [Local flora. A few specimens of the local fauna. Honestly, organic materials aren't my thing. Enchantments are where my interests lay. Magical engineering is my forte, not biological studies.]

Leon sighed again, silently lamenting Nestor's negligence. As the air passed his lips, he felt the disturbance in the air and ambient magic as someone alighted on the roof of his portable villa behind him, making no noise otherwise. He didn't even need to turn around to recognize Princess Cassandra.

He thought for a moment that she might be trying to sneak up on him, if the wide, mischievous grin on her face was any indication. The grin shrank a little bit when he pulsed his magic senses at her, indicating that he was aware she'd arrived without him having to turn around, though didn't go away.

"It's rude not to greet a Princess, you know," she said as she joined him at the edge of the roof.

"It's also rude to interrupt someone when they're thinking," Leon easily replied.

"You weren't lost in thought, though," Cassandra pointed out. "You were inspecting my forest, and quite intensely at that. Looking for whatever it is you came here for?"

"A fun challenge?" Leon replied with only a hint of sarcasm. "Yes, I'm looking for that. I'm not seeing much, though. Care to share any tips for finding things to do out there?"

Cassandra gave him a frustratingly smug look, telling him, at least as far as he could tell, that she could see through him. She still humored him, though.

"This question has been raised many times in the past," she explained. "Many attempts to bring this forest under control have been made, and none have been successful. Even slowly cutting in from the edges don't work that well, with entire villages and work crews disappearing after a time and the forest reclaiming the territory it lost soon enough. And yet, as you can see for yourself, this forest hardly seems like it should be capable of such a thing, right?"

Leon nodded, listening along.

"Well, for one thing, the floral giants and goat men are stories, we've never been able to verify them, so don't hold out hopes to see them."

"Really?" Leon responded, putting on a mockingly childish tone as he expressed his disappointment.

"Ah, man, those giants are something I've been looking forward to seeing!" He didn't quite believe Cassandra, but he said the words anyway.

"No need to get so sassy," Cassandra shot back, though the amused grin on her face betrayed her true feelings. "Just, you know, temper your expectations. On the other hand, finding whatever's been making my people vanish for so long *is* something that I'm interested in, so keep your eyes open for anything suspicious."

"I'll try," Leon replied. He was about to add some other sarcastic comment, but then a proper question arose in his mind that had him pause and look searchingly at Cassandra for a long moment.

"What is it?" the Princess asked with some mild concern.

Leon debated telling her what had occurred to him, but instead, he just smiled at her and turned back to stare out at the forest. “Never mind,” he said. “It was nothing. Just a stupid thought that gets stupider the more I think about it.”

“Well now I *have* to hear it!” Cassandra glared at him, but without a shred of genuine malice in her eyes.

“No, no,” Leon replied. “I’d rather not embarrass myself with an asinine idea, that’s all. Anyway, I’d better head inside.”

“Leon!” Cassandra shouted back, but Leon just jumped down from the roof and made for the front door. He expected to hear Cassandra doing likewise, but he could see with his magic senses that she was staying on his roof, just watching him leave, her ruby eyes narrowed in consternation.

He took glee in the look, but then turned his mind toward his idea. As soon as he walked into his portable villa, he sat down in the nearest chair, made sure the anti-magic senses wards were in place, and then conjured some paper to sketch on.

[Nestor,] Leon whispered as he hurriedly began to sketch some runes, though not having much more than the barest hint of an idea quite yet.

[Leon,] the dead man responded, sounding slightly aggrieved at having been ignored for the past couple of minutes after Cassandra’s interruption.

[I had a wonder,] Leon responded.

[That wasn’t just an excuse to get away from that spoiled brat?]

[No, actually. Well, not *entirely*. I had an actual idea.]

[This’ll be good. All right, Leon, let’s hear it, what are you thinking?]

[Is there some way to scan for large concentrations of metal or stone? Back in the Bull Kingdom, there were rituals multiple mages could do—with enchantment and spell support, of course—that could project their magic senses a great distance to scan around for demonic magics. They were running a purge of vampires and that’s how they tracked their quarry.]

[That sounds incredibly inefficient,] Nestor replied. [So many ways it could be subverted...]

[Well, yeah, but just because it isn’t likely to work for vampires who could be hiding where magic senses might not reach doesn’t necessarily mean that a similar thing couldn’t work for finding something inanimate, does it?]

Leon heard Nestor give one of the longest, tiredest sighs he’d ever heard. [No,] Nestor conceded, though it sounded like he struggled mightily to do so. [No, it doesn’t mean what you’re asking is entirely impossible, if you’re asking what I think you’re asking.]

[I want to see if I can use an enchantment to refine my magic senses to target only what I want them to target, so that I’m not stuck scanning through the forest on my own.]

[Yeah, that’s what I was afraid of. Well, it’s not impossible, but it *is* incredibly difficult.]

[How so?]

[First of all, you know that magic senses don't penetrate solid objects that well, don't you?]

[I do,] Leon replied. He was more than aware of that fact, and that was why he'd devised—with much help from Nestor and cross-references with other Heaven's Eye defensive measures—robust wards for his home in Occulara to detect any attempts to tunnel beneath his villa. His magic senses could be projected more than two hundred miles through the air, but it could barely make it through several inches of solid stone, let alone something with a greater amount of magic flowing through it.

[Well, that doesn't easily change even with enchantments.]

['Not easily' doesn't mean 'can't'.]

[Thank you for the lesson, I was aware of that already.]

[Look at us, teaching each other what we already know. At least we're learning much about each other.]

Nestor ignored Leon's sarcasm, though it still grated on him if his voice, sounding like it was barely escaping through clenched teeth, was any indication. [It requires a great deal of power to penetrate solid matter, especially for something as hard as rock. That kind of power is usually not something that any average mage can generate on their own for any useful length of time.]

[What about an exceptional mage?]

[They might be able to power an enchantment like that for longer, but not by much. Probably not enough to be of use, though this depends entirely on what you're looking for and where it is. Anyway, with enough magic power, you can brute force your way through solid matter and scan for something specific.]

[So, and I'm just spit balling here, but since what we're trying to find is a large concentration of stone, in a place where stone doesn't seem all that common, then we don't have to penetrate something quite that difficult, do we? Just dirt and other organic material.]

[That doesn't necessarily make it easier, Leon. Dirt *would*, admittedly, be easier, but living things that absorb the magic around them can interfere with such scanning.]

Leon scowled, but he pressed on, anyway. [Would something like this be helped if we had a sample of local stone? You said that the stone used in construction would've been local...]

[Yes...] Nestor confirmed quite unenthusiastically. [Even with powerful earth mages, local stone is always better...]

[Then we get our hands on a local rock sample, whip up an enchantment to scan for other large sources of that kind of stone, and see what we can find? Maybe tune it so that it only scans the surface for any ruins that might be poking up out of the dirt, and only if that fails do we start trying to look underground?]

Nestor was silent for a long moment, but Leon's excitement at having an idea to latch onto didn't dissipate.

[This... might work,] Nestor conceded again, though it was like pulling teeth. [This isn't going to be something 'just whipped up', though. Send the Librarian over to me and be prepared to follow my instructions. This will take us until the morning, at the very least.]

Leon smiled, and got to work. The Prota Forest may have seemed empty, but it felt good to have at least some way to narrow that down at least a little.

Chapter 732: A Murder of Eagles

"... so these are the places we have to check," Leon said, marking down half a dozen spots on the map of the Prota Forest that he'd identified.

With Nestor's help, he'd used an ad-hoc enchantment to project his magic senses and used his paltry command of earth magic to pull a rock out of the ground to use as a guide. Even with the enchantment, he couldn't penetrate that far into the ground, but he was still able to identify six different sites within the forest that possessed significant amounts of local stone above the ground. Unfortunately, when scanning those sites with his magic senses as normal, Leon was unable to see much beside overgrown forest, but he supposed that just meant that the stone he'd detected was close to the surface.

"How are we going to get there?" Gaius asked, immediately jumping into problem-solving mode.

"I was thinking we could fly," Leon replied. "I haven't been able to see any reason why we couldn't, though I think it'll still be prudent to proceed with all caution. Just because I can't sense any crazy monsters in the forest doesn't mean they don't exist; the Sacred Golden Empire has been unable to settle the forest in eighty-thousand years for a reason."

The rest of his retinue looked a little unsure, but nodded in acknowledgment. The most hesitant among them was Anna, and for that he could understand: her Attican Snapper could barely fly, and most certainly couldn't fight in the air. If they were attacked en route, then she'd have no choice but to retreat to the ground if she wanted to contribute at all to their response.

As they were all processing what they had to do and studying the points on the map—the Sacred Golden Empire may not have been able to settle these lands, but they'd certainly done a good job mapping the region out—Valeria asked, "And what will the Imperials be doing?"

Leon sighed and thought about it for a moment. "I don't know," he admitted. "I assume they'll be coming with since I doubt they'd ever let us out of their sight..."

"Let me get this straight, then," Alcander began with a confused look on his face. "We're here looking for some secret research thing your family left here in ancient times, and we're just going to lead the Imperials right to it? Won't they try to take possession of it?"

Leon frowned slightly. It was a problem he'd thought about many times before, but fortunately, he'd been reassured many times by Nestor. "It *is* something operated by my Clan long ago," Leon replied. "However, their mastery of enchantments was far greater than mine. They had ways to secure their property with blood. Even if our escorts were to follow us, and they probably will, that won't mean they'll have access to whatever is being stored there. Assuming anything's left, that is."

"Ehh, I still don't like it," Alcander whispered. "I'd prefer if we tried to ditch them somewhere."

“That’s not going to happen,” Marcus responded. “We’re in their lands. Even if they don’t control the forest completely, they’re not going to just sit back and wait for us to show back up if we were to slip away. They’ve deemed us people worth following, and they’ll follow us no matter where we go. Best to get used to their presence.”

“It is what it is,” Leon said. With a quick glance at the closest window—really just a light enchantment projecting what would’ve been seen on the outside since Leon didn’t want any holes in his fortified portable villa—he saw that it was getting quite late. The sun was about down, and he still had some studying he wanted to see to. “Get some rest,” he commanded his retinue. “We have a long flight ahead of us tomorrow, and probably more in the days after that. And who knows what else we’re going to find out there, so be ready for a fight.”

With that, his short meeting came to an end, and everyone left to spend the night as they would. Leon, for his part, spent some time fulfilling his promise to Sid and practiced his earth magic for a little while, and then finally spent the rest of the night with his lovers.

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“This is a bold choice, I have to say,” Cassandra said as Leon and his retinue assembled, his portable villa safely ensconced within his soul realm once more.

The tree that the Princess had spent the night in was the Sacred Golden Empire’s version of a portable villa. This specific one wasn’t moved, acting as a ready camp for any official Evergolden business within the forest, but Cassandra’s escorts had brought with them a seed for a palace-tree, and some of those with her could their mastery of nature magic to cause it to grow in less than an hour into a tree more than large enough to accommodate the entire escort unit.

Now that they were getting ready to move, Leon had, up until this moment when Cassandra had come up to him and his retainers, been watching the Evergolden camp being packed up. The mages who’d activated this tree were busy essentially mothballing it. It wouldn’t be torn down, but left in the same state that it had been found, looking not much different from the other trees not too far away.

Any other palace-trees they’d build for their camps *would* be destroyed when they left, as far as Leon knew. The tree would be killed by the mages who’d so rapidly grown it, the original seed would be retrieved to be used again, and the dead tree would, with a little magical encouragement, rapidly decompose and feed the local ecosystem.

It was efficient, Leon had to admit. Nothing was left behind for anyone to squat in, and since the tree was grown with magic rather than sunlight and the nutrients in the ground, nothing was taken from the surroundings.

But with the Princess standing before him, Leon couldn’t dwell on such thoughts. “What do you mean ‘bold’? Are we missing something, is there some reason we shouldn’t be flying?”

“Maybe,” Cassandra coyly responded. “Besides, if your intention here was really to go hunting and experience the forest, I’d have figured that you’d rather proceed on foot.”

Valeria was right next to Leon, and her eyes narrowed in displeasure. “You’re being needlessly obtuse, Your Highness,” she said, being firm in her tone, though quiet enough that the Princess’ retainers nearby wouldn’t hear and be offended.

Cassandra glared at Valeria. “I’m being—”

Before the Princess could continue, Valeria interjected a little louder, “Ancestors know that if I were aware of any threats within this forest that might prevent us from flying there, I certainly wouldn’t be keeping that a mystery. I’m sure that everyone else would do the same, don’t you think, Leon?”

Leon chuckled softly as he gave his silver-haired lover a loving look. Then, his eyes turned back toward Cassandra, and he quietly said, “Yes, I think if anyone were to know about any threats, they should probably speak up.”

The Princess stared back at them, looking not at all amused. She then tossed her braided hair around a bit and eventually said, “We’ve encountered various powerful creatures in this forest. Some of them can fly.”

Leon waited a moment for her to elaborate. That moment stretched out an uncomfortably long time, as it seemed obvious to him that she wanted him to ask her for more information, and he refused to do so.

But not everyone’s willpower held out. Elise, perhaps a little nervous about heading further into the forest, asked, “What kind of flying monsters?”

Leon immediately felt terrible—he shouldn’t be putting his pride over getting information that his people would need to survive.

Cassandra replied with a smug smile, “This far out? Strange eagles, as far as I’ve been told. They shouldn’t be too big a deal, though, not with three eighth-tier mages here protecting the group.”

Elise didn’t look all that comforted, and Leon swallowed his pride and asked, “How strong are these eagles?”

“I couldn’t tell you, because I don’t know,” Cassandra dismissively answered. “Anyway, we’ll follow you from here on out, but I’d prefer if you got going soon. We’re burning daylight here.”

Leon thinly smiled and said, “We’ll head out when we’re ready.”

Cassandra raised her eyebrows at him for a moment, then turned and walked back toward her people, who’d finished breaking down their camp.

As Cassandra walked away, Valeria just barely audibly muttered, “Bitch.”

Cassandra’s stride didn’t break, but Leon was fairly sure she heard Valeria’s comment as her head cocked slightly.

Leon glanced at Valeria, who shrugged at him, and Maia said into their heads, [Valeria isn’t wrong, that one infuriates.]

Leon grinned in agreement, and then forced himself to refocus on the task at hand. At the very least, he was going to take Cassandra’s warning about flying creatures down in the forest seriously. Their first

stop wasn't that far, relatively speaking, only about thirty miles into the forest. But that was still a long way into the forest, and given how unwieldy Anna's Attican Snapper was in the air, he wanted everyone to move safely and not exhaust themselves on a longer-than-usual flight.

To that end, he had everyone get into a defensive formation as they took off. Helen, Marcus, and Alix, as his best marksmen, would fly above, protecting the formation from any attacks from the sky as they flew. Talal and Elise, the latter riding Anzu instead of using her flight gear, would be in the center, surrounded by Marcus, Gaius, Alcander, and Anshu. Anna would bring up the rear on her snapper, while Leon and Maia would fly below the formation, between the group and the forest.

With a fairly strong formation, Leon wasn't too concerned that they would be attacked. Besides, in his experience, wild animals rarely attacked humans, especially in large numbers. There were just too many unknowns and dangers for them to try. But he couldn't be sure what wild animals would do in a place where humans didn't live, so caution was for the best.

Once all of that was sorted out, Leon had them set off. Cassandra and the Evergolden escort had already gotten into the air by then and been waiting with varying levels of patience for Leon and his people to get into their formation, and they followed closely behind, not quite riding their ass but not so far away that they couldn't catch up in a matter of seconds if violence were to break out.

Like that, they traveled fairly quickly, making good time. Leon found himself relaxing as he directed his people's movement with his mental communication technique, the great green expanse beneath him filling his mind with thoughts of home, while the wind in his hair and the freedom of flight elevating his mood close to ecstasy.

All of that was why, when Cassandra began shouting behind them, he was quite upset. Not with her, of course, but with the eagles erupting from the green leafy canopy of the dense primeval forest beneath them that she'd noticed.

The eagles were much larger than normal, being not too much smaller than a full grown woman by Leon's estimation. Based on their body shapes and similar-looking light brown feathers, Leon guessed they were all of the same species. Their talons looked sharp, their beaks deadly, and their eyes were completely black—unnerving on its own, but Leon was far more disturbed to realize that they didn't emit any kind of magical aura. But still they rose into the air, killing intent pouring from their bodies, their black eyes locked on his group, mad screeching resounding from their beaks.

An animal was usually blessed with some magical strength as it grew up. Only newborns would be equivalent to a human mortal. For what seemed to be fully grown birds as these to not have even a first-tier aura was greatly confusing, and all the more concerning as dozens and dozens of the birds poured out of the trees.

[Eyes down!] Leon roared into his retinue's minds. To his three lookouts at the top of his formation, he ordered, [You three, keep an eye out!] To everyone else, he directed, [Use bows and arrows if you can! Conserve your magic as much as possible!]

With that, Leon plummeted from the sky, his magic accelerating him quickly to meet the rapidly rising horde of eagles before they could directly attack his people. Lightning blazed through his body, and as he fell, he outstretched his hand and let his lightning flow through him. Silver-blue bolts began

streaming from his fingers and raked across the eagles as they rose. Just behind him, Maia did likewise, conjuring twelve smaller-than-usual water dragons and sending ten of them diving toward the raving, screeching eagles. Behind them, Cassandra had done likewise, diving toward the birds as her followers closed ranks. The Princess drew Sunlight and began sweeping it through the air, projecting her magic through the blade and launching bright beams of light from it.

Leon expecting all of this force to cut clean through the eagles, rending them asunder so completely that they'd die in an instant. And to an extent, he was right; every eagle that his lightning touched fell from the sky, but they weren't burned and blackened, their bodies weren't destroyed. Likewise, Maia's water dragons made short work of their opponents, and Cassandra's light sliced through them like half-melted cheese, but the eagles' remains weren't completely destroyed, as Leon might've expected from creatures without magic power. And the rest of their concerningly massive congregation kept rising without the slightest heed paid to their fallen comrades, their screeching only growing more and more incessant as they drew closer.

More and more eagles emerged from the treetops until hundreds, and then thousands were in the air, filling the sky with their deafening calls, and as they drew close, Leon opened up even more with his magic power. He let loose with an enormous wave of lightning, slaughtering dozens of eagles below and around him, while Maia conjured another, much larger water dragon, and Cassandra conjured hundreds of beads of light that hovered around her for a moment before firing themselves unerringly through many eagles.

The beasts fell from the sky in the hundreds, and yet more kept flying up through the trees, seemingly not at all concerned about the fates of their fellows.

Leon, as he fried dozens more in another lightning strike, was greatly alarmed to notice several hundred more eagles flying around their group, even as the rest of his retinue filled in a few gaps here and there with well-placed arrow fire. It was almost as if the eagles were throwing themselves at their group, killing themselves in great numbers so that a comparative few could fly around them while they were distracted.

But Leon noticed, and he stopped holding anything back. These eagles, while much stronger than he would've thought otherwise, weren't much of a threat on the whole, so he'd been holding some of his power back in reserve. But now, his magic exploded out of him, and in a matter of seconds, a storm cloud formed over their traveling group, covering not only his people, but the Evergolden escort, as well. And from that storm cloud came dozens of lightning bolts, each one striking an eagle and forking out to others nearby.

Hundreds more of the incessantly screeching birds fell from the sky, but at the same time, a few, in their dying moments, flapped their wings and sent deadly wind blades careening towards his group. Leon watched as most of these wind blades did absolutely nothing to his armor-clad retinue, but for one that seemed to snake right through their group and strike Elise in the face.

She cried out in surprise and pain, and Leon saw red. Power erupted from him as a drop of red dripped out from behind Elise's helmet. The deadliest wrath became his world, and he was barely aware of his actions beyond that point. All he knew was the greatest expression of his fury: his magic.

Lightning erupted from his storm cloud, and then, as it dissipated, the lightning in his body was replaced with fire. And then after a few bursts of fire, it was back to lightning. The smell of blood filled the air as the screeching of hundreds and hundreds of eagles was replaced with fiery explosions and booming thunder. The sky itself seemed to almost be set ablaze in Leon's fury.

When he started coming back down from his rage high, the eagles had stopped screeching, though that was because they were all dead. Leon hovered above the ground barely more than five stories up, the land beneath him scorched black and nothing but blackened dirt and husks of trees could be seen for almost a hundred feet. Eagle corpses in numbers beyond counting littered the ground beneath him.

He glanced back up, and seeing that his retainers weren't in danger anymore, relaxed. Only then did he notice that he'd been holding his breath and his muscles were so tense that they'd practically hardened into stone. It took some conscious effort to relax, and as he did, Maia drifted down toward him.

[Leon,] she whispered. [It's over...]

"Yeah," he awkwardly responded aloud.

He glanced back up again, and while he saw some concern in the faces of his family and retainers, it wasn't all that serious. Alix, seeing that he was back in control, even shook with nervous laughter.

The Evergolden escort, on the other hand, stared at him with nothing short of surprise and great wariness. He was most amused to see Cassandra now staring at him with shock and even a little bit of fear.

Leon looked back to Elise. Her helmet was off, showing that any injury she'd sustained by the eagle's attack had been healed. But now her eyes swam with concern for him, and he clamped down hard on any lingering rage. He'd seen her bleed, even if only a drop, and he'd lost himself completely.

He quickly flew back up, Maia at his side, and he shouted to his people, "Everyone alright? Any injuries to report?"

Everyone was silent for a moment, and Gaius responded, "I... think we're good here, boss!"

From behind, Cassandra came barreling over, her eyes wide, her body shaking with... Leon couldn't say. Excitement, anxiety, dread, she seemed to feel all and yet none at the same time. "What in the Ashen Fields was *that*?!" she shouted, sounding much the same as she did following their first attack on the black wyvern months ago. "That black fire looked like you called it from the Ashen Fields themselves! How did you *do* that?!"

Chapter 733: The Silent Forest

Leon, needing a moment to calm himself down, landed in the center of the blackened crater he'd, in his rage, made. The rest of his retinue descended from the sky and landed around him, and Leon, ignoring Cassandra's questioning, went straight to Elise.

The sight of a wind blade making it past her armor to cut her face had enraged him, triggering the outburst. It had been a blur at the time, but as Leon turned it over in his head, more came back to him. However, right now, none of that mattered. He went to his wife, and she, with an embarrassed smile, lifted her helmet again to show him that she was fine.

Leon forced himself to relax. Even his retinue's insistence that they were fine only a moment ago had done little to assuage his boiling wrath. But this, at least, turned it back down to a simmer.

"Leon!" Cassandra shouted as she landed beside his group. "What *was* that?! Answer me!"

In his anger, when Leon turned, he didn't see the attractive blond, red-eyed woman that he'd allowed to creep into his thoughts here and there. Instead, he saw the spoiled rich girl that she was, a Princess demanding an explanation from someone she considered beneath her.

And it almost set his simmering wrath to boiling again.

In a flash, Leon appeared before her, his killing intent towering, his anger great. Cassandra was stunned for a moment, and with the rest of the escort still in the air, she was effectively alone before an eighth-tier lightning mage.

Leon wasn't going to actually attack her, but for just a moment, he let it seem like he might. Cassandra's ruby eyes widened in fear and she took a step back.

"You knew about the threats in this forest," Leon growled.

"I..." Cassandra sputtered as her aura flared to life, fighting off Leon's own intense killing intent, and she began to straighten up, her fear turning to righteous indignation. "I *told* you about this!"

Leon wanted to respond. There were, in fact, few things that he wanted to do more than waste even more time arguing with the Princess. But his wrath, after this momentary spike, was now cooling again, and when Elise's hand snaked into his, it vanished almost entirely.

"I'm fine," his fire-haired wife whispered.

Leon sighed, and with his exhalation, the last of his anger left him.

The same, however, couldn't be said for Cassandra, who glared at Leon as the rest of the Evergolden contingent landed around them and surrounded Leon's retinue.

"Back away from the Princess!" the lead Evergolden warrior shouted, a gargantuan halberd brandished in her hand, her armor gleaming in the sun and practically glowing with magic power.

Leon spared the seventh-tier mage a dismissive look, then calmly walked back to his retinue, Elise at his side. He gave Cassandra and the Evergolden escort only enough attention to know that they weren't going to attack, with Cassandra even waving them off as several more of the escorts rushed forward to stand at her side.

Leon's retinue, standing in the blackened clearing that Leon had just carved into the Protia Forest with his black fire, looked more than a little relieved as tensions abated.

"Hey there, boss," Alix whispered as Leon rejoined them. "You're not... going to get us into a fight with these people, are you?"

Leon bitterly smiled and replied, "Not today, I think."

Alix chuckled awkwardly, and Helen said, "Not *ever*, I hope."

Leon took a deep breath and responded, "That's for the future to decide. Not today is all I can promise."

"You inspire such confidence," Helen quipped, and crouched down next to a small pile of eagle corpses she and Anna had collected in the previous couple of minutes. They'd all been charred black, but if those two thought there was use in studying them, Leon wasn't going to argue.

Instead, he glanced back at the Evergolden escort, closed his eyes, and took a few slow, deep breaths.

Then he opened his eyes and walked back.

"I apologize for my shortness," Leon said to the Princess, who had been distracted from glaring at him by speaking with two of her seventh-tier followers.

Cassandra gave him a long, hard look, then waved her hand and said, "It's fine. Being ambushed doesn't put people in the best of moods, does it?"

"It doesn't," Leon replied with a bitter smile.

"You sound like you're speaking from experience."

"I am."

"Sounds like there're some stories you could tell me. However, the only story I want to hear about right now is what happened to you. You looked like you went insane."

Leon took another deep breath and glanced back at his retainers. They'd mostly closed ranks despite the Evergolden escort backing off and regrouping, while Anna poked and prodded at the charred eagle corpses with some big tweezers and a knife as Helen held it still. Still, he could tell they were paying attention, as were most of those at Cassandra's back.

To answer the Princess, Leon just said, "I saw my wife superficially wounded and kind of lost it, I guess."

Cassandra grinned as she crossed her arms over her chest. "That's quite the understatement, Leon Raime. How about you tell me about that black fire? I saw it during our fight with that black wyvern, but honestly, I thought I was seeing things. But this was unmistakable, you used *black* fire! I've never seen such a thing, and I've seen ninth-tier mages creating all kinds of fire! I've even seen some fire mages with special bloodlines, and they've never had *black* fire!"

With a shrug, Leon replied, "A man needs his secrets, doesn't he?"

"Given the threats we face, I think being honest about our capabilities is in everyone's interest, isn't it?"

"Is that necessary, though? This wasn't that damaging of an ambush."

"That doesn't mean that other ambushes won't be more damaging..."

"Other ambushes won't be more damaging if you're more upfront about the threats we face."

"I *was* upfront about these birds!"

Leon scowled slightly. "You did, though you understated the threat; there were *thousands* of those things here, and some nearly got through our defenses." Cassandra's expression began turning livid, but before she could make the vociferous arguments that Leon could see raging about in her head, he

hurriedly continued, "I don't blame you for that, really. I'm fully on board with the idea that you didn't know this would've been as chaotic as it was. I just think... that we should all probably take the potential threats of this forest a little more seriously. Can we at least agree on that?"

Cassandra still looked rather upset, but she reluctantly nodded.

Leon breathed a sigh of relief. "All right. Fantastic. How about we take an hour to rest, then, and pool our knowledge?"

The Evergolden Princess made a show out of thinking it over, even leaning back to whisper with one of her seventh-tier escorts before finally agreeing.

So, for the next hour, everyone was allowed to rest up a bit as Leon, Cassandra, and their top lieutenants got together and did what they'd been too arrogant to do before now: actually discuss, in detail, what threats they might face further in.

When that conversation was over, Leon revised their route. There were, as far as those in the Evergolden escort were aware, several 'hotspots', of sorts, within the Prota Forest. They'd never been able to settle the forest, but mapping it out had never been difficult. And those scouts, rangers, and cartographers that had created those maps also kept track of where they'd been attacked by the local fauna. As a result, Leon learned that three of his points with high concentrations of above or near-ground stone were within these high-danger areas.

He immediately decided that they needed to visit these three places first. In his mind, the Thunderbird research facility would be more than likely defended, whether intentionally or not, by the more dangerous creatures of the forest. Unfortunately, when he cast his magic senses out over the forest, he was again unable to sense any threats. Just like with the horde of eagles, there were no powerful auras to focus on, no great disturbances in the natural flow of magic in the forest that would indicate the presence of a powerful being or enchantment.

For all intents and purposes, it seemed like the forest was the very picture of peaceful and, to Leon's sensibilities, inviting.

Still, in the interest of safety, they all collectively decided to proceed on foot. They were all high enough tier mages that even the rough forest ground was no obstacle, and neither were the dozens of miles they had to cross. However, as they got moving, Cassandra decided to mix things up a bit, and asked Leon if they could walk together at the front of their marching column.

Leon, not seeing any reason to refuse, agreed.

"So," Cassandra said as they got moving, "when are you planning on telling me what you're looking for?"

Her tone was light and playful, and Leon seriously considered playing along for a little longer. However, after the past day, he didn't want to nearly as strongly as he had during the past couple of weeks.

So, he simply said, "When I feel like it, I suppose. Are you going to insist that I tell you what I may or may not be looking for?"

"I'm getting closer to insisting," Cassandra admitted. "On the other hand, I've always loved surprises."

"Did you love that ambush?"

“Ambushes don’t count—they’re *ambushes*. I’m talking about fun surprises, not something that might pose a real, tangible threat to the safety and well-being of me and my people. Will this pose such a threat?”

All playfulness in her tone vanished as she asked her last question, and as Leon easily picked his way around the roots of a massive, thick-trunked tree, he honestly replied, “I can’t say. I’ve never been here before, so I don’t know what to expect.”

“Hmm,” Cassandra hummed in thought as a smile of anticipation spread across her face. “This is starting to sound like a real adventure!”

With that, neither of them spoke for a while longer. Things became so quiet, in fact, with nothing but the sounds of exertion coming from their group as they quickly moved through the dense forest to distract them, that Leon almost began to feel bored. As much like his home as this place felt like, it simply wasn’t the Forest of Black and White.

After a while, this silence began to press in on Leon’s eardrums, constricting around him so slowly that he didn’t notice until it became nearly overwhelming.

The forest was silent.

Realizing this, Leon held up his hand and called out, “Hang on for a moment, everyone!”

It took a moment, but everyone came to a halt. There were a few grumblings from behind him, but without the sound of several dozen people trudging through the forest, Leon was able to concentrate a little better on what he was now becoming aware of.

“What is it?” Cassandra asked after Leon stared out into the forest for several seconds.

Leon could feel her aura starting to grow a little more intense, along with the auras of those further back. They were preparing for a fight, but that wasn’t why he called them to a stop.

“It’s damned quiet,” Leon observed. “No insects, no birds. Barely any wind.”

Cassandra, now cued in on what Leon was referring to, looked slightly confused as she cast her gaze around.

Leon continued, “You told me of giants and other creatures in this forest. Disappearances and the like. Where are they? Where are... *anything?*”

It was a heavy silence that filled the forest. The air was sweet with the smell of flowers, but Leon couldn’t hear the buzzing of even a single bee. He couldn’t hear a single bird call, nor distant roar of hunting predator, nor cry of pain and warning from hunted prey. Aside from the sounds of the people behind him and the wind blowing through the trees, the forest was suddenly dead silent. And at Leon’s tier, he could’ve heard the heartbeat of a pigeon two hundred feet away. The sheer lack of typical forest sounds that he would’ve expected was one of the more unsettling things he’d ever experienced.

“Oh, wow,” Marcus whispered from a dozen steps behind Leon, “that’s really creepy now that you mention it.”

"Maybe..." Alcander suggested, "... maybe everything went to ground after Leon annihilated a large section of the forest? If I lived here and sensed something of that magnitude, I think I would've gotten right the fuck out of here, too."

"This is different," Anna said from the back of her Attican Snapper, her expression grave. "Most creatures that sensed Leon's attack would've gone to ground, for sure, but others would've run. They'd likely still be running, and doing so none too silently. Even then, those that didn't run away would still be detectable. Others, those who're less intelligent, would've seen Leon's power as a challenge and might've attacked us. This is just... this isn't right."

Leon suddenly heard the snapping of a twig not too far away, and he projected his darkness magic, silently commanding everyone to quiet down. His retinue immediately complied, and armed themselves to boot as Leon turned toward the noise he'd heard and brandished his sword. Elise and Talal, meanwhile, huddled down in the center of their group, the armor Leon had made glowing with power as they both activated their shields of light.

In response, the Evergolden escort assumed a similarly defensive posture, with Cassandra in particular calling upon Sunlight's power to coat it in burning white light.

But then, just as everyone's tension was ratcheting up, a young wolf cub came stumbling out of the forest in their path. Only, even though it was a cub, it still reached Leon's thigh, and had fur the color of the greenest grass.

The cub ambled about a bit, utterly oblivious to their presence despite the fact that none of them were hiding. But all eyes were turned in its direction.

"Aww," Alix cooed. "Look at this little guy!"

Leon sensed her taking a step forward, and he held out his hand, stopping her immediately. "Stay vigilant!" he shouted. "Watch all around us!"

He knew it might've seemed a little like overkill given the fact that it was just one overly large wolf cub, and none of them could sense any of its fellows around, but Leon was finding some comfort in being paranoid. He hadn't been able to sense the eagles, either, and they'd ambushed his flying convoy in enormous numbers. He wasn't going to chance letting down their guard only to be hit with another ambush.

His caution turned out to be vindicated not even ten seconds later. He'd not even taken two steps toward the wolf cub before all the hells seemed to break loose. A wolf howl sounded in the distance, and then wolves seemed to spring out of nowhere at them. They appeared from behind trees, from within bushes, even in a few cases, from the tree branches. Dozens of huge, grass-green wolves, each one more than triple the size of a more mundane wolf, attacked them all at once, biting, gnashing, mauling, and howling. The silence of the Protia Forest was immediately shattered.

The howls didn't last long. Two of Cassandra's escort fell, but everyone else was ready, armed, and heavily armored. The howls were quickly drowned out by blasts of magic. Explosions of fire, booming thunder, the titanic grinding of stone, gale-force wind blades, and a roaring water dragon resounded through seemingly half the forest, and the wolves were almost immediately enveloped in deadly magic.

And then they burst through that veritable wall of magic power, bloodied, but not dead. Chaos reigned for several seconds as the beasts crashed into the traveling group, but another round of magic brought forth the terrible yelps of injured wolves.

Leon himself moved like water around stone, weaving in and around the wolves as they charged, slashing with his family's sword and letting loose with the Thunderbird's lightning. In but a moment, three wolves died to his power and blade, and then two more a heartbeat later.

The wolves weren't particularly strong, but they kept coming, dozens upon dozens. If Leon had to guess, they would've been around fourth, or even as weak as the third-tier. He, and the other high-tiered mages in the party, went through the wolves like a scalpel through wet paper.

But, after about half a minute of intense fighting, the wolves suddenly stopped. The last one fell dead at Alcander's feet, his massive ax buried in its head. More than a hundred wolf corpses had fallen around them, and would've formed a wall of corpses had much of the forest not been completely obliterated around them, the destruction wrought by their magic turning plants and trees into little more than piles of ash and dust on the ground for more than a hundred feet around them.

All except for one tree, blackened and stripped of bark and leaf, still standing just beside their group. Leon barely had the time to register how strange this was before the limbs cracked and bent, seized another of Cassandra's escorts and Anshu in its limbs and lifted them into the air in the blink of an eye.

Anshu screamed in surprise, and then in pain, the Evergolden escort doing likewise. Others might've hesitated, and for the briefest of moments, the rest of the Evergolden escort did. Leon's people, however, were a little more experienced, and moved immediately, the escort just behind him.

Alcander roared in anger at his comrade being attacked, and with a mighty swing of his ax, one of the branches holding Anshu up was severed. From the stump, a slight burst of dark green pollen erupted, filling the air with the smell of sweetness. The rest of Leon's retinue rained blows upon the tree, and with each severance of a limb, another puff of pollen came.

Finally, Leon himself blazed past everyone and hit the tree trunk with the most intense fire he could conjure in the moment. Orange flames licked across the trunk, and in a moment, rendered it ash. Within the flames, Leon saw for less than a second a humanoid figure, and one that he'd known would be there from the moment that the tree started moving. It was short, with proportions somewhere between a child and an adult, though closer to the former than the latter. Its head was a little overly large, and if it hadn't been obscured by his fire, Leon knew he would've seen huge, almond-shaped eyes that were as black as night, and skin like brown bark.

A tree sprite.

It was incinerated within Leon's fire, and behind him, Anshu and the snatched escort both fell to the ground, and the forest fell silent again, only disturbed by the movements of those among their party, and the groans of pain from Anshu and the three fallen Evergolden warriors.

Chapter 734: An Adventure

Leon rushed forward as Anshu groaned on the ground. The three members of Cassandra's escort were not too far away, and as far as Leon could tell, they were alive, but severely injured.

However, their physical injuries wasn't what Leon was most concerned with.

"Helen!" he shouted as he slid to the ground next to Anshu. Helen shouted a reply, but Leon barely heard her as he activated his tau pearl. Healing magic flowed through the enchantments in his armor, down through his gauntlet, and into Anshu. The Indradian immediately relaxed, his unconscious groaning coming to a swift end.

There wasn't much blood on Anshu, so Leon had some hope, but when he took the man's helmet off, he found a very discouraging sign. It was hard to tell given the fact that Anshu was naturally very dark skinned, but Leon saw that there was already some discoloration around the man's eyes.

Leon's heart sank. Tree sprites were dangerous creatures, even to beings far more powerful than they were. Their trees could inflict great blunt force trauma, but their poison was far deadlier. The monster's natural neurotoxin would essentially melt their victims' brain, and the helpless victim would usually be awake and aware of it happening, and experience indescribable pain throughout the day-long process. Leon had only ever seen one man poisoned by a tree sprite—a man-at-arms that went north with Roland before Artorias was killed—and he was determined to have a different outcome this time.

The tau pearl healed Anshu's wounds, but Leon didn't think that was the end of it. He kept the tau pearl's healing energies flowing, just in case.

"What is it?" Helen asked as she slid in beside Leon, while Cassandra's people began tending to their fallen comrades.

"Tree sprite venom," Leon explained.

Helen didn't need anything more, and in a moment, conjured a vial about half the size of her index finger. "Hold him still," she commanded Leon, and he followed her instructions immediately. He was in charge, but she was the specialist here.

With great care, Helen turned Anshu's head, and Leon held the man's head in place when she was done. She then took out a small knife and made a quick incision along Anshu's neck. Blood immediately began to spurt out, but Helen pulled out what looked like an incredibly narrow enchanted funnel and stuck it into Anshu's neck. The blood flow was stopped, and Helen poured the contents of her vial into the funnel, which flared with magic power for a moment as the antitoxin was injected directly into Anshu's neck. From there, Leon knew that Anshu's natural blood flow had likely already carried the antitoxin directly to his brain.

"That's all I can do," Helen said nervously as she took the funnel out of Anshu's neck.

Leon scowled, but he wasn't angry. If that was what she could do, then that was all she could do. He simply doubled down on using his tau pearl, then glanced at the other three who'd been downed by the tree sprite.

"See to them," Leon ordered, noticing that the rest of the Imperial escort didn't seem to be administering any antitoxin, themselves.

Helen nodded and got to work, while Leon turned his gaze back to Anshu. He thought he might've been imagining it, but he thought the discoloration around Anshu's eyes was already lessening. Regardless,

he'd fixed what he could fix with the tau pearl, and with some reluctance, he stopped and straightened up.

"Is he alright?" Valeria inquired as she joined Leon at Anshu's side. She didn't appear too upset, and for that, Leon couldn't blame her. Anshu had done his best to keep his distance from the rest of the retinue, and for the most part, it seemed that he'd succeeded.

"I think he'll live," Leon replied. "Nothing else we can do, now."

Turning back to the rest of his retinue, he noticed that they'd largely set up something of a perimeter around the small clearing that the battle with the wolves and the tree sprite had made. Alcander and Marcus had stacked most of the wolf corpses while Maia, Gaius and Alix were keeping an eye out for anything else coming out of the forest to threaten them. Elise and Talal were standing by Anzu looking quite out of place as they stared at all the blood and death. Most notably, however, was Anna, who had dismounted her snapper and crouched down to examine one of the more intact wolves that they'd brought down. She had its head in her hands, and she was quietly working on sawing open its skull with a knife and her light magic.

The rest of the Imperial escort that wasn't tending to their fallen comrades were, like Maia, Gaius, and Alix, keeping watch, their weapons and magic at the ready just in case something else decided to jump out at them.

Leon made his way over to Elise and Talal, with Valeria at his side.

"Leon," Talal said in stoic greeting, though the Samarid looked a little green around the gills.

Elise didn't say anything, but she gave Leon a fairly glowing smile.

"You two all right?" Leon asked.

Talal nodded, and Elise responded by reaching back and running her fingers through Anzu's fur. "With Anzu here," she said, "I'm always alright!"

Anzu happily chirped and flexed his wings, and a few errant wisps of wind magic caused his feathers to flutter. Like a cat, he then rubbed his head on Elise, drawing out a quick laugh as Elise was almost knocked over, but she moved from stroking his back to his head.

She seemed to be doing fine, but before Leon could confirm that, Anna called out, "Hey, Leon! I think I found something!"

A moment later, Leon was at his retainer's side, staring down at the exposed brain of one of the dead wolves. Immediately, he could see some of what Anna was concerned about, for the brain was covered in what looked like green mold and stank like the worst, most rotten hell.

"What in the hells is that?" Valeria exclaimed as she took a few steps back.

Leon was a little more composed, but he still laid a hand on Anna's shoulder and gently pulled her away from the dead wolf.

"It's fine," Anna said as she shook off Leon's shoulder. "Whatever this is, it seems inert, so I don't think it's contagious."

“Better safe than infected with some mystery brain rot,” Leon responded. “Do you know what this is?”

“No,” Anna admitted. “But it’s starting to be familiar.”

“How so?”

“When I poked around in the remains of those eagles you brought down, I found similar signs of some kind of brain infection. I wasn’t sure back then, though, because you didn’t exactly leave many of those birds intact.”

Leon frowned awkwardly, but he didn’t apologize.

“Anyway, I think there’s something *really* wrong with this forest,” Anna continued as she stood up. “I’m not saying we should turn around quite yet, but this is... concerning.”

Leon nodded in agreement. “Yeah. This place is *strange*. I couldn’t sense any auras on this creatures during the attack. It was like they weren’t magical beings, yet they fought as if they possessed fifth-tier-ish power.”

“So it wasn’t just me, then?” Valeria said with some relief.

“Same here,” the sixth-tier Anna confirmed with a grave look in her eyes.

“Mystery brain infection, aura-less monsters...” Leon mumbled. He glanced around and, noting that the clearing was big enough to set up camp, decided that they should stop here for the rest of the day and put more thought into how they should proceed.

His decision made, Leon announced it, and met with little push back.

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Two hours after sunset, the camp was built, with Leon’s fortified villa forming something like a stone wall around the small palace-tree that Cassandra and her people set up. Leon didn’t like doing it, but for the sake of defense, he was able to tolerate it. It helped that another wall made of stone had been set up around his villa by one of Cassandra’s earth mages, so if they were attacked in the night, his villa wouldn’t be on the frontlines.

Just outside of the camp was a large burn pit, also constructed by one of the Evergolden earth mages. Within it were the corpses of all of the wolves that had attacked them only a few hours before. All of them burned in white fire, Leon having made the decision not to try and save any of their corpses for material processing. He wasn’t going to take that chance after seeing a wolf with its brain covered in green mold. It might be a natural, harmless thing, but he wasn’t going to take any chances that it was some mysterious contagion.

Especially not with the knowledge that his Clan ran a research facility in these parts many years ago.

To the end of finding answers, after setting up the villa, Leon filled Nestor and Xaphan in on what had happened, though he was certain that both already knew most of it since they’d been paying attention to the battle.

[Sounds like this entire forest needs to be burned to ash,] Xaphan calmly stated. [Just let me out, Leon, I'll see to it. This place will be little more than ash and charcoal by the time I'm done!]

[Hold your horses, candlestick,] Nestor caustically replied. [If burning this entire forest down were possible, don't you think it would've been done by now?]

Though he hated to admit it, Leon agreed with Nestor. [This place is *very* wet,] he observed as he took a deep, humid breath. [There's quite a bit of magic down here, and from I can tell, it has a much higher concentration of water magic in the air than just about anywhere else I've been, save for the Wetlands. And that's not even touching on the sheer size of this forest. Burning it down isn't practical.]

[In demonfire, everything burns,] Xaphan countered, though not with that much conviction. He believed what he said, but Leon could tell that his demonic partner was simply resigned to not resorting to the most destructive method.

[Maybe next time,] Leon replied.

[Best not to make promises,] Xaphan said. [You don't want to disappoint any more than you have to.]

[Xaphan, have I ever let you down?]

[Do you really want me to answer that?]

[No. Anyway, do either of you know what in the hells we saw today?]

Nestor answered first. [Hiding magical strength is an unusual, though not unprecedented defensive mechanism in the universe. That said, I've never seen it manifest that widely in multiple creatures in the same biome. First those birds, now the wolves...]

[This isn't why the research facility was set up, was it?] Leon asked.

[No,] Nestor replied. [I would've been informed of such a thing. This forest was memorable back then, but this would've been of much greater importance.]

[Why? Hiding auras isn't that difficult a thing to do...]

[Spoken like a true provincial,] Nestor scoffed.

[Indeed, Leon,] Xaphan said, [hiding an aura for a sapient being isn't that difficult. But doing so *perfectly* is another matter entirely. There's always just a little bit that gets out. That's why when a non-sapient being showcases the ability to hide their aura, it's always of some significance. There's potential for study there, among other things...]

[What other things?]

Nestor answered, [Luxury pets. Weapons. Depending on the method of aura containment, possibly alchemical material.]

[I've fulfilled many contracts to procure such creatures,] Xaphan admitted.

Leon almost snorted in incredulity. [Really? People would waste your time with things like that?]

[People have wasted their time with a great many things,] Xaphan replied. [People reach out to demons to fulfill their desires, no matter what those desires are. And in my many millennia, I have interacted with a great many people, and fulfilled just about every desire they might've made of me.]

Leon almost jumped on that statement, but he let it pass without comment. Nestor, however, wasn't so restrained.

[So you're saying, demon, that you're a whore? You've fulfilled *every* desire, haven't you?]

[*Just about,*] Xaphan sniped.

As the two started to bicker, Leon sensed Cassandra approach, and to his surprise, she was accompanied by Valeria. The two women didn't look to happy to be in the other's presence, but they came to him with a look of purpose that seemed to outweigh their personal feelings. He turned to face them and greeted each other a quick nod of the head.

"I hope we're not interrupting anything, Leon," Cassandra said with a smirk that seemed to cry out that she wouldn't care if she *were* interrupting, which she kind of was.

Leon tuned out his arguing soul realm guests and asked, "What's going on? I thought we weren't going to meet for another hour or so."

"I got restless," Cassandra explained. "So I went and grabbed Valeria and decided to start this meeting early."

Leon looked at Valeria, who shrugged in ignorance of why the Princess had decided she had to be here, too.

Picking up on their wordless exchange, Cassandra said, "I figured we could all spar when this was over. Our current record cannot stand!"

"Ah," Leon simply replied, and Cassandra gave him an exasperated look—he presumed for his plain unenthusiasm. Changing topics before she could start complaining, Leon asked, "How are your people doing?"

Cassandra took a deep breath, and for a moment, Leon thought she wasn't going to let the previous topic go. However, she proved him wrong when she said with a very complimentary tone, "Your alchemist is good; my people are going to be fine. The tree sprite's toxin didn't get the time it needed to do any real damage, and our healers were able to take over after the toxin was neutralized."

"That's good to hear," Leon said. "We had tree sprites where I grew up, and I saw one man die after getting attacked by one. He had to be put down by his superior because we didn't have the ability to heal him, and we didn't want to see him suffer."

When he stopped talking, both Valeria and Cassandra remained silent. Valeria, he knew, was simply waiting for Cassandra to get to the point of her starting this conversation, while Cassandra looked awkward enough that she didn't quite know how to proceed from what Leon had just said.

So, Leon proceeded on his own. He quickly informed them of the results of Anna's study of the wolf remains.

“... and while it’s not a conclusive set of tests, it does indicate some kind of pattern. Does this sound familiar?”

When Leon finished, Cassandra took a long moment to think. “... No,” she eventually said. “On rare occasions, some bold hunters will bring something back from the Prota Forest, but whatever material they bring back, whatever carcass they might get their hands on, isn’t ever something worth noting for anything besides the sheer novelty. No strange mold covering a monster’s brain, and certainly nothing to do with this aura-less trait that we’ve been seeing.”

“A disturbing pattern...” Valeria muttered as she stared out into the dark forest.

Cassandra pursed her lip slightly, but after a moment’s hesitation, said, “It is. I’ve never seen such powerful creatures able to hold in their auras so well. It’s honestly rather disturbing. How are we going to see hidden enemies if they have no auras?”

“That’s a problem we’re guaranteed to run into,” Leon stated without a shadow of a doubt. “These hordes of wild animals have acted not at all like wild animals that I know. Wild animals are fierce, but not suicidal; they shouldn’t have thrown themselves at us like they did. They must be... Well, I can’t say anything for certain, but it seems entirely likely that something has been sending them at us for their own ends. What, I can’t say. But it’s disturbing, and I’d like to find out what’s going on.”

“As would I,” Cassandra said.

Leon nodded in gratitude for the support, then asked, “Then should I assume that any suggestions to retreat will be...?”

“Ignored,” Cassandra easily finished.

Leon nodded, though he wasn’t quite sure how to think. He supposed if he wanted to keep the research facility strictly secret, then taking this opportunity to fall back would’ve been perfect. However, he was already planning on plundering the research facility for everything that it was worth, so he didn’t much mind showing it off to Cassandra, especially since she already knew that he was of the Thunderbird Clan.

Additionally, given the nature of the research facility—it was here to study local flora and fauna, which had intrigued the researchers from the *Nexus*—he had a sneaking suspicion that the strange behavior of these animals had something to do with the facility. Finding it would undoubtedly reveal the secret of whatever was going on here, even if the real secret was that he was just jumping to conclusions with nothing more than the barest hints of evidence.

“So, then,” Cassandra said, pulling Leon out of his thoughts, “these locations you’re leading us to, they’re not going to just be ‘good spots for hunting’, as you claimed they’d be, will they?”

Leon still didn’t want to be completely open with the Princess, but after getting mad at her for her own obstinance in telling him about the forest’s dangers, he debated with himself how hypocritical it would be to continue refusing to tell her the truth. He glanced at Valeria, and she gave him a quick, resigned shrug.

He could interpret that well enough: she thought that the Princess was probably going to find this out sooner rather than later, and there wasn’t much point in keeping it as a great secret.

“We might find some stuff there,” Leon vaguely said. “I can’t say with any certainty what we might find, if we’ll find anything at all, but there *might* be *something* there. Something related to my Clan.”

Cassandra’s ruby eyes shone like red stars, excitement pouring out of her very being. “So,” she said, barely able to restrain herself, “this really *is* an adventure, isn’t it?”

Leon sighed, then softly chuckled to himself. “I guess it is. I guess it is.”

Chapter 735: The First Site

It was the day after they entered the Prota Forest, and the decision had been made to continue. As they expected, though, the second day proceeded about as eventfully as the first, with their party being attacked three times as they trudged through the forest. There didn’t seem to be any kind of rhyme or reason to the attacks, but they were growing steadily stronger.

The first was easily repelled. Another pack of wolves had stalked them through the forest and attacked while their back was turned. Fortunately, this time there weren’t any tree sprites to support the ambush, and with Anshu and the others who’d been injured the day before fully healed, the wolves were no match.

The second was a little rougher, with a huge boar recklessly charging their position as they passed through a small valley, crushing the earthen obstacles that the Evergolden mages erected in its way. It didn’t stop until Alcander rushed forward and wrestled the boar to a standstill, getting a rough gouging in doing so when the boar’s tusks scraped against his forearm. Gaius ducked in and sliced the boar’s belly open, while Marcus shot it in the eye, so the boar went down and Alcander was quickly healed.

Finally, a solitary panther struck, and true to its nature as an ambush predator, it had managed to savage one of the Evergolden escorts before Leon put it down.

Worryingly, all of these attacks came with absolutely no warning. The beasts didn’t emit even a single solitary aetos of magic power, and the forest itself seemed to be working to hide their movements. They made no sound until the moment they attack Leon’s party, and even with all of his ranging experience, Leon could find no tracks of any kind along their path. Not for rabbits, not for squirrels, not for anything. The forest remained just as silent and still as it had been the day before, with the attacks being the only exception.

It was disturbing, but not so much that anyone argued for them to turn back. So far, their power had seen them through these obstacles easily enough, and that didn’t seem about to change.

However, there were a few quiet whisperings that they should call for backup, or at least let Evergold know what was going on. Even though all of their sustained injuries had been relatively minor and easily fixed with healing magic, that wasn’t necessarily going to always be the case, and Leon had been able to see that some discontent was growing within the Evergolden escort. They were too disciplined to bitch openly, but he could see it in their demeanor and hear it in their quiet whispers when they thought their superiors weren’t listening.

Cassandra had flatly turned down all requests to send for reinforcements, the idea that this was going to be a great adventure appealing to her vanity too much to ask for aid. However, her two seventh-tier

escorts were able to convince her to at least make use of a comm stone to send back reports to Evergold.

Adding onto those reports came the results of Anna's continued examinations. She'd cut open more wolf corpses, the boar, and the panther, and found that all of their brains were covered in the same strange green moss as those beasts from the day before. Leon and Cassandra had each ordered their people to ensure that their physical defenses were always up, and to flood their bodies with their magic on a regular basis to ensure that nothing was taking root within their own heads.

Still, they proceeded with great caution, and as a result, they didn't make much progress during that second day. They reached the first of Leon's three discovered points, and all they found was an enormous stone hill, mostly covered by dirt and local flora.

The hill was unworked, having clearly never seen the business end of a chisel or an earth mage, but as they drew nearer to inspect it a little more closely, a huge chunk of it began to move. The ground shook, the hill vibrated with greater and greater intensity, and then it suddenly fell still as Leon and Cassandra ordered their people to fall back into the forest.

But its stillness lasted only a moment, and this chunk of stone suddenly exploded out of the rocky side of the hill, held aloft by thick green vines covered in hundreds of flowers with bright blue petals surrounding dull gold discs. These vines coiled and twisted around the boulder, and the disc in the center of each flower opened, revealing the discs to be eyes. They weren't human eyes, being completely round and colored like polished amber, but they flitted about with incredible speed, and as they all started locking upon Leon's party, three more vines, each covered in flower-eyes of their own, burst out of the earth around the hill.

The first of these monsters was the largest and slowest of the group. The boulder its vines were wrapped around was easily twice the size of a carriage, and the central trunk of these vines was so large that three full-grown men would struggle to encircle it with their hands. The other vines were considerably smaller, enough that Leon was sure he could've wrapped his arms around them and grasped his own wrists.

As with everyone else in this forest, none of the vines emitted any magical aura, but they made their hostility clear when a wave of killing intent hit Leon and floored several of the weaker members of the party, including Gaius, Helen, and Alix. The big vine flexed, and then the earth at their feet split open and more reasonably sized vines sprang out trying to wrap themselves around the incapacitated members of the party.

Without hesitation, Leon responded with a wave of fire, turning most of these vines to ash in less than a second, freeing those who'd been grabbed.

"Kill them all!" Cassandra shouted, and opened up with her light magic.

An intense fusillade of magic was unleashed, and in a moment, the small vines were squealing like stuck pigs, and their amber flower-eyes were spinning in their sockets.

Leon kept up his pressure using fire. With every wave of his hand, another wave of deadly fire swept forth, consuming the vines attacking them.

But the big vine wasn't going to take that lying down, and it flexed again, the fires that washed over it seemingly giving it no pause. The vine's amber eyes then rolled about within their flowers, and a moment later, flashed with orange light. Intense beams of light lanced outwards from every eye, slicing one of the two dozen Evergolden escorts in half at the waist, killing her immediately. Three more of the escorts had limbs severed, and four more were injured.

Leon was enraged when he saw that his retinue didn't escape the attack unharmed. Alcander took a beam in the belly, and while it didn't slice through his armor, he was still hurled to the ground and didn't move again. Marcus was blasted back, and like Alcander, went still.

Losing patience, Leon surged forward, his aura blazing with heat. All of the vine's amber eyes swiveled in his direction and glowed again, preparing another shot, and Leon pulled his anti-light magic gem into his gauntlet. With a pulse of magic power through this gem, the light in the vine's eyes faded, and it reeled back as if physically struck.

Leon closed the distance, but just as he came within good range to use his fire without putting the rest of the party in danger, the vine slammed back down, using the boulder it had entangled like an enormous club. Leon had to throw himself to the side to avoid being hit, and when he hit the ground, more vines came tearing out of the ground all around him.

Without hesitation, Leon let his fire magic pour off his body from every angle. He seemed to explode into orange flame, which then twisted around him into a fiery tornado within which the new vines disintegrated.

The big vine twisted away from this conflagration, but when its eyes turned toward the black figure within the fire and began to glow again, the light within their eyes vanished with another pulse of magic power. Leon then came hurtling out of his fiery twister, his family's sword blazing with fire, and swung toward the vine, sending a huge wave of fire crashing down upon it.

A truly unnatural shriek came out of the vine, and as it burned, it twisted at Leon again, trying to crush him beneath its boulder before it died. However, before it could bring its improvised club back around, a water dragon crashed in and sank its watery jaws around the vine's base, snapping and tearing at the strange creature. Almost simultaneously, Cassandra appeared in a flash of light, Sunlight alight with deadly power, and she cleaved right through the vine with seeming ease, cutting what was above ground in half.

The vine shrieked again, and its top half writhed on the ground as it burned in Leon's fire. Maia's water dragon, meanwhile, didn't give up, kept its jaws locked around the vine just where it burst from the ground, and ripped with great might. The shrieking grew louder as the water dragon pulled the vine out from where it had taken root beneath the stony hill, and Leon heard the snapping of countless roots as the vine succumbed to the water dragon's strength.

But he was incredibly unnerved as an enormous bulbous orb was torn from the ground, countless snapped roots coming out from its bottom half, while a dozen cut vines thrashed about helplessly in the air. Most distressing was what could only be described as a face on one side of the massive bulb, with a pair of large amber eyes half the size of Leon's entire body whirling about in their sockets, and a huge, gaping mouth that lacked teeth, open wide and screaming in agony.

Now that it was out of the ground, the screaming was almost painful, hitting Leon's eardrums like needles. He called upon his power, intending to silence this monster forever, but then, seemingly of its own accord, its mouth snapped shut. Its bigger eyes froze for a moment, then swiveled around to stare at Leon and Cassandra, who now stood right in front of it from where Maia's water dragon held it aloft.

A massive wave of killing intent hit Leon, one large enough to have his vision swimming. Cassandra came out worse for it, falling to her knees from the sheer weight of this creature's antipathy, but Leon was still in condition to fight. He called upon the Thunderbird's lightning, then pointed his sword at the creature and let it all flow out of him.

The clearing that had formed around their battle lit up with silver-blue lightning. The heat set nearby trees that weren't already burning on fire, nearby leaves were incinerated in a microsecond, and the thunder that accompanied Leon's power shook and snapped some of the tree trunks around them that had already been scorched by fire.

Leon's lightning fried the bulb, blackening it from the intense heat and popping both amber eyes like overripe grapes. But then, the bulb's mouth, presumably in one last act of defiance, opened, and from it poured a veritable ocean of dark green pollen so thick it was opaque.

This cloud rolled over Maia's water dragon immediately, and Leon heard it lose all cohesion in an instant. Making a snap decision, he summoned all of his skill in wind magic and tried to throw back this oncoming pollen cloud. He didn't know what it might do, but he could tell that it wouldn't be good.

At first, he didn't think it would work, but then Anzu came charging in, as did two more of the Evergolden escort, both wind mages, and Leon's wind barrier was bolstered enough that the cloud was rebuffed. As it roiled backward, it started to dissipate, and Cassandra sprang to her feet and shouted, "Fall back! Get away from this thing!"

Leon agreed wholeheartedly with the order, and he led his own people backward to put significant distance between them and the pollen cloud, making sure that his wind barrier remained up at all times. The entire party reeled backward as fast as they could, stopping only to grab their fallen companions, until they'd put more than a thousand feet between themselves and the now-dissipating pollen cloud.

"All right," Cassandra said as they came to a halt, "what the Ashen fuck was that thing?"

Leon was surprised that she didn't know what this thing was, given that it was in *her* Empire, but he didn't let that thought out. Instead, he focused entirely on Marcus and Alcander, both of whom were still unconscious after taking those light blasts. He ran over to his fallen retainers and called upon the power of the tau pearl. Alix and Gaius, who'd grabbed both of the other former noblemen, had already started in on using some healing spells, but the wounds each of Leon's men had taken were severe.

Marcus and Alcander both had intact suits of armor, but between some of the plates and wyvern scales leaked blood, showing that at least some of the vine's attacks had managed to get through. How, Leon was unsure, but as he called upon the tau pearl to aid his people, it took a surprising amount of time before he got the slight resistance from the pearl that told him they were as healed as the thing could make them.

But Leon wasn't done. He looked around and saw that the Evergolden warrior who'd been cut in half was already covered on a litter with two of her comrades standing guard around it. The other three

who'd had limbs sliced off were being seen to, and Cassandra herself had taken charge, seeing to a sixth-tier Evergolden mage by holding up her severed arm to the stump and flooding the connection with ethereal white light, slowly reattaching the arm. Similar scenes were happening with the other two, and Leon quickly joined them, adding the power of the tau pearl to the mix. Soon enough, all three of the Evergolden mages were back on their feet, looking a little pale, but otherwise none the worse for wear. The remaining four injured Evergolden warriors had quaffed healing potions, and in this time, their wounds closed and were seen to by their healers.

"How's everyone doing?" Leon shouted once it seemed like everything had calmed down.

He heard back from all of his retainers that they were fine, and when Cassandra did her own headcount, she came back with much the same results. All in all, they'd only lost the one Evergolden warrior who'd been cut in half.

Once all of that was done, Leon turned back to the battlefield. They'd made quite the mess of the area, blasting another huge hole in the forest and leaving little else save for ash and charcoal. The smaller vines had been burned to cinders, but the bigger vine yet remained, and Leon saw that Anna was already staring off in its direction.

He started making his way over to her, stopping for a moment to check in with Elise and Talal, who were both mercifully fine.

"What did you make of all that?" Leon asked Anna once he reached her.

His retinue's beastmaster didn't immediately respond, instead staring at the dead bulbous creature as it quietly smoldered on the ground. As Leon waited for her response, Cassandra joined them in staring at the unmoving vine monster.

"That was quite the fight, wasn't it?" she excitedly exclaimed.

Leon turned to her, a little shocked at her unabashed enthusiasm. He didn't blame her for that enthusiasm—there was a part of him that had relished the fight, too—but the fact that she was so *loud* about it after losing one of her people rather irked him.

Leon simply quietly responded, "It was... something, all right."

"You're overwhelming me with your joy," Cassandra sarcastically replied. "Don't tell me you're having second thoughts about proceeding?!"

Leon frowned and glanced back at her, and, conscious of the fact that the rest of the party was probably listening in, he replied as respectfully as he could without lowering himself, "Injuries are one thing. If it were just me heading out into this forest, that would also be one thing. But when people start getting killed and dismembered, then I'd say a little time to think is warranted."

He wasn't seriously thinking about turning around, but if he could convince the Princess to do the same by appealing to her responsibility to her people, then that was another thing entirely...

Cassandra stared at him for a moment, then turned away and didn't respond, leaving the door open for Anna to finally speak.

"That was a little more dangerous than I think might've been apparent," she said.

Leon, eager for any change in topic, asked, “What did you see during that fight?”

“Not much I can really say here,” she said. “Just that I think that cloud that it vomited at us looked a *lot* like the mold that was growing on those wolves’ brains.”

Cassandra, still listening to them, asked, “Are you saying that those wolves were attacked by that creature?”

“There’s a lot I can speculate about that,” Anna said, her tone helpless. “There’re too many unknowns. Maybe those wolves encountered another of these things. Maybe that mold is nothing. Maybe I’m completely wrong and the two aren’t that similar. Maybe, maybe, maybe. Regardless, I think if we see any more big green clouds, we should stay far away. Maybe kill it with fire, if possible.”

Leon smiled. “That, I can do.” He then turned back to Cassandra and said, “I think we should make camp here. Get some rest and prepare to scout out the other sites tomorrow. I think we’re going to have to reevaluate how we’ve been going about this.”

Cassandra looked almost ready to argue, but then she glanced up at the early afternoon sky, and then looked to her people. It was plain to Leon that none of them were eager to continue, especially after having lost one of their number, but they were all too professional to actively complain. Still the two seventh-tier mages leading the escort squad were staring quite intensely at Cassandra, and the Princess appeared to get the picture.

“Very well,” she said. “Let’s make camp, and then we can talk about how we to proceed.”

Chapter 736: Unshackled

The camp Leon’s party made was nearly identical to the one they’d set up the night before—a relatively small palace-tree was flash-grown, and Leon set up the individual modules of his portable villa around it. The Evergolden earth mages then built a stone wall around the pieces of his villa, making their little camp quite tough. They had to do a bit of extra legwork getting rid of all the remains of the large and old trees in the area that Leon’s fire and the bulbous vine had destroyed, but in the end, setting up camp didn’t take more than an hour.

Once all the work setting up was done, Leon made the rounds, checking in on all of his retainers. For the most part, they were all fine, but Leon spent a little bit of extra time with Marcus and Alcander, both of whom had been hurt quite badly during the fight with the bulbous vine. After getting assurances that they were doing just fine, if a little sore, he then went to find his family.

Maia and Valeria were doing about as well as he expected. Anzu, likewise, seemed to be having the time of his life rolling around in the burst grass, and rather blatantly ignoring Anna’s hopeless attempts to get him to stop. Already, his pure white coat had turned gray from the ash and dirt that he was getting all over himself, and while Leon knew that he could get his griffin to stop, he just smiled and made for Elise instead.

Of all the people in his party, she was the one he was most concerned about. Like Talal, she didn’t have much in the way of combat skills, but Talal was decades her senior and had worked with Heaven’s Eye for a long time. He was also a manager for a team of gladiators, so he was at least tangentially acquainted with violence. Elise, however, was young, inexperienced in war, and had been injured in

their first encounter in the forest. Knowing this, Leon wasn't too surprised to find her in their private quarters, staring out of the window-projection on the wall with a blank look on her face, lost in thought.

She didn't even realize that he'd entered the room until he gently embraced her from behind, and when he did, she was startled enough that she almost jumped to her feet.

"Hey, it's just me," Leon said conciliatorily, and he loosened his embrace a little. However, once Elise realized that it was just him, she grabbed his hands and pulled them back down around her shoulders and chest.

"Husband," she muttered as she leaned back into him. She was silent for a long moment, and Leon didn't disturb her. He just let her lean against him, let her feel his presence and know that she was safe.

After almost five agonizingly long minutes, she finally rose from her seat—doing her utmost not to free herself from Leon—and turned around, letting Leon's arms drape around her upper arms and down her back.

"Leon," she whispered, savoring his name and packing it with so much love and emotion that Leon couldn't help but hold her tighter.

"Elise," he replied, doing his best to use just as much love as she did, and from the way she smiled, he thought he succeeded. The sun itself couldn't have been so beautiful as the vision in his arms.

But finally, she pulled back just a little and, looking a little more composed, asked, "What brings you here? Is everything set up?"

"Camp has been made," Leon answered. "I still have some time before going to meet Cassandra to plan out our next moves and wanted to check in on my gorgeous wife."

Elise's smile widened, but then dimmed slightly as she averted her gaze. "I'm fine..." she said.

"You don't sound that convincing."

Elise just smiled again and pressed her forehead against Leon's. "I'll be fine," she clarified. "There's been a lot of excitement these past couple of days, and..."

She trailed off, but Leon knew how she wanted to finish that statement even if she didn't want to say it out loud. "... And you're regretting coming along?" he asked.

Elise looked slightly horrified, but Leon knew that he hit the nail on the head. She rushed to clarify, saying, "I love you, Leon, and I want to support you as best as I can, you know that!"

"It's fine, I'm not angry," Leon replied soothingly. "There *has* been a lot of excitement these past couple of days, and this sort of thing isn't for everyone. Honestly, I have to admit that I was more than a little surprised that you wanted to follow us this far."

"You *know* that I would never abandon you, or want to be left behind..."

"Of course, it's just that I would've figured you would've stayed back on the yacht or something."

Elise again fell silent for a long moment. "I just..." she started before stopping to think again. "I just... I just feel kind of useless, being left behind again and again," she said. "I can't contribute to these sorts of

violent endeavors, and it's frustrating. It feels like I'm being left behind every time you and Val and Maia go off on journeys like these. I couldn't help with the wyverns and felt like I was just dead weight being dragged along by you and your retinue."

"You could never be dead weight."

"That doesn't change how I feel. I thought that if I could tag along on something like this, it would help... that it would help me learn how to fight, and then I'd never have to be left behind again!"

Elise shuddered with unshed tears, and Leon took a few seconds to squeeze her against him and press his lips against her cheeks and lips a couple times.

"It's fine if you're not a warrior," he said. "I don't love you any less. You have skills that I will never have, but even if you didn't, even if were just a lazy, brainless beauty—those first two couldn't be further from the truth, by the way—then I would still love you."

"Really?" Elise said with a lot of good-natured skepticism. "Even if I were an empty-headed socialite?"

Leon blatantly open his mouth to answer, then stared at the ceiling in an exaggerated thinking expression. "Well, maybe not if you were empty-headed..." he said sarcastically.

"Hey!" Elise pinched his arm, but her smile had grown much wider and happier.

The two shared a laugh, and then Leon said, "Don't feel 'less than' for not being a fighter. It doesn't matter at all to me. I love you all the same. And if you want to turn back, or stay here, that's fine, too. I love you, and I want you to be happy and safe. I won't think any less of you for not wanting to continue, and I won't think any more of you for wanting to continue. That's just the way of it. I love you more than I can properly describe, and nothing will change that."

Elise melted into his arms, joy spread across her face, her emerald eyes glittering with delight. Before she could respond, however, a quiet knock came from the door, and both Leon and Elise looked over to see Valeria poking her head into the room.

"Uh..." she said a little awkwardly, "the Princess is here. Just thought you ought to know."

"Thanks, I'll be right out," Leon replied, and Valeria smiled and shut the door. Leon then turned back to his wife. "We'll have the rest of the day at least to think about it. I'm thinking that this'll be our base camp. Just think it over, all right? I'll support you in whatever decision you make."

Elise gave him a quick kiss. "Thank you, my love. It won't take that long. Now, get out there and deal with the spoiled Princess."

—

Cassandra was waiting for Leon when he walked into his portable villa's dining room, sitting at the head of the table. Talal and one of the seventh-tier Evergolden escorts was present, but no one else.

"Finally," Cassandra impatiently said. "Honestly, I don't think I've ever had to wait on anyone before you, Leon Raime."

"If you're going to stick around, then best get used to it," Leon replied as he slid into the seat at the other end of the table. It would've been easier to talk to the Princess if he were to sit next to her, but given her hijacking of his usual seat, he couldn't make himself look inferior to her by sitting even on her right. "I'm not going to rush around at your beck and call."

"Frustrating..." Cassandra muttered, seemingly more to herself than to the room. Without acknowledging it for a moment, she simply launched directly into the purpose of their meeting. "So, we're meeting here, wasting the rest of this day when we could be looking for these ruins you say are out here, Leon. Why?"

"We need to decide on a better strategy," Leon said, fixing both the Princess and her older and more experienced bodyguard in his golden gaze, impressing upon them his seriousness. "A few injuries are one thing, but we lost one of our number today—"

"One of *our* number," Cassandra corrected.

Leon just smiled at her and continued. "When people start getting injured, it's usually a sign that we have things we need to improve. Those signs came yesterday. When people start dying, it means that we *need* to adjust our strategy going forward."

"Are you saying you want to run away?" Cassandra asked, her tone challenging.

"If you let me finish, I'll say exactly what I mean, saving you the trouble of guessing," Leon coolly replied, staring right at Cassandra. She stared right back, her ruby eyes gleaming, daring him to say that they should turn around, but he had no intention of doing that. "What I'm saying is that we need to change our strategy. Not run away."

Before the Princess could ask what he meant, the seventh-tier Evergolden mage jumped in, appearing to be at her wit's end with their verbal sparring.

"What are you proposing, Leon Raime?"

"We're not moving fast enough," Leon said. "Our weaker mages are slowing us down, and they're clearly vulnerable to the dangers of this forest. So, let's keep this place as a base of operations, let most of our group secure it. Then, we have our strongest mages—even if it's just those of us at the eighth-tier—head out into the forest on our own and scout the area ahead of us. We can bring the others back in once we have a better idea of the dangers we face, and the direction we need to go."

"It's not a bad plan," the seventh-tier mage said to Cassandra, who pursed her lips in thought.

"Are you saying that the three of us should go in one group?" the Princess asked. "You, me, and that wife of yours?"

Leon, presuming that she was talking about Maia, said, "No. The three of us scout out in different directions. It would only delay us if we were to all travel as one."

"And what's to stop you from giving us false directions so that you can claim whatever it is you're after without us around? Are you looking to hog all the glory for yourself?"

Leon glared at the Princess, his patience with her running low. "This isn't about glory," he growled, and the Princess paled slightly, recognizing that she'd angered him something fierce. "This is about ensuring

that we find what's here, and then we leave without spilling any more of our own blood. That vine monster could've done serious damage to us—and I mean the two of us, specifically—if we'd let our guards down. This forest is *dangerous*, and there's no room for our egos. So how about we try and look at the problem with a little objectivity? Acknowledge the danger of this expedition, and act accordingly. Besides, I don't think any of us are going to find the kind of ruins you hope are out there, while also being able to hide that find from everyone else. I think if any of us finds this place, then the entire forest will know."

Cassandra didn't look happy, but she at least looked suitably chastened.

Leon took a deep breath, then asked, "Are there any other suggestions? Criticisms that can be made about my strategy? Or should we go with this from here on out?"

Cassandra didn't respond immediately, but instead stared at Leon for a long moment, then glanced at her seventh-tier companion. The Evergolden mage subtly nodded, and Cassandra sighed deeply. "Fine," she said. "We'll do this your way."

Leon nodded gratefully, and then launched into a quick summary of what they still had to check. There were two more likely spots for his Clan's research facility, along with a handful more potential spots outside of the zones that the Sacred Golden Empire had marked as dangerous. He decided that Maia and Cassandra could each search one of those most likely spots, while he checked out the less likely spots. He knew that he could cover quite a bit more ground than either of them could, and not only was he not going to hold himself back anymore, he also had a new piece of gear he wanted to put through its paces...

—

The entire expedition holed up in their new camp for the night. Since the decision had been made that they'd be staying here at least another night, the Evergolden mages set up a more intensive guard detail and reinforced the stone walls. Leon's people, in turn, remained on high alert, ready to act as a quick response force if the camp was attacked. Leon, Maia, and Cassandra, meanwhile, prepared themselves for their recon mission.

Cassandra didn't look entirely happy, but she'd at least agreed to Leon's mission. The biggest issue Leon thought she had was his attempt to make a rule that if any of them found any ruins, they'd make note of them and return to the camp. Just based on his own first-hand knowledge of his Clan's defenses and the kinds of things they tended to vigorously defend, he knew that if this research facility was still functioning, then none of them, save for maybe himself, would be able to get in without having a lot of trouble.

A lot of potentially deadly trouble.

So, if they found anything, they'd fall back and assemble everyone else to tackle the problem as a group, rather than trying to enter on their own and getting killed.

Cassandra had looked particularly bitter when she'd accepted that rule, and for that Leon couldn't blame her. He didn't think she'd follow the rule, but if he were honest, he didn't think he'd follow it, either.

It was only going to be the three of them heading out into the forest. The two seventh-tier Evergolden mages were going to remain behind to command the camp, and Leon trusted Valeria to be professional if they were to be attacked.

Elise, meanwhile, had gotten back to Leon that night. She had decided that while she didn't want to return to civilization, she also couldn't bring herself to continue on the expedition proper. So, even when—or *if*—they found what Leon was looking for, she'd be remaining at camp until everything had been secured. She'd taken enough chances on this journey, and she wasn't looking to get injured again.

Leon had to admit that he was a little relieved to hear that decision. While he wanted to support his wife, he also knew as well as she did that she wasn't a fighter, and the knowledge that she could get hurt weighed heavily on his mind whenever she was out with them.

But now, he could head out into the forest on his own and relax.

The next morning, with little more than a look and a smile of provocation, Cassandra was the first to take off from the camp and fly out over the dense, primeval forest. Maia rolled her eyes, then glanced at Leon. When he nodded and smiled at her, she pulsed back confidence and love through their connection, and also took to the skies.

Leon wasted no more time after that, and seized the air around him. With his Thunderbird blood, the air readily responded to his will, and he near-effortlessly rose into the air. As his boots left the ground and the wind blew around him, he felt himself relaxing. He was wearing his armor, but that didn't make much difference; if he was flying, he was happy.

Without further ado, he conjured his invisibility gem into his gauntlet, and as he took off over the forest, darkness enshrouded him, and he faded from view. Not too far away, he could see Maia doing the same, and it seemed that Cassandra didn't like *that* development, for she paused in mid-air to stare at where both of them used to be, a deep frown on her face before she continued on to her objective.

Leon smiled as he flew out over the forest. He flew with great speed, not paying too much attention to where exactly he was going and keeping his eyes open for a good place to land. He wanted to get at least twenty miles away from the camp so that he could do his thing in peace. Maia, Cassandra, and both seventh-tier Evergolden mages would still be able to see him at that distance, but he was confident that they wouldn't notice him in time.

Eventually, he found a suitable location, and descended through the canopy to land on a hill overlooking a bend in a river covered in shrubs and trees. He was just about covered from visual sight from all directions, and from what he could tell, there wasn't anything actively dangerous on the hill.

So, without further ado, he landed on the hill, pulled all of his armor and clothes into his soul realm—rendering himself visible in the process—and then activated his transformation enchantment.

His blood seemed to vibrate within him, and he felt like he was throwing off the heaviest shackles in existence as his arms turned to wings, his feet to talons, and his body grew. In a matter of seconds, he was standing below a large tree in his avian form.

He didn't take off immediately, but instead conjured his newly-enchanted iron ring around his left talon. Into that ring went his invisibility gem, and once again, Leon faded from view. It took a little longer, but his avian body became invisible. And only then did he lift back off.

Now, he felt like he was finally ready to find this research facility.

Chapter 737: Ambush

Leon, shrouded in shadow, took off into the air. With the wind against his face, running through his feathers, and over his wings, he felt invincible. He was back in his element, soaring through the sky, master of all he surveyed.

He struggled a bit to focus, and after about several minutes of reveling in stretching his wings once again, he managed to turn his attention back to the forest below him.

As with the previous couple of days, the forest was eerily silent. There were no birds, no wildlife at all. Or at least, none that Leon could detect, not even from above and with his eighth-tier senses amplified by his avian form. The wolves, tree sprite, eagles, and others that had attacked before had all seemed like they'd come out of nowhere, and even from above, Leon couldn't see a single sign that there were more in the forest.

But he had no doubt that there were more. The forest was large, dense, and hadn't known human civilization for a long time. There was undoubtedly quite a bit more like the bulbous vine out there, as far as he was concerned.

So, he began flying around to some of the other sites he'd located a couple days before. Each one he'd marked had large deposits of local stone that could indicate the location of his Clan's research facility, but three were located in places where previous Evergolden scouts had been known to be frequently attacked. There were still two more high danger places, but Cassandra and Maia were checking them out, and Leon trusted that they would get the job done safely. But that left three more sites outside of high danger zones that he wanted to scout out.

He still felt like his Clan's research facility was going to be located around one of those high danger areas, but he had to be thorough, and moved with great speed. He reached the first site rather quickly—a hill dense with trees, but near its base, entwined within the tree roots, were moss-covered stones. These were what had tripped his magic senses when he'd used his scanning enchantment, so he quickly landed to inspect the stones a little closer and to re-up his invisibility enchantment, which had started to fail after so long in use.

Unfortunately, after half an hour, he wasn't able to detect a single thing of note within the stone. Not one enchantment, not a single spark of magic power inconsistent with the rest of the environment around the stone.

Finally, he returned to human form for a moment—he wasn't able to remain invisible the entire time, and had to hurriedly transform and get back into his armor to calm his nerves—and knelt down on one of the mossy boulders poking out of the ground. His grasp of earth magic was rudimentary at best, so when he placed his hand upon the stone and concentrated, it took quite a bit of time for him to start mapping out the stone beneath him. His magic entered the stone and then spread through the earth, letting him sense what was buried in the dirt.

He found dirt, stone, and plant roots, and little else. He found no buried ruins of his Clan, but neither did he sense any underground animals or insects. It was like the forest was completely devoid of life more sentient than a tree. If he didn't know better, he would've thought this was some kind of nature preserve kept free of destructive animals.

Once he'd noted all of the mundanity that he could, he returned to the skies after transforming back into his avian form. He was once again invisible, and when he got to a comfortable mile or so above the leaves of the highest trees, he projected his magic senses and checked in on everyone else.

Cassandra was blazing through the trees with great speed, her light magic allowing her to get through the forest with ease. Maia, meanwhile, had submerged herself into a great water dragon that was winding through the forest with an almost comical amount of restraint. The water dragon was enormous, but Maia wasn't leaving much of a trail behind her. Finally, Leon glanced at the camp and was relieved to see that it was just as he'd left it.

So, he turned his attention to the next closest of his sites and beat his wings, propelling himself with a great gust of wind magic powerful enough to deform a fluffy white cloud that he couldn't help but fly through.

The next site was, at least geographically, a little more promising. Instead of a hill, this one was a narrow, but shallow valley. Trees lined the ridges along the valley's edge, creating what was essentially a tunnel with a roof of leaves.

Leon entered this tunnel at one end with more caution than he had with the hill. He couldn't sense anything dangerous down in the valley, but that didn't mean anything at this point.

Down along the valley floor, Leon could see the tops of a few boulders peeking out of the wet soil. He alighted for a moment on a particularly large tree root and glanced around, searching for anything at all that might indicate the presence of ruins, but he saw nothing.

He was just about to ask Nestor and Xaphan if they had noticed anything when white-hot pain erupted from his side, and he was thrown off the root. His shroud of darkness was torn asunder, rendering him visible before he hit the ground a couple dozen feet away.

Leon was utterly discombobulated. He barely understood what had just happened, and the pain wasn't going away.

He then turned his head and saw the spear sticking out of him. It was made of rough, unworked wood, and had pierced right through one of his wings and into his side. It hadn't gone much further than just breaking skin past his wing, but it still *hurt* when he instinctively raised his wing and pulled the spear out of his chest.

Blood poured from his wound, and in a panic, Leon looked around trying to see just what had attacked him. And then he saw them, standing at the top of the ridge, partially obscured by the plant life: humanoid figures, but each at least half again as tall as the average man, and with bodybuilder physiques. They numbered thirteen, and each had skin like tree bark, goat-like horns sticking out of their foreheads, inhumanely elongated faces, glowing green eyes, knees that bent backwards, and hooves instead of feet. All wore little more than loincloths, revealing their masculine physiques.

They were all armed, as well. Seven had crude stone clubs, three had primitive bows, and three more held multiple spears that looked more like sharpened tree branches.

None had magical auras, but from how deeply the unworked, unenchanted spear had penetrated into Leon's avian body, he knew that they were strong, regardless.

He flailed about on the ground for a moment, trying to get his legs back underneath him as the goat men started moving. Those with the clubs jumped several dozen feet into the air and landed down in the valley, while those with spears and bows threw or shot their projectiles.

Lightning surged through Leon's body as panic and anger set in. He didn't lose his mind, but given how he'd allowed this to happen, that was a small mercy.

With lightning coursing through his body, Leon's perception of the world slowed, and he rose in an instant. Silver-blue lightning danced over his body, and the spear sticking out of his wing was turned to ash. The arrows and spears careening towards him were likewise incinerated by lightning when they drew close, but Leon could tell that they were aiming to kill.

He tried to flap his wings, and, despite wincing in pain, realized that he could fly. So, he took off, and the seven goat men in the valley that were advancing on him tried to jump and head him off.

Five missed entirely, but the other two drew close enough to strike. But they never got the opportunity; Leon snatched one out of the air in his talons, and his lightning caught the other. The latter was practically flayed as his body was torn apart by lightning, and fell back to the forest floor as little more than fried meat and bloody mist. The former, Leon squeezed. His sharp talons cut through his bark-like skin surprisingly easily, and when Leon released him, he'd almost been cut in half.

Both goat men were dead, but more projectiles came hurtling toward Leon, which he countered by flapping his wings and sending a powerful gust of wind to knock them off course.

The goat men still hadn't made a single sound. Leon couldn't imagine how they were communicating, but in that moment, he didn't much care. They weren't backing down, so he decided to go all out. He reached into the sky with his magic power, and in the time it took for him to make two wingbeats, four lightning bolts had fallen from the white clouds above. This lightning cut right through the leaves mostly covering the valley from sight and struck all of the spear throwers and one of the bowmen. All four fell to the ground, their bodies charred black.

Not giving an inch, Leon then beat his wings and sent a powerful gust of razor-sharp wind rolling into the club-bearers. Two of the club-bearing goat men were torn apart by Leon's eighth-tier power, while the remaining three were tossed about like fallen leaves, their bark-like skin lacerated in dozens of places.

Leon then felt a pair of arrows hit him in the back, piercing feather and hide, but going not much further. Still, the fresh pain enraged him, and he turned back to the two remaining bowmen, and dove. With his injured wing, he didn't quite have the control he needed to get both, but with talons extended and beak at the ready, Leon slammed into one of the bowmen, the force of his landing sending the other reeling.

His talons tore through the bowman he'd landed on, stabbing clean through his body and into the soil beneath where the goat man had fallen. Leon's beak then came down in a deadly follow-up and severed the goat man's head.

He sensed another arrow hurtling toward him, but he warded it off with a gust of wind. He then lunged at the final bowman, his beak and talons already spattered with blood and with murder in his golden eyes. The bow-wielding goat man never stood a chance, and Leon ripped him in half.

The three final club-bearers, far from cowed or terrified, were, by now, charging back up the hill, their own injuries seemingly ignored. Leon simply glared contemptuously at them, and summoned three more lightning bolts. All three unerringly struck their targets, and the final goat men, not even halfway up the hill, were frozen in their suicidal charge as Leon's lightning charred their flesh, destroyed their nervous systems, and flash-fried their muscles. They were rendered into seared statues, the momentum of their charge causing their corpses to collapse onto the hill.

For a moment, as Leon stood on the ground at the top of the hill, the forest's trees at his back, and admired the results of his handiwork. He'd finally met the goat men, and they'd proven not only hostile, but also both deadly and strangely weak. To prove their deadliness, the throbbing pain in Leon's wing and back finally pulled him out of the afterglow of the brief battle. He used his magic power to grab ahold of the arrows lodged in his back and pulled them out, wincing at the stinging pain that accompanied their removal.

Before he did anything else, he took stock of himself and his surroundings. As far as he could tell, his fight hadn't attracted the attention of his companions—the camp remained peaceful, and both Maia and Cassandra were quickly advancing upon their targets, each more than a hundred miles away. He couldn't detect any other hostiles around, either, but he couldn't take that for granted, and remained on high alert. Reassured about as much as he could be, Leon transformed back into his human form and donned his armor.

His injuries carried over to his human form, he was a little disappointed to see, but they'd shrunk considerably in his human form, and the tau pearl seemed to jump at the chance to heal his wounds. The pearl's light magic surrounded him and knit his flesh back together, and Leon was left looking almost like he'd never been injured at all. Only the blood that had been drawn betrayed the wounds he'd sustained.

Only about a minute had passed since the felling of the goat men, but Leon immediately realized that that had been far too long. As he'd been tending to his wounds, it seemed like the forest had started trying to devour the corpses of the goat men, with roots quietly snaking out of the ground, wrapping themselves around the remains, and slowly pulling them underground. The earth below simply parted, and the dense shrubbery was rushing to fill in the gaps in the forest floor that Leon's lightning had blown.

It was such a surreal sight, seeing the forest 'healing' just as quickly as he had, that Leon stared in shock and confusion at what was happening for a moment. But then that moment passed, and he rushed forward, not intent on letting whatever was happening steal away the corpses. He grabbed ahold of one of the bowmen as the corpse was halfway below the ground, and he immediately realized that he was probably not dealing with some non-sentient magical phenomenon; more vines erupted from the earth and batted him away like a cat with a ball of string. Leon was thrown backwards and slammed into a tree, which creaked in protest and shook with living indignation.

Leon hurled himself away from the tree just as several branches, each one thicker than his arm, slapped against the tree like he would if he felt an insect crawling on him.

Without a moment's hesitation, Leon took to the sky. Just as his boots left the ground, more vines burst from the ground at his feet and attempted to wrap around his ankles, but a quick blast of fire ensured his freedom, and Leon rose into the air.

He climbed fifty feet into the air—high enough to have plenty of time to react to anything on the ground, while also not getting too close to the leavy canopy above him. That tree had moved like it was possessed by a tree sprite, and Leon wasn't going to take any chances that more trees around were possessed, too, so he gave their branches and leaves a wide berth.

Unfortunately, as he was reacting to all of this, the goat men had been pulled underground, vanishing from sight. Leon could only sigh as the last he saw of his opponents vanished into the earth, and with it, any conclusive evidence that he might be able to gather about what had just happened.

But he hung there in the air, just breathing as he processed the past five minutes. Goat men, vines in the earth 'eating' them, and moving trees.

To satisfy his curiosity, Leon conjured a relatively small lightning bolt and tossed it at the tree that had moved. His bolt splashed across the bark, burning it black, but not splitting the tree open. Nothing emerged from it as Leon's eighth-tier power shook it down to its roots, so it wasn't a tree sprite, but the tree shuddered as if in pain, and then its trunk began to twist and turn in ways that shouldn't have been possible, and its branches flailed about, slamming into its neighboring trees and tearing apart the flora around it.

Finally, just as the tree fell still, it shuddered one last time, and a dense cloud of dark green pollen fell from its upper branches, identical to what the bulbous vine had spat out. Leon didn't hesitate to catapult himself backward, away from the green cloud, and carefully monitored himself as he flooded himself with fire magic to ensure that even if he did breathe any of that stuff in, that it wasn't able to take root within him.

Only then did the forest finally, *finally*, go still once more.

Leon was left there, hovering in the air, staring at the mostly-pristine forest, not wanting to drop back down with all of those underground vines and moving trees. He could tell that this deposit of stone wasn't what he was looking for, but he'd found something anyway, and he didn't much like it.

The fight itself was exciting, in its own way, though Leon couldn't help but get the impression that this wasn't meant to be a real ambush. He thought about as it he rose back into the air—he'd been invisible, but had been attacked by beings he couldn't sense, which had the durability of wet paper, yet were strong enough to inflict him harm. Then, all evidence of his fight was erased once it was over, preventing him from studying the bodies left behind.

'Maybe I'm just being paranoid,' he thought. 'Is there something out there directing all of this? This felt like a planned ambush, or at least something trying to put me through my paces. If this was a real attempt to kill me, then why stop at the goat men? Or was this just a hunting party that stumbled across me? But if that was the case, why would they just attack without thought? And what in the hells was that stuff that came out of the tree?!'

Leon scowled as he flew onward, still in his human form, toward the final site he wanted to check. He sent a quick mental warning to Maia to ensure that she was extra cautious given he'd just been attacked, and then redoubled his effort to find out just what was going on in this forest.

Chapter 738: Manticore

As Leon flew over the forest, his caution never wavering, he asked Nestor and Xaphan both, [Were you two paying attention to that ambush?]

[No,] Nestor bluntly replied.

[I was,] Xaphan admitted, sounding like he was grinning madly. [That was quite a blunder on your part. Getting a little too used to your magic senses, are you? Can't handle it when you're unable to sense threats coming? Unused to actually using your physical senses?]

Leon gritted his teeth in frustration, but he couldn't honestly refute any of Xaphan's points. It was true: he was reliant on his magic senses now, and if he'd been paying more attention with his physical senses, then he might've avoided some pain. Given how quickly the goat men went down once he got going, he figured he might've even taken them all out before they managed a response, if he'd only been a little more on-point.

[Relax,] Nestor said, though his tone lacked any warmth. [You survived, so all's well that ends well. Just don't do something so stupid again.]

[And when you *do*,] Xaphan added, [call on me.]

[Really?] Leon inquired skeptically. [Is killing some feral goat men in the woods something you'd deign to spend your precious time on?]

[Not specifically,] Xaphan replied. [However, my healing is going slowly enough that I wouldn't mind the opportunity to stretch my legs a little. Use my power, you know.]

Leon nodded. [I'll keep that in mind. But for now, I was hoping to pick your brains as to how in the name of the Ancestors did those goat men know I was there?!]

[You were using your shadow cloak?] Nestor asked.

[Yes.]

[The one you cobbled together for your tiny Thunderbird form?]

[Uh huh.]

[You have to know that that one's incredibly flawed. I mean, so is the one you're using right now, but that one for your larger body is really bad. I'm surprised it even completely covers you from physical sight, let alone anything else.]

[It works well enough for about fifteen minutes,] Leon explained. [After that, the cloak starts to decay. It hadn't decayed that much by the time I landed at that site, they shouldn't have seen me. And yet, somehow, they did. They were strong, but they seemed to lack magic power. I'm just trying to understand everything here...]

Xaphan then suggested, [Why don't you run through everything again? Go through it all with a fine-tooth comb and see if you notice anything you've missed.]

Leon took a deep breath and ran through the entire encounter with his soul realm guests. His initial arrival at the site, the ambush, his counterattack, and finally ending with the moving tree and its pollen attack that he was quite certain wasn't possessed by a tree sprite.

[Hmm,] Nestor hummed. [I'll try and think of something, but again, biology isn't my thing.]

[Then pipe down,] Xaphan retorted. [Leon, have you considered the possibility that all of this is connected?]

[How do you mean? Connected how?]

[I'm saying that there've been quite a lot of encounters in this forest, have you considered the possibility that everything here shares some kind of will? I've seen similar things before, where some kind of creature makes its way into an environment and proceeds to take over everything within—usually with some kind of mind-dominating darkness magic.]

[You're saying that you think everything here might be controlled by something?]

[Given what you've found so far, I would say this is a strong possibility. You breathe in that green 'pollen'—I'm sure that's not what that green stuff is, but we can go with that, for now—and that'll cause that mold to grow on your brain. You'll find your body being taken over by whatever created those spores to begin with.]

[That's... a disturbing thought,] Nestor whispered.

[You're one to talk,] Leon shot back with great venom. [That's essentially what you tried to do to me back in the day.]

Nestor wisely decided not to respond, so Leon turned his attention back to Xaphan.

[If I wanted to confirm this hypothesis of yours, how might I go about doing so?]

Leon could almost see Xaphan shrugging in the brief silence that followed his question.

[Honestly,] the demon of flame said, [I'd just burn this whole forest down, hivemind or no. It's already proven itself to be hostile and incredibly fucking creepy, I wouldn't allow it to continue to exist.]

[Mmhmm. I'll take your advisement under consideration, but I doubt my answer will be the same as the last time you made that suggestion. But, to get back to the point, that doesn't really explain why they knew I was there when I was invisible.]

[You'd landed on a tree root, didn't you? We just saw a tree move of its own accord, is it so hard to believe that you were revealed that were revealed by physical contact?]

Leon frowned in thought. If even the trees could be turned against him, then there was no place in the forest that could be considered safe, and remaining invisible wasn't a real option... not that he was in a hurry to drop his current invisibility.

He sent a quick warning to Maia and resolved to treat the trees themselves as potential enemies, too, so long as he remained within the forest.

Leon looked around at the forest as he flew over it, unseen—or so he hoped. As far as both danger and beauty went, he didn't think the place yet held much of a candle to the Forest of Black and White, but it was still quite a beautiful sight. At the very least, burning it all down as Xaphan had suggested wasn't something he was eager to do. As he admired the forest, he realized that he'd somehow gotten off course, and quickly corrected himself. The third site he was going to visit was the farthest from the camp, but he was a little surprised that he'd drifted off course so far.

[So, demon, you were just going to offer suggestion to confirm your theory?]

[Was I going to do that? Funny thing, I don't remember ever intending to do so...]

Leon bit down on his anger, and though he was speaking mentally, he felt like he was still speaking through clenched teeth. [You were, Xaphan. Anything else would've been quite ridiculous, wouldn't you say? After floating that idea?]

[Hmm, honestly, I don't know how you would go about confirming this,] Xaphan admitted. [I've encountered such mentally-linked creatures before, but I've never bothered to study them. Perhaps this is something that you should involve someone else in?]

Leon rolled his eyes so hard in response that he almost thought they were about to pop out of their sockets. It seemed he'd reached the limits of what his soul realm passengers could do, so the conversation died down.

As he flew, he found his mind drifting several times as he passed over the endless green sea of the forest canopy, and every time he refocused and got his bearings, he'd found that he'd drifted off course again. He was still getting closer, but he found it a little strange that he kept drifting like he was. In a forest, even one as strange and eerily silent as this one, he was confident enough in his navigational skills to never get lost, or even to go off track, and yet here he'd done it four times already.

So, with Xaphan's theory in his head, he came to a stop about five miles from the final site and gave himself as thorough of an examination as his magic senses allowed—which was exceptionally thorough. Fortunately, he found no signs that he was being mentally manipulated, but he flooded his system with the Thunderbird's lightning just in case.

But, finally, after several hours of flying around above the forest, he arrived at the final site with large amounts of local stone at or near the surface. And what he found was fairly promising, being a large pit with stone poking through here and there, and a large pool of surprisingly clear water down in the center of the pit. Most of the ground was mossy and covered in dirt, but that dirt layer above the stone was thin enough that there weren't many plants, let alone large trees, growing on it. What stone he could see resembled terraces moving down into the pit and had relatively regular shapes, though somewhat obscured by millennia of erosion.

Given what he could see, he guessed that he was hovering over a quarry that had been left abandoned for a terribly long time.

Taking some risk, Leon conjured his earth-manipulating gem into the gauntlet that usually held his anti-magic gems and activated the enchantment. He felt the magic reach down into the wet soil and start latching onto stone, and it didn't take long for him to seize control of some fairly sizable chunks.

Leon pulled these chunks free of the earth and found that they were all of roughly the same size, being cubic, with all sides a little shorter than he was tall. Some of the chunks he checked were cracked and broken, but he could still see the regular edges carved by tools and smoothened by erosion.

'This place must be where they quarried the stone for the research facility,' Leon thought to himself. *'Then it must be close!'*

He cast his magic senses out wide, hoping to find any sign of what he was looking for. Unfortunately, he couldn't detect anything, and the rest of the sites that he'd discovered with his sensor enchantment weren't particularly close to this former quarry.

Before he could ponder what he'd found anymore, some movement caught his eye, and he instinctively rose higher into the air and let the hovering stones fall back to the ground.

Only a couple seconds after they hit the ground, quietly walking out of the forest came a massive creature of such size and obvious ferocity that he wondered for just a moment how he'd not seen it until now. A moment later, the creature's lack of aura immediately explained why.

It was easily thrice as long as he was tall, with the body and head of a lion, the horns of a ram, the wings of an eagle, and the tail of a scorpion. Its hide was a golden brown, with feathers to match, and a pair of burning red eyes that swiveled all over the quarry as if searching for something.

This was a manticore, Leon realized. Such creatures were incredibly rare, and as far as he knew, supposed to be incredibly strong. However, this one lacked all magical aura, so he wasn't able to clearly see just how strong this one was. But what he *could* see was rippling muscle beneath its lustrous coat, long claws that glittered like polished black steel, an erect scorpion's tail that glistened in the sun, and when it growled, Leon saw for just a moment vicious fangs that looked sharp enough to slice clean through a man with hardly any effort. Its mane and lack of pants made it clear enough that this manticore was male.

The manticore advanced further into the former quarry, made a deep chuffing sound, and then leaped down to the bottom of the quarry, landing right next to the small pool.

When the monster had first arrived, given his demeanor, Leon had thought that it had been looking for him. But as the manticore, still guarded, began to quietly lap at the water in the pool, he wondered if his assumption had been in error.

For a long moment, Leon watched the beast drink its fill, captivated by his size and raw physical power. He even considered the possibility of trying to capture him to bring back to Anna to add to her growing menagerie.

However, when the manticore stepped back from the pool and began pawing at the ground, Leon immediately abandoned those plans, for down in the dirt, he saw the manticore using one of his claws to scratch a crude water rune.

'He's sapient?!' Leon thought in surprise.

Whatever he was doing, the manticore didn't finish before he suddenly froze and glared back into the forest. Leon followed the manticore's gaze and was even more surprised to see an enormous humanoid figure standing at the edge of the forest and the quarry, especially since he'd been actively trying to use his physical senses as much as his magic senses.

This figure had relatively human proportions, though was about the height of a stone giant. It lacked any definably human features save for its overall body shape, however, for its body was entirely made up of hundreds of sticks, twigs, and logs of varying sizes bound and held together by tough-looking vines, moss, and colorful mushrooms.

This, Leon realized, was one of the plant giants that he'd heard about. His eyes widened and he dropped down closer to the quarry. He didn't get so close that he felt like he was in danger of being seen, but he wanted to see what was about to happen with a little more clarity and examine the newcomer a little more closely.

The manticore drew his attention when he loudly roared in challenge and assumed a threatening posture. The plant giant looked not at all disturbed and simply stood there at the edge of the quarry, seemingly staring right back at the manticore with nonexistent eyes. It had no face at all, but its 'head', made of a large piece of petrified wood, was still pointing at the manticore.

Two more plant giants then sprouted from the earth like whales gently breaching the surface of the ocean. They were slightly smaller than the first giant, but not at all different in any other respect. Once they'd assumed their positions, the three began to slowly make their way down into the quarry.

The manticore roared again, but the beast sounded much less sure of himself this time, and Leon wasn't that surprised to see him turning around and taking off into the air, his eagle's wings beating extremely hard to carry him to the opposite edge of the quarry.

The plant giants didn't seem at all concerned and continued to head down to the pool. Leon avidly watched as they silently and motionlessly stood around the pool, but was disappointed when nothing more seemed to happen. He watched the manticore high-tail it into the forest and vanish from sight much sooner than he should have given Leon's power, leaving Leon alone with the giants, watching them intently. From this close of a distance, he could definitely see the resemblance between them and the stone giants in the Border Mountains, but that didn't mean that they *were* somehow related to golems. So, Leon decided to consult the expert.

[Nestor,] he whispered. [What do you take these things for? Golems?]

Nestor was quiet for a long moment, but Leon felt the dead man's magic senses project outward. Nestor didn't have very good range, so despite his own misgivings about getting closer to the forest floor, Leon dropped a little and did just that.

[No,] the dead man eventually replied. [No, these are something else entirely... These are not golems...]

Leon frowned. [Are you sure? You haven't exactly been that welcoming to giants descended from your golems before...]

[That was different. Those were undeniably my creations; my arguments then were to try make you see your mistake in assuming that they were 'alive'. These are something else entirely, these are not any kind of golem that I've ever seen.]

[Huh. What in the hells are they, then?]

[I couldn't tell you, boy. Regardless, I would advise against tangling with them.]

Leon nodded in response, having not had any intentions of doing so to begin with.

He hovered in the air, watching the motionless giants for a while longer. It eventually became clear that they weren't going to move again, and without any other kind of knowledge of just what they were doing, Leon decided to head back out into the forest in search of the research facility. So, with one last glance over his shoulder at the plant giants standing motionless over the pool, Leon flew back over the primeval forest.

As he rose back into the air, he projected his magic senses once again and located Cassandra and Maia. His river nymph mate was doing just fine, her water dragon having borne her all the way to her site, where she was looking around for any sign of man-made structures. This was quite relieving, for Leon saw Cassandra standing in the middle of a clearing, looking quite dazed and confused as she slowly turned in circles, staring at the forest around her. He couldn't tell what exactly was going on with her, but he at least knew that it wasn't good.

He took off in her direction, moving as quickly as he could. She didn't look to be in any immediate danger, but given Xaphan's warning about possible influence from some intelligence that governed this forest, Leon couldn't take that at face value.

However, along the way, somehow, Leon found himself flying in the wrong direction. He hadn't been turned around completely, but he realized at some point that his bearing was more than sixty degrees off Cassandra.

He didn't stop to question it, but instead reoriented himself and continued flying with all haste in her direction.

When he reached her, he landed in her clearing with great energy, revealing himself as he landed.

Cassandra reacted slowly and with little in the way of understanding or recognition. She was in full armor, so he could only see her eyes, but they seemed dazed and unfocused.

"Cassandra!" Leon shouted, hoping she'd react in some way. However, she just slowly blinked and stumbled away from him.

Without hesitation, Leon lunged forward and hit her with an appreciable blast of the Thunderbird's lightning. Her armor was powerful, but it lacked any independent power sources—its defensive wards, like nearly all armors that Leon had seen or created himself, were entirely powered by the mage wearing it. As a result, her defenses were down, and Leon's power hit her hard.

The Imperial Princess reeled, then tripped over a root and fell to the ground.

"Ow!" she shouted. "What the Ashen fuck!"

She glared up at Leon in anger, her eyes now infinitely more focused than they'd been just a moment before, but that anger quickly turned to confusion as she glanced around at her surroundings.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"Most of the way to the location you were going to investigate," Leon explained. "I found you just standing here in the clearing looking like you'd forgotten how to exist."

"What?" Cassandra shook herself a bit, then pushed herself to her feet.

"Do you remember what happened?" Leon asked.

Cassandra didn't immediately respond, but continued to stare at the forest around them. Her helmet obscured her expression, but from her body language alone Leon could tell that she was thoroughly confused.

"No..." she replied. "I don't... how did I get here?"

Leon frowned. "Are you feeling all right? Well enough to get back to camp?"

"Of course I do, but why would I want to return to camp? I haven't done what I need to, yet!" Cassandra indignantly replied, her confusion going full circle as it gave way to anger.

"Because something happened to you," Leon incredulously replied. "Look, let's just head back and get you checked out. Make sure that nothing's wormed its way into your head. I have some reason to think that may be a possibility. This ruin I'm looking for isn't going anywhere, so let's err on the side of caution, yeah?"

"I'm perfectly capable..." she began to insist, but as she took a step forward to emphasize her point, she stumbled, barely catching herself before she landed face-first in the dirt. Leon instinctively rushed forward to try and catch her, but she just waved him off. After a moment's thought, she whispered, "Fine, I think I could use a bit of rest anyway..."

Leon quickly sent an update to Maia, and then he and Cassandra, after taking a few moments to orient themselves, took off into the sky and started to slowly make their way back to camp. Leon was gratified to see that the Princess' condition rapidly improve, but he was still deeply concerned to have seen her so affected.

As they flew, Leon once again found himself flying off course and in need

Chapter 739: A Few Pieces Falling Into Place

Whatever had happened to Cassandra to so discombobulate her, it had faded entirely by the time she and Leon had returned to camp. Her anger at having to return, too, had faded, and when they reached the palace-tree, she surprised Leon with a relatively humble apology. She then went to get fully checked out by her own healers, arranging to meet with Leon again when that was finished.

Her check-up didn't take long, and she invited Leon to her palace-tree to discuss what had just happened about an hour later. By then, Leon had already gotten in touch with Maia, was informed that there was nothing worthwhile at her site, and asked her to return as quickly as she could. She

acquiesced with great haste, making it back to the camp barely five minutes before Cassandra sent for Leon, and looking just a little haggard at the pace she'd had to set to do so.

During that time, Leon had informed Elise, Valeria, and the rest of his retinue about everything that had happened over his scouting trip, and he and Valeria began inspecting the most detailed map that they'd been able to acquire of the local terrain as closely as they could. However, that was put on hold as Leon, Maia, and Valeria all made their way into Cassandra's palace-tree for their meeting.

Once they met with Cassandra in, surprisingly, an actual conference room within the tree instead of a chamber created by its branches and leaves, they were joined by four other Evergolden mages: the two seventh-tier mages in charge of the entire escort, and a pair of fifth-tier mages who seemed to be acting as secretaries for the Princess.

Pleasantries were had, and then Leon and Maia shared their side of the scouting mission. Maia had little to say, having encountered little else save for teres on her journey, but it took Leon almost another hour to get through his story with how many questions Cassandra and her people asked him.

Once he was finally finished, it was Cassandra's turn.

According to her, she met with little resistance as she sped through the forest. No wolves, no goat men, no tree sprites. The forest seemed to her, for all its ominous reputation, to be perfectly willing to let her travel through it as she pleased. However, as she moved, she claimed that she apparently blacked out, and only regained awareness when Leon shook her awake. At first, she hadn't realized that she'd blacked out, and had taken Leon's suggestion to return to the camp and get checked out as a slight against her abilities, but in the hours since, she realized that there *was* a gap in her memories, and that there were at least twenty, perhaps as many as thirty or forty, minutes when she couldn't account for where she was or what she was doing.

Fortunately, she'd come back with a clean bill of health.

Leon nodded when she mentioned the results of her check-up, and with Xaphan's warning in mind, he asked, "If it's not too much trouble to ask, how thorough was this evaluation? Did it only check physical capabilities, or were your mental faculties cleared as well?"

"You're asking if I've been infected with that green stuff?" Cassandra asked.

Leon nodded again.

"I haven't," Cassandra replied. "At least, if that stuff was responsible for my fugue, then it was soon cleared out of my system by the time I was checked out. It's surprising though, I wouldn't have thought such a thing could get past my armor..."

"Does your armor have robust anti-darkness enchantments and other enchantments to help filter that sort of gunk out?"

Cassandra frowned in thought. "I can't describe in detail..." she hesitantly replied, before one of the seventh-tier mages at her side spoke up.

She quickly explained to Leon, “The gear set aside for the Imperial family is of the finest quality. Obviously, none of us have the technical knowledge to truly go over it—not that we would even if we did—but suffice it to say, this sort of threat shouldn’t affect our Princess.”

Leon hummed in thought as he leaned back in his seat. His eyes drifted in Valeria’s direction, and when she gave him a questioning look, he nodded, and she brought out their map.

“I only mentioned it briefly since that fight with the goat men was much more spectacular, but there were several places where I realized I was flying off-course.” As he spoke, Leon marked these locations on the map, then marked down all of the stone-rich locations they were to investigate. “I enchanted my armor myself, and I have great faith in my own defenses against darkness or any other mind-altering magic that I may come across. Still, I believe that I may have been affected by whatever it was that you encountered, Your Highness.”

“You weren’t left wandering the forest, dazed,” Cassandra replied, just a hint of ice in her tone.

“I can’t explain that,” Leon replied without missing a beat, though he noted her slight bitterness, “all I can say is that I wouldn’t have ever expected to lose myself as I did in a forest environment. Whatever might be doing this is subtle, and it can slip past our defenses. That concerns me.”

[Why wasn’t I affected?] Maia wondered.

Leon smiled thinly. “I was wondering the same thing,” he said. “The only thing I can think of is that you never got into range of whatever this might be.” He indicated the map again. Maia’s site was the point that was farthest to the east. Cassandra’s site was roughly northeast, while the three sites that Leon investigated were between northeast and northwest, having started with the latter and then moved east towards the former. “This is useful, though, because it can give us some kind of idea of the boundary that this phenomenon has. I was thinking we could do a little more scouting and see if we can refine this understanding a bit. As it is, it covers a very wide range.”

Leon quickly sketched out an incomplete border around where he’d found Cassandra, the path he’d taken from the first site he’d investigated in the northwest and noticed that he’d been flying off-course, then all the way down to Cassandra’s site. He’d even noticed that he’d flown off-course on the way to her, as well, so he was able to mark off a large swathe of the local forest that could potentially be under the sway of this phenomenon.

“Very well,” Cassandra said. “We should get started on getting more accurate borders immediately.”

“Maybe we should wait until tomorrow morning?” one of the seventh-tier mages suggested, earning her a withering glare from the Princess. However, she didn’t flinch, and stuck to her suggestion. “Let’s just make sure that none of us suffer any ill-effects of whatever this might be instead of entangling ourselves even further into it.”

If Leon had to guess, he would’ve said that none of the other Evergolden escorts wanted to be here. He supposed he could understand, and while he was as eager as Cassandra was to get started, he didn’t want to push these people too far and engender resentment.

Cassandra seemed to consider her subordinate’s words, and when she glanced at Leon, silently asking him for his opinion, he just shrugged and said, “We’re in no hurry. This thing has probably been here for

eighty-thousand years, so it's not like it's in danger of vanishing in the next twelve hours. One night won't hurt, and it is going to get dark soon."

With a sigh of frustration, the Princess wound up begrudgingly agreeing, and the group made their plans for the following day. Once that was over, Leon, Maia, and Valeria returned to Leon's portable villa and filled in the rest of the retinue on what was going to happen the next day—and unlike this day, they'd actually have something to do.

—

Leon sat on top of one of the modules of his portable villa, the day's events and what had been discovered still running through his mind. He stared out into the deep, dark forest, trying to understand what the environment was telling him, and trying to make sense of the problem they'd been presented with.

As an enchanter, he couldn't understand just how Cassandra had been so affected, especially since he was still sure that he'd been affected to, to a lesser extent. After his experiences in the Serpentine Isles, having been led around by the nose by Jormun and that Primal God, Leon had made sure to study darkness magic in the eleven years since he'd left that awful island chain. He was no expert by any means, but his defenses on his armor were robust enough that he simply couldn't understand just how he'd been affected without so much as the faintest of signs that his defenses had been breached. That spoke either to power beyond his comprehension, or he was missing the point.

He greatly hoped it was the latter, for that was something he could actually address. If the root of this problem was simply beyond his ability to understand, or was so much more powerful than him that he couldn't even notice it, then he might have to turn back and give up on this expedition, and that was something that he was not at all willing to do without having *very* convincing reasons to do so.

In an attempt to understand this, he called upon all of his skill in magic—both of the magic that he wielded as a mage, and the skill he had as an enchanter—and tried to figure out how he'd try and accomplish the same effect.

Unfortunately, he couldn't think of any ways to replicate this feat. Make something invisible? He could do that in several different ways. Affect someone's perceptions and leave them stranded in the woods? Sure, he felt like that was within his capacity, so long as he had months of prep time and enough materials.

However, something so subtle that Cassandra was left with an unexplainable hole in her memory, and Leon had been led off-course in a forest multiple times left him feeling rather helpless.

[I don't suppose you know of anything that might explain this?] Leon asked Nestor after giving the dead man as detailed of an explanation as he could of the conundrum.

[I know of a myriad of different ways to accomplish this feat,] Nestor haughtily responded. [That you can't simply speaks to the volume of knowledge that you have yet to acquire, and how lacking in true skill you are.]

[Uh huh,] Leon grunted. He certainly didn't appreciate Nestor's arrogant tone, but he had no problem bowing the to the man's expertise, and he was fully capable of admitting that for all his skill in the arts of

enchanting, he was a rank amateur compared to his dead kinsman. Getting pissy over something like this simply wouldn't be productive.

[Get to the fucking point, ghost!] Xaphan irritably shouted, giving Leon some second-hand catharsis.

[Such enchantments were well-known during my time,] Nestor explained. [However, they weren't what you'd call 'common'. This research facility didn't have such protections when it was built, I can tell you that much.]

[Good to know,] Leon replied. [Can you provide any actual insight?]

[I'm getting to it, boy!] Nestor shot back.

[Faster, please.]

[I can't identify exactly what's being used,] Nestor growled, [but I can at least clarify some things. Firstly, I don't think it's using any darkness magic—at least, in your case. Such magic wouldn't affect you the way it has. Secondly, you'd know if it had. Thirdly, such magic just to make you fly off course would be terribly inefficient.]

[Ok, so I haven't run into any darkness magic. Can you guess as to what I *did* run into?]

[Why don't you make a guess of your own, since you're being so impatient?]

Leon scowled, but he played along anyway. He still had many hours left until sunrise, and a couple hours more after that before they could start their work.

[I've been wondering that very thing. I haven't been turned around in a forest in a long time. This place is as close to home as I've ever been in outside of the Forest of Black and White. And yet, somehow, I've gotten knocked off course. From what I can remember, I didn't even notice anything, at least until I *did*.]

[And you detect no darkness magic affecting your mind?] Nestor asked, clearly trying to lead Leon to where he wanted him to go.

[No. It's almost as if one moment, I'm on the right track, and then the next, I suddenly realize I've been flying in the wrong direction for a while.]

[The simplest answer is that you're simply mistaken.]

[I *wasn't*. I *don't* get turned around in forests.]

[Then if the fault is not with you, what's the most likely option after that?]

Leon took a deep breath, weighing the options in his head for a long moment before answering, [An illusion.]

[Good. That's what I was thinking, myself.]

Leon slowly nodded as he stared out into the forest, the entire place bathed in his magic senses. For all that he could see, the entire forest was empty, devoid of the smallest insects all the way up to the largest predators. It was so eerie, especially given what he'd seen over the past couple of days, and the only explanation was that false information was somehow being fed to him and his people. If the cause

was not darkness magic, then the only other explanation that he could think of was that what he was sensing wasn't what was actually there. The forest was lying to him, somehow.

[How?] Leon asked. [I can't sense even a hint of notable light magic. Besides, what kind of power requirements would this place need, to block out such a large section of the forest?]

[Who says that's what's happening?]

Leon almost responded immediately, but took another moment to stop and think. Then, he conjured his gauntlet with the gem that allowed him to telekinetically control stone. It was next to nothing to find a small pebble in the soil around his villa and summon it to him. Once it was within his grasp, he took a few seconds to use his meager earth magic to carve a light rune upon it. Once the pebble started glowing, Leon used his gauntlet to throw the thing as far as he possibly could.

The glowing stone was blasted away from him and out over the forest, traveling more than half a mile before it began to dip. However, by then, Leon had already seen what he needed to: about a thousand feet away from him, the glowing stone had vanished for a split second before reappearing again, like it had hit the bounds of an illusion enchantment, and the enchantment needed a moment to account for the stone hurtling out across the sky.

[So,] he said after a few seconds of thought, [This illusion... Is only around us?]

[An illusion is around you,] Nestor corrected. [I'm sure there are others.]

Leon nodded in agreement as he turned this realization over in his head. If this one enchantment was all there was, then surely, he'd have seen what the illusion was trying to hide long before now. His range for magic senses was a little over two hundred miles, after all.

As Leon sat thinking this over, Nestor continued, explaining, [There are quite a few complex things going on here, I think. Were I in charge of handling all of this, I would probably use several layers of illusion magic to ensure that people don't even realize there's something here, and if anyone got curious enough to test that, they'd still come up with nothing. For those who got *too* curious, then more conventional defenses might come into play.]

Leon thought about the monsters that had attacked his group so far, and of the many reports—now seeming a little strange in their frequency—of dangerous monsters in the area, and of how confused Cassandra had been when he'd found her earlier.

[Illusions to ward away curiosity...] Leon murmured. [Monsters for those who start approaching and to give this place a reputation... and finally darkness magic to make sure anyone who persists turns around and can't remember why...]

[Easy enough,] Nestor agreed. [Subtle. Such an enchantment scheme would play perfectly into how people might see a forest like this. Deep, dark, full of danger, and easy to get lost in. And if anyone manages to get past these defenses, I'm sure there are even more within.]

[Yeah...] Leon murmured. [At this point, I wouldn't be that shocked to see the research facility still operating in there, and with all of the Thunderbird Clan defenses still running. If that's the case, what might I expect?]

Nestor sighed dramatically. [Oh, I wouldn't be that certain the place is still up and running, but I suppose there wouldn't be much harm in assuming the worst. I would caution you against weapons like the 'Lances' that the people of this plane have aped, only much more dangerous. Golems are a given, I should think. Other than that, static wards like light barriers and fortifications of stone and metal are about what to expect. This place wasn't nearly as sensitive as my lab, or the prison where our little fiery friend was kept, but those places also had large local garrisons to ensure security. This place would've had a garrison, to be sure, which would've pulled out in our Clan's fall, leaving this facility without its most potent defense. As advanced as our wards are, they were all, for the most part, meant to stall an enemy long enough for a military response.]

[That's heartening to hear, I guess,] Leon said. [I'm sure there're more defenses now, though. This place is clearly not abandoned. But I question if it's human. Still, whatever it is, it doesn't want us here.]

[Are you going to turn around? Just let whatever this thing is toss you out like yesterday's trash?]

Leon grimly smiled. [Of course not. I'm not going to stop until I either get inside that research facility or confirm that there's nothing of it left. If someone's trying this hard to keep me out, then that only means there's something good in there, and I want it all the more.]

Chapter 740: Scouting the Warded Zone

Leon, hovering in the air, watched as his retinue spread out over the treetops. His entire party was with him, save for Elise and Talal, who'd both chosen to remain back at camp—not that he could blame them, given the dangers of the Prota Forest. However, Cassandra wasn't of the same mind, and despite her own brush with what Leon could only presume were the defenses of the research facility, she still insisted on joining them. In fact, so vigorously did she insist that Leon could only surmise that her brief mental subversion had done nothing but encourage her to find this place.

Along with Cassandra, four of the Evergolden escorts had accompanied them, including one of the seventh-tier mages and three sixth-tiers. The rest of their unit had remained at their camp, ensuring that it wasn't attacked and destroyed in their absence.

What Leon had assembled everyone here for was quite simple: before they could start trying to subvert the defenses keeping them out of the wide section of forest that he assumed the research facility lay within, they had to first map out its boundaries.

To some extent, this had already been done—the previous day's scouting missions to all of the sites with significant amounts of local stone had seen to that. What had Leon more confused was the fact that this area was on their maps. This large swathe of forest wasn't just a giant hole in their maps, which he was inclined to assume meant that cartographers had been through this region before.

However, he had to catch himself when making that assumption, because Cassandra couldn't remember having had her mind played with, combined with the fact that Leon could still see within this region with his magic senses—not that he could actually see anything of note. He supposed that meant none of the cartographers realized that they'd been forced out of the area, used their magic senses, and never realized that everything they were seeing were illusions.

Of course, all of this just meant that Leon didn't think he could entirely trust their maps, nor what he was seeing with his magic senses.

As he pondered these things, his retainers kept spreading out across the sky, until they were separated by miles, each. Since they were all in the air and high level mages, they could all still see each other, though.

[Everyone ready?] Leon asked using his mental communication technique. His people, all of them sans helmets to allow him to speak with them in this way, nodded, gave him thumbs up, or otherwise affirmatively acknowledged him. He then glanced at Cassandra and her people, and after a similar exchange, Leon said, [Then let's get to it. Remember, at the slightest sign of anything playing with your perceptions, halt and put on your helmet!]

Again, Leon's order was acknowledged, and their entire group began to slowly fly forwards. They didn't move in unison, however, with Leon, Valeria, Anzu, and the seventh-tier Evergolden mage all flying several hundred feet behind the others. They didn't know how powerful the initial effects of the mental subversion might be, or where the boundaries of the enchantment lay, so for the sake of ensuring the entire group didn't stumble into it all at once and have the entire party debilitated, these four kept an eye on everyone else ahead of them.

Like this, the group slowly inched across the sky, flying well below their speed limits and constantly on the lookout for anything at all that might pique their interest.

Alix, close to the middle of their group, was the first to react to something. Leon watched as, for a moment, she seemed to stumble in the air, then glance around as if trying to get her bearings. After a second or two, though, her helmet appeared over her head and she darted backwards a dozen feet and began furiously waving at Leon.

Leon waved back in the agreed-upon signal for her to wait there—with her helmet on, Leon's mental communication was blocked, leaving them reliant on visual communication.

Gaius was next, having a similar reaction to Alix. After him was one of the Evergolden mages, and then everyone else shortly thereafter. All of them froze in the air, and Leon hurriedly scrawled down their locations on his map.

Once all of that was said and done, Leon had a dozen points on his map showing the outer boundaries of this effect.

Only Leon hadn't pushed against this boundary yet today, and he was quite curious if he would experience something similar to the mild navigation issues that he'd experienced the day before, especially once he donned his helmet. So, with helmet in place and the other points marked, he slowly flew forward. After a few seconds, he blinked and realized that he was flying in a different direction than before. Despite focusing as much as he could, he couldn't even say what had happened, just that he simply realized that he wasn't slowly flying in the direction that he'd thought. He never even realized where any illusions began or ended.

He stopped and glanced back, noting with some relief that he hadn't traveled that far compared to everyone else, so he marked his location down on the map and then flew back.

Unfortunately, despite their numbers, they'd still need to do this many more times before they had a better feel for the borders of this effect, not to mention testing if these boundaries remained true on

the ground. If this effect was in the shape of a dome, then the boundaries Leon was marking might not be accurate to what they'd find down amongst the trees rather than flying over them.

So, with some resignation to the fact that this was going to take a while, Leon and Cassandra got everyone organized to start doing this all over again, but from a different starting point.

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"It looks like this *is* a dome," Leon said as he stared at the map on the table in front of him.

"But one that's *very* tall," Valeria noted from his left.

"Why would it need to be that big?" Cassandra wondered aloud. "This thing is more than a mile high! What could this thing be trying to hide that's so tall?"

Her ruby eyes flitted in Leon's direction as if expecting him to explain, but even if Leon knew the answer to that question, he didn't think he would've.

The three of them, along with the rest of Leon's retinue and the two seventh-tier Evergolden mages were all packed into the dining room of Leon's portable villa. Cassandra had offered the meeting room in her palace-tree, but Leon had pointed out that his dining room was just a little bit larger, and he wanted his retinue to join the meeting since they were a part of the mission.

That, and he just didn't want to meet again on Cassandra's turf. That might imply that she was running this expedition, and not him, and that was not an implication he wanted to let stand.

As for his map, he'd managed to narrow down the territory covered by this strange magic into a rough oval about forty miles long from the east to the west, and about thirty miles or so long from the north to the south at its widest points. This zone narrowed as it rose, eventually reaching about a mile and half high at its center—which, Leon was quick to note, wasn't the stone-rich site that Cassandra was going to investigate the day before. That spot, instead, was a little further west, a few miles removed from the center of this warded zone.

"A good question that I'm looking forward to having answered," Leon replied when he returned Cassandra's gaze.

The two stared at each other for a long moment before Leon turned his attention back to the map, but he could feel Cassandra's eyes linger on him for a moment.

Leon continued, "Now the question is how to get in there. Since Her Highness can't remember everything when she passed the threshold, that means we have no idea how quickly the mental intrusion ramps up, or even how much it might affect us when wearing gear that protects the mind from subversion..."

Cassandra glared at Leon for his little dig at her expense, but then suggested, "We could start cutting our way through the forest. That'll give us a good idea of how far we can get..."

Gaius then quietly suggested, "A rope would do the trick just fine, and might not antagonize anything here that wants this forest to remain intact."

He then found himself the target of Cassandra's ire, and he paled slightly before Leon tapped the table and flexed his aura, relieving the pressure Gaius was under.

"I'm of the same opinion as Gaius," Leon said as he stared challengingly at Cassandra. "Tie a rope around someone and send them into this marked zone. We'll monitor as far as we can."

Cassandra looked like she might try arguing, but after some contemplation, and exchanging glances with her seventh-tier followers, she just nodded.

"Fantastic," Leon said. "We still have a bit of time left in the day, why don't we try this now?"

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"Last chance to back out," Leon said to Alcander, who now stood in front of their group with a rope tied around his waist.

"Heh, back out?" Alcander snorted. "More like this is your last chance to take my place. Don't try and tell me that you're happy I'm going in and not you!"

Leon smiled wickedly and quietly whispered, "Don't tell Elise." Alcander wasn't wrong; he wanted to be the first one to explore this mysterious place, shrouded by some confusion-inducing magic. However, he knew that was quite reckless, and with Elise taking part in the expedition—even if she was back at camp rather than with them now—his recklessness had to take a step back.

Besides, he was also extremely curious to see just what was going to happen when Alcander went in there, and there was great value in observing from afar rather than experiencing for himself.

Alcander chuckled a few times, but then turned serious as he stared into the forest ahead of him.

It was dark, both from the lateness of the evening and from the sheer density of the untamed forest out here. Yet, he was a fifth-tier mage, and such darkness was no obstacle for him. Still, none of them could see very far into the forest without their magic senses, and Leon didn't even trust those right now.

"All right, then," Leon said as he stood back. "Ready when you are."

The rope around Alcander's waist was not only securely tied around a stone pillar conjured by one of Cassandra's mages, but also held by most of Leon's retinue. It was incredibly long, and another of Cassandra's mages was using a fascinating enchantment to rapidly growing thin vines that entwined around themselves to create more and more rope—no matter how far Alcander went, they'd have more than enough rope to pull him back. Only Anshu, Valeria, and Anna weren't holding the rope, as they were too busy watching their flanks and making sure they weren't going to be ambushed as they watched Alcander, but if needed, everyone could step in.

But with Anzu, Anna's Attican Snapper, and the rest of Leon's retinue holding the rope, Leon didn't think that Alcander was in much danger of not being recovered.

So, without much further ado, Alcander began confidently strolling into the forest, quickly vanishing into the dense darkness between the trees.

Leon watched, his magic senses locked onto Alcander and the area around him. He saw his retainer picking his way through trees and over dry riverbeds and around shallow pits. Alcander was in full

armor, his helmet secure, but Leon saw the moment that he started to be affected by the zone. Alcander's confident stride faltered for a moment, and he started looking around a little more. But he kept moving forward, showing that while he was starting to be affected, it wasn't quite to the point of total confusion that Leon had found Cassandra in the day before.

At least, not immediately. Alcander kept moving, his pace slowing, his head turning more and more frequently as if he were losing his way. And then he stopped, his head swiveling around as if he'd completely lost himself, and he got himself tangled up in the rope, soon falling to the ground. He flailed about like a drunk after a particularly bad night, and Leon was just about to calmly call this scouting mission off when Alcander suddenly disappeared.

Leon blinked in confusion, noting that most of the rope was still there, but Alcander himself and the last few feet of the rope were just... gone. What was left had fallen to the ground and ceased to move.

"Leon!" Cassandra shouted, but by then, Leon was already moving. Lightning surged through his body as his adrenaline kicked into gear. He could feel the self-recriminations coming on, but he'd barely taken thirty steps before Alcander suddenly appeared not too far away, on his feet, the rope still tied around his waist. He looked much the same as Cassandra had, staring around like he didn't know where he was, what he was doing, who he was, or even which way was up.

Leon turned in his direction and sprinted for his retainer. Alcander turned to watch in dull confusion as Leon seemingly appeared before him, and barely reacted until Leon hit him with a jolt of the Thunderbird's lightning.

Alcander fell, and a moment after he hit the ground, he shouted, "Ahh! What the fuck?!"

"Al?" Leon asked as he crouched down over his fallen retainer. "Are you all right?"

"Huh?" Alcander gave him a blank stare just barely visible behind his visor. "I mean, yeah, but... Wait, what's going on?"

Leon sighed, then held out his hand to help the larger man to his feet. "Come on, we'll explain on the way."

—

"Well, that was a good idea," Cassandra said with a hint of sarcasm once everyone was back in Leon's dining room. "Good to rule out any possibility, I suppose."

"Better to test the simple options, first," Leon retorted a little testily. "I think we're just damned lucky that we weren't attacked at all during all of that. It's been quiet today..."

"Maybe everything's giving us a wide berth after seeing how the last few groups got their teeth kicked in," Marcus suggested.

Leon frowned, but he supposed that made a degree of sense. Still, if Xaphan's theory about all of the creatures here being connected in some way held true, then it was possible that whatever was controlling them was simply holding back some reserves. He was just concerned that he couldn't sense anything around here. He knew that there were plant giants, manticores, and goat men, but he couldn't

sense hide nor hair of any of them. The forest for hundreds of miles seemed, as far as he could tell, to be dead silent.

"There are other tests we can run..." Leon murmured, thinking of the tracking arrow that Nestor and Xaphan had thrown together during the campaign on the Serpentine Isles. He'd learned the enchantment in the past eleven years and was confident that he could inscribe it onto anything. However, such a plan would only work if this confusion barrier was all that stood in their way...

"As far as I could tell," Cassandra said, "Your man was teleported."

"A surprising show of power," Leon muttered, "but I can't say you're wrong."

He'd seen enchantments that bent space before in Xaphan's prison, but he couldn't sense the same magic at play here. Of course, he could barely sense anything at all of use, but he supposed that was just par for the course at this point.

"This is a real conundrum," Marcus said. "Honestly, if Al was teleported in there after having any ability to resist taken by this mind-clouding magic, then I don't think there's any real way to get in there—at least not without weeks or months of prep work..."

He trailed off, but when Leon glanced at him, he found Marcus staring pointedly at him. Leon thought he knew what the former noble was getting at, and loath as he was to admit it, just like with Cassandra, he couldn't say that Marcus would've been wrong to voice it.

They didn't have months. Leon was already risking things with Heaven's Eye by leaving Occulara at such a critical time. He needed to take care of this in one month, at the most. Too much more time, and he wasn't sure if there would be anything left for him to return to in Occulara; the Director would consolidate his power too much for Leon to be a meaningful threat.

Leon glanced around at everyone else in the room and saw similar looks of defeat, especially in the eyes of the Evergolden guards. Even Maia, Valeria, and Elise didn't look particularly enthused, with Elise even offering Leon a sad, kind of resigned smile. Cassandra was the one exception, as she was staring at the map with a look of grim determination.

At this point, Leon guessed that Cassandra might simply refuse to leave. She wanted adventure, and they hadn't run into anything that legitimately threatened their strongest members—he briefly wondered just how concerned Cassandra was that she'd lost two members of the escort squads so far. If Leon and his retinue were to leave, he felt like he'd just be giving up this problem for Cassandra to solve, and he'd never know what was in the research facility.

'I've been too damned hasty,' Leon thought to himself in frustration. He might have to choose between the research facility and his position in Heaven's Eye.

"Let's get some rest," he declared. "It's late. We can try something else in the morning. There are still plenty of possibilities that we've yet to test, so let's not get disheartened and pack our bags just yet, yeah?"

He saw acceptance in his retinue, but a few rolled eyes and even one spiteful glare from Cassandra's people. Cassandra herself barely even looked up from the map.

“Tunneling?” she muttered. “That’s too obvious, but worth a shot, right? Maybe trying to blast our way in? Or flying directly down from above its barrier? But the teleportation...”

Leon smiled as everyone else filed out of the room. At the very least, he could appreciate Cassandra’s determination in this regard. He felt it, too. Though this day hadn’t been that promising, he wasn’t about to—

As he was losing himself in thought, a horn resounded over their camp, and Leon’s heart skipped a beat.

That horn blast could mean only one thing: the camp was under attack.