

Storm King 791

Chapter 791: Enemies in the Shadows

It was always a hard thing to pry the Sunlit Emperor away from his women and his palace. For the most part, he allowed handpicked men to oversee matters of state. He participated enough to not be an absentee Emperor and to keep an eye on his appointees, but he largely allowed his chosen ministers to govern with great autonomy. As a result, he spent nearly all of his remaining time in his palace sleeping with a member of his harem or training his magic power.

It was unbecoming of an Emperor to grow fat or lazy, his mother had always told him. While he didn't take many of her lessons to heart, that one was one that he always stuck to. He knew that it was his personal power more than anything that allowed him to retain his wealth and titles, and he couldn't allow it to atrophy.

The Sunlit Emperor greatly enjoyed his time in his palace. Sex with the most beautiful women in his Empire and growing his power were his two favorite things in all the world. So, aside from those few administrative duties that he forced himself to see to, there were few things that could pry him away from his chosen lifestyle.

One of those things were reports on old Thunderbird technology that his Empire had inherited. It was rare that there was any progress on them, but the Sunlit Emperor had laid out some plans to have a few select pieces brought to him for his personal experimentation.

Half a year after Leon departed from his Empire, on a bright sunny day, he found himself relaxing deep in his favorite private palace enjoying the attention of a dozen of his most recent concubines when one of his female attendants interrupted him. At first, he was excited, thinking that perhaps the Thunderbird artifacts had finally been covertly moved to the palace.

Unfortunately, he was disappointed to hear that he was interrupted for an entirely different reason...

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The Sunlit Emperor was *not* happy when he entered the private study that he'd chosen for this particular meeting. The study itself was as opulently appointed as befitted an Imperial palace, but its luxuries were lost on the Emperor as he glanced backward to ensure the door was closed, then collapsed into an armchair by the hearth in a most undignified fashion.

There he sat, slouching, as he seethed in resentment for having been pulled away from his pleasures. However, he only allowed himself this indulgence for several seconds before he straightened himself out.

It was a good thing he did, too, for not a moment later, there came a knock at the door, and a second later, it opened, revealing the face of his most trusted secretary, and behind him, the grim visage of the Keeper himself.

It was incredibly rare for any of the plane's tenth-tier mages to meet in person. He knew that the Lord Protector and the Grand Druid met on occasion, but apart from their brief dalliances, mages of their caliber meeting in person happened *maybe* once in a millennium, at the most frequent. In fact, the

Sunlit Emperor had never met any of his equals in person, not even when he acceded to the throne of his Empire.

As such, instead of rising to welcome the Keeper into his study, the Sunlit Emperor remained seated, his expression carefully measured, yet his eyes never once wavered from the poorly-dressed man.

As was his custom, the Keeper wore nothing more than shapeless brown robes, attire that the Sunlit Emperor—dressed as he was in elaborate, multicolored formal wear—took in with disdain. The Keeper himself obviously didn't care for any luxuries around him, and made it clear by keeping his eyes closed and navigating purely with magic senses.

He took a seat opposite the Sunlit Emperor, and even after the secretary closed the door behind the Keeper and sealed them in behind some of the most powerful privacy wards within the palace, neither tenth-tier mage spoke for a long time.

The Sunlit Emperor tapped his finger on his armrest, waiting for the Keeper to speak first. However, when the veritable beggar refused to even open his mouth for what seemed an eternity, the Sunlit Emperor finally said in a tone about a thousand percent brighter and cheerier than he felt, "So, my friend, what brings you to my neck of the woods? It must be urgent if you came with such *short notice...*"

'More like no notice at all...' Sunlit bitterly thought.

The Keeper sat there, infuriatingly stone-faced and silent, for several more seconds. "I came here..." he finally uttered, "... to speak with you about a matter of grave importance..."

Again, the Sunlit Emperor waited for several seconds. "What matter?" he asked when the Keeper kept his silence. Changing his tone, the Sunlit Emperor demanded, "Speak, old man. You come to my doorstep without invitation or announcement, don't play coy with the reason why you've come."

"Leon Raime," Keeper stated, surprising the Sunlit Emperor not at all, yet still inspiring no small amount of anger for a multitude of reasons.

"The fleets down south are shattered, the bodies of our soldiers lie scattered and rotting about the Sword. The Sky Devils have pressed us hard and spilled our blood. Instead of speaking on their threat, you instead come here for an insignificant boy? A boy coddled and kissed by Heaven's Eye?"

"The advance of the Sky Devils make this matter even *more* important!" Keeper insisted. For just a moment, his eyelids cracked, and light spilled forth like he'd stuffed a pair of stars into his eye sockets. Killing intent erupted from his body in equal measure, though none of it yet directed at Sunlit. "You know why this is important! You saw the same things I did!"

Sunlit just about stated that he saw nothing that concerned him. His mouth was already curling upward in an arrogant smirk before he managed to catch his tongue. "Let's not beat around the bush, Keeper. Tell me what you want. Tell me what concerns you. We can speak further if I share your concerns."

By this point, the Keeper had regained his composure, though Sunlit had enjoyed seeing the bald man finally express some kind of emotion, for once.

"I keep the memories of the atrocities committed by that boy's ancestors," Keeper plainly stated. "They will never be repeated while I yet live. That Leon Raime met with the Sky Devils even briefly concerns me greatly. I fear that they may come to some kind of accord. If the Sky Devils are reunited with the blood of their natural ruler, then they may again visit atrocities upon Aeterna that seem forgotten to all but my Sentinels."

"The Sky Devils have gotten far enough without the boy," Sunlit pointed out.

"All the more reason not to allow them to rally around Leon Raime."

"If you're that worried about him, then why don't you just go and kill him? That would resolve your concerns, no?"

"The Lord Protector and Grand Druid have betrayed their ancestors and entered into terrible alliance with the boy," Keeper spat.

Sunlit kept his expression neutral, but his mood soured further. "That's... *concerning*. Are they getting in your way?"

"Yes... and no..."

"... Is that it, old man? Going to give me an answer like that and leave me hanging? Explain your meaning."

"The boy... has taken possession of a tau pearl."

Sunlit rolled his eyes in a rather exaggerated fashion and had to stop himself from audibly scoffing. "Leave superstition for the powerless; we are above such nonsense. The boy is a descendant of the Thunderbird, is it any wonder that he has artifacts of surprising power and origin?"

"The tau do not give pearls lightly," Keeper growled. "Neither do the pearls themselves give power recklessly."

"So you say. Is this something that will cloud your judgment?"

The Keeper went quiet for a moment, but when he spoke, he did so with conviction. "No. Leon Raime must die before he brings death to our plane. There can be no alternative. The power he bears cannot be allowed to exist."

Sunlit sat there and smiled, waiting for the Keeper to finally get to his main point. However, once again, he had to prod the older man to speak again. "You wouldn't have come all the way here just to *discuss* Leon Raime. So, tell me, why have you come to my Empire and bothered me?"

"Ilion and Evergold have allied with Leon Raime. As things now stand, the boy is now untouchable. And soon enough, if they harvest the fruits of his presence for too long, the balance of power that has maintained the peace for so long throughout our Empires will be disrupted. We must oppose the west and the north, or else they will surpass us in power, and we will never be able to contain Leon Raime."

'*Quite self-serving, aren't you?*' Sunlit thought contemptuously.

"Are you asking for an alliance?"

"I am. Not against the west and the north, but against Leon Raime. All that we can do to stop his taking power must be done."

Sunlit smiled, though the smile didn't quite reach his eyes. "I'm... amenable to such a request. I have no love for Leon Raime, and actually quite agree with you that his influence upon our plane must be curbed. However, you've forgotten one powerful player that he has in his corner: Heaven's Eye."

"Merchants and bankers," Keeper spat. "Men of no consequence."

"Money men they may be, but money has power. Those who deny that it does are fools. And Heaven's Eye has *lots* of money. You may not care what they do to your Empire, but I care about what they might do to mine. To risk reducing our capacity to wage war at a time when the Sky Devils are rising against us... Surely you can see why I hesitate? To completely replace the commerce and industry that Heaven's Eye has within my Empire with local guilds would take decades, and even then, those sectors would still take at least a century to recover at the very least. If we're going to go that far, we might as well invite the Sky Devils back to the mainland to give us deeper ramming."

"You would bow your head to those who think of nothing but silver and gold, and let our true enemy escape due judgment?"

Sunlit stared at Keeper in disbelief. "How did your stupid ass rise as high as you have? How about you stop interpreting my words in any way you wish and actually listen to what I'm saying? I'm asking if you have any idea how to handle the massive fucking hole that Heaven's Eye will leave in my economy and how to handle the subsequent tremendous loss of tax revenue that I might stand to lose if they pull out, you fucking moron!"

The Keeper withstood Sunlit's brief tirade with poise enough that Sunlit had to stop himself from going further.

"I will not make any public declarations," Sunlit growled. "I will not publicly ally with you against the north and the west. If you wish to act against Leon Raime and those who allow him to exist, then I will support you, but I will *not* do so publicly."

"You know there's an animal out in the northeast, living somewhere past the Andoran Wastes far beyond even the boundaries of distant Beloran and the limits of human civilization. It's a strange creature, like an enormous bird with a fluffy body and small head upon a long, thin neck. I won't bore you with the details, but these idiot birds bury their heads in sand when frightened. You and the rest of the cock-riders in the other Empires all remind me of them. The Sky Devils press against us, yet you bury your heads in the sand, allowing yourselves to be absorbed in meaningless issues."

"I will support you against Leon Raime and the others, but know that my focus lies in the south, across the sea. My focus is on the Sky Devils."

'And a few more things besides...'

Keeper scowled, but in the end, he accepted Sunlit's tacit support. He didn't stay in the palace for much longer, leaving the Sunlit Emperor alone again. Only then did Sunlit let the grin he'd been suppressing at this outcome reveal itself. He had what he wanted from Leon, there was no reason to protect him. The

possibility that Ilion and Evergold would benefit from their relationship with Leon had his grin faltering, but the knowledge of what he would soon gain from his own projects had it steadied.

It was with the knowledge that his plans weren't affected by this that had him smiling all the way back to his harem.

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Things couldn't possibly be worse for him. Not long ago, his vampires had grown throughout Occulara, their power, backed by that of Heaven's Eye, growing with them. They numbered in the hundreds, though few were vampires of any note. Of them, he and Valentina were the strongest, the only eighth-tier vampires that he knew of on Aeterna.

Now, it seemed that he was the last. Somehow, Valentina had managed to not only get captured, but convince her Heaven's Eye captors to spare her, and rid herself of her vampirism. How she did this, he knew not. Why Amon had done nothing to stop her was an even deeper mystery, though when Amon had told him of all this, he'd detected a note of frustration and deep rage within the demon that he'd never heard before. It made him think that perhaps Amon had lost Valentina not from neglect or apathy, but that this Lord of Flame had tried to kill her and failed.

Such a possibility disturbed him. He'd given himself to the demon for power, and here Valentina was showing that Amon's power was far more limited than he ever realized.

The thought of surrendering had occurred to him several times since leaving Occulara. If Leon Raime was willing to let Valentina in, then why not him? He'd made an attempt on Leon's life before, but it wasn't like Leon knew that. Given that Valentina had been involved in that particular incident, he didn't think his former comrade would reveal that to their target...

But no, he wasn't Valentina. If he even tried, he knew without a shadow of a doubt that Amon would have no problems killing him, if only to prove a point. Even though he was the last of Amon's vampires on this plane with this level of power—at least, as far as he knew—he was still expendable.

So, he was stuck. His deal with the Director had fallen through, depriving him of his most powerful ally, though thankfully, he'd never dealt with the Director personally, leaving his cover intact. He still had his position, and with the current political climate in Occulara, he was eminently grateful for it.

For now, he had the time to devise a new strategy. However, he wouldn't be alone in that.

Even now, he sat in one of his homes in the Ilumerian Wetlands, a small manor on a rocky cliff overlooking the seemingly-endless swamp. He was deep in the dungeons, extracting every bit of use he could from the crew of the merchant barge he and his closest followers had attacked just a few days before, draining them of their blood to fuel his communion with their Lord. He'd had to keep some of them off the women as Amon preferred his sacrifices 'unspoiled', so he knew that there was some discontent in their ranks, but for now, so long as Amon shared with him the wisdom he needed, all would be well.

The sacrifices were properly drained, the runes were drawn in blood, the sacrificial bowl was filled with the remaining blood, and when the time came, he drank every drop. He felt the power pulled from the blood and flow through his veins, using his own blood as a medium, providing him nourishment and

power, while also flowing through his heart and into his soul realm. From there, his contract with Amon had the power flowing onward to the Lord of Flame.

It wasn't much in the grand scheme of things, he was sure, but it was more than enough to get his patron's attention.

Almost immediately, the crackling voice of his patron resounded through his mind, speaking his name in little more than a whispered growl. He couldn't help but nervously run his hand through his jet-black hair in barely-suppressed fear.

[My Lord...] he responded. [Leon Raime. He grows in power and influence. Those who defend him are powerful, far more so than me.]

[Straighten tongue,] Amon commanded, and despite his eighth-tier power, he almost lost himself to fear. Amon was more powerful than anything else he knew of on the plane, his power so thoroughly eclipsing the tenth-tier that comparison was hilariously insulting.

[If I am to successfully kill the boy and the demon within him, then I need comparable power,] he said, his heart so madly beating that it seemed to be trying to escape his chest. One did not simply *ask* a Lord of Flame for power and expect to receive it for free, after all.

[Power comes at a price...] Amon said, and he could practically feel the demon's smile.

[Such cost comes as no surprise,] he replied. [I've paid for all power I've received in blood, sweat, and tears. What price would this come out to?]

[One thousand souls, third-tier or higher, and I will boost you to the ninth-tier,] Amon stated. He knew his Lord well enough to know that he wasn't going to get another offer. He'd witnessed other vampires attempt to haggle with their Lord, and in the best-case scenarios, their requests for power were immediately denied.

In the worst-cases, they burst into flame, their demonic patron retaliating for the perceived insult.

[Done,] he stated, and he felt his patron's attention fade, and a sense of elated lightness settled about him. It was hardly ever apparent during their communions, but his demonic patron's attention was as weighty as all the world, but he'd only notice such pressure once it released.

'Now,' he thought to himself with perverse glee, 'I need to find a thousand mages who won't be missed...'

This was why he resorted to vampirism. He'd been an eighth-tier mage for so long, but only now did he have the opportunity to rise to the next tier. Once he obtained such power, it would be time to make his move. No more would he be testing Leon Raime's defenses, it was time to act personally.

He'd have Leon Raime's head soon enough, and then he could pay Valentina a visit. It would be for the best that he find out just how the woman had managed to slip through Amon's clutches...

Chapter 792: Five Years

The steel before him glowed a brilliant blue, the metal having heated up to a terrible temperature. So hot was it that if Leon's enchantments weren't so powerful, it would've liquified in a second, and then

vaporized a second later. As far as most conventional forging techniques went, it was far and away an impractical amount of heat, but in this case, Leon needed it greatly.

The weapon he was forging was to be tremendously powerful, and to properly channel the power that it needed to, he needed to use an unorthodox forging technique. In this, he'd been helped by Sid. His blacksmithing teacher wasn't that familiar with enchanting, but with the ideas he'd had over the past few years, together they'd devised this new technique to help prepare steel to receive enchantments.

With the steel so hot, Leon could manipulate it with great ease, carving runes beneath the weapon's surface in the structure of the metal itself rather than having to rely entirely on etching the runes directly onto the steel once the steel had cooled. It was a new technique—at least to him—that demanded a great amount of magic power and severe control over fire and earth magic, but Leon hadn't been slacking since the sacking of Argos, and his magical skill had grown by leaps and bounds. To finish this weapon using this new technique was hardly a challenge.

His hands glided across an enchantment control console next to the furnace where the weapon hung in the air. The furnace itself resembled little more than a firepit in the center of his workshop, but all along its surface and spiraling out from its edges were a complex web of fire, light, and earth enchantments that both generated and contained the fire magic within. Using an equally-complex bank of control consoles next to the furnace, Leon could quickly and easily inscribe the enchantments he wanted directly within the steel he was forging.

In this case, the weapon he was making was a glaive—or rather, a foot and half long glaive blade. The rest of the weapon was complete, he only had to finish the blade and then assemble the weapon.

Fortunately, he was almost done, and his heart raced with excitement. However, the excitement he felt was almost nothing compared to Valeria's, who stood next to him, staring at the blade as if hypnotized as Leon finished using the control console to carve runic glyphs within the blade. Leon could feel her eighth-tier aura flexing with glee and see her fingers curling in anticipation of wrapping around her new weapon's haft.

It didn't take him long to finish. The weapon cooled, then was quenched and tempered using oil mixed with blue wyvern's mana and Leon's own black fire, then he added a few artistic flourishes such as some silver trimming and filigree along the back edge of the blade, forming stylized lightning bolts flashing around fingernail-sized snowflakes. Finally, he added a few more enchantments to the blade etched into its surface to help it keep its edge.

"Is it done?" Valeria asked as she took in the finished blade.

"Yes," Leon said, holding it out for her to inspect.

It was a marvelous work if he did say so himself. The steel had been heat-colored to a dark blue, and while the silver additions were clear, they didn't distract from the beauty of the blade. It glimmered in the light, and the metal had been given a rippling, water-like pattern from the way Leon had forged it. For an ice mage, it was perfect.

Valeria's smile threatened to separate her jaw from the rest of her face, so Leon took the blade back and headed over to his desk, where the rest of the weapon waited.

There, an eight-foot-long haft of thunder wood had been prepared. Helen had treated it with an oil that colored it sky blue, while Tikos had manipulated the surface of the wood into an artistic twisted shape, perfect for holding onto in the heat of battle. Finally, Leon had added another spike to the weapon's butt, a spike that could well serve as a spear in a pinch, forged similarly to the glaive's blade.

It was a trivial thing for Leon to affix the blade to the end of the glaive, and when he did, all of his hard work was finished—the weapon glowed briefly as the enchantments in the blade linked up with the enchantments in the haft, the weapon itself seeming to celebrate its completion. It had taken him weeks to finish this weapon, and looking at the finished product, he had to say that it was as perfect as his skills could possibly make it.

When in hand, it would greatly enhance Valeria's water and ice magic, while the thunder wood would give her a degree of control over and protection from lightning, as well. Several other enchantments Leon had put into the haft used thunder wood's apparently endless ability to generate lightning magic and either channeled that power or altered it into ice magic, giving Valeria that much more of a power boost. Aside from those enchantments, Leon thought the blade capable of cleaving through all but the most robustly-enchanted materials, would certainly never dull without hitting something extraordinarily magical, and had such heft to it that only a powerful mage could wield it.

Valeria took it in hand and gave it a few practice swings, showcasing her eighth-tier power in spectacular fashion by twirling blade around like it was practically weightless.

"How does it feel?" Leon asked with a smile of pride.

Valeria paused, then lowered her new weapon. "Perfect," she purred as she rushed over and pressed herself against Leon, kissing him with a heat and intensity that promised much more later on.

When they finally separated several minutes later, Leon breathed a hearty, "Good..."

Valeria flashed him a wink, then took her weapon and headed out of his workshop, speeding as quickly as she could to their training hall to put her new weapon through its paces.

Leon breathed deeply, the forging process having been mentally tiring, but rewarding beyond measure. Valeria had been the last of his people who had gotten a weapon personally forged by him using all of his skills, greatly increasing the power of his retinue. However, as powerful as the weapons that he'd given all of his people were, they paled in comparison to all the gains they'd made over these past few years.

They were now a little more than five years out from the sacking of Argos, and in that time, Leon had not once stood idle. He was in the playground of giants, now—or at least, he was compared to the enemies he was more used to facing. He needed more power, and he needed it as soon as possible.

In that vein, the single most important thing that happened for his retinue happened about a year and a half after the sack of Argos, when the apple orchard finally produced a haul that Leon cared about. With Tikos in charge of the place, the regular trees had produced apples at a startling rate. They were delicious, to say the least, so much so that the apples from his orchard had quickly become the most popular brand in Occulara, made even more so by their relative scarcity, despite great tree-sprite-powered yields.

However, it was the Hesperidic Apples that Leon cared about, and that took so long to finally mature. They rarely bore fruit, but the apples they did bear were practically miraculous, serving to greatly aid any mage in whatever tier they were in to advance to the next. Even the dreaded sixth-to-seventh jump when a mage had to identify their own nature and build a Mind Palace that reflected it was made easier with the help of Hesperidic Apples.

For him, they were much less spectacular, though no less amazing, stimulating the growth of his soul realm to a degree that he'd never before experienced. It had taken him almost thirty-two years for his soul realm to reach a little over two hundred miles in radius, but in the past five years, thanks to the Hesperidic Apples, he was brushing against the doors of the ninth-tier, with his soul realm's radius now measuring just under one thousand miles.

Even without another Hesperidic Apple, Leon estimated that he could reach the ninth-tier in less than two years. However, it was about time for the trees to produce another batch, and just one more Hesperidic Apple was all he needed to reach the ninth-tier.

The rest of his family and retainers had realized similar gains. They'd all shot up a tier or two, leaving even those who focused less on magical training, like Helen, much stronger than they were before. In fact, Helen had grown from fifth-tier to the sixth, while all the rest of his retainers had reached the seventh-tier at least. Anna, Valeria, Anshu, and Red, meanwhile, reached the eighth. Gaius, Alix, Marcus, Alcander, Talal, Exotikos, and Anzu were all of the seventh-tier, and of them, Anzu was the closest to the eighth.

Leon couldn't help but beam with pride when he thought about his griffin. Anzu was almost twenty years old, now, and moved about with what Leon could only assume was a human level of intelligence. He estimated that Anzu himself was only one Hesperidic Apple away from ascending up another tier, and when he did, Leon hoped that he might finally grow strong enough to take human form. That power hadn't manifested when Anzu reached the seventh-tier, to Leon's quiet disappointment, but he was certain Anzu would realize it when he reached the eighth.

However, for all the progress that everyone had made, there was still one person in his home who outshone them all: Maia, the formerly eighth-tier river nymph, holding the rank of Naiad amongst her people—or at least, she did, when she still had river nymphs attending her. If that were still the case, she'd now be a Pleione, for she'd managed in the last five years to ascend to the ninth-tier, keeping her position as the strongest member of Leon's family and retinue.

The only one that could possibly match her—and given that he wasn't partaking of the Hesperidic Apples, Leon didn't typically count him the same way—was Xaphan, who'd also finally, after almost twenty years, managed to reach the ninth-tier as well. It had seemed an interminably long time to Leon, but such a span of time was nothing to the former Lord of Flame, who admitted that Leon's current enemies and allies were skewing his standard a bit, and twenty years between eighth and ninth-tiers was still a tremendously swift rate of recovery or advancement.

Leon had to admit to some jealousy on his part, but given how close he was to the ninth-tier, he didn't let it go to his head.

Instead, he was just happy that the powers his people were now achieving were potent enough that he didn't think someone like the Keeper would be able to successfully attack his villa again without plenty of back-up.

Which, of course, any tenth-tier mage would undoubtedly have, but a step forward was a step forward.

Fortunately, Leon hadn't needed to test his defenses since the Keeper's attack. The Lord Protector frequently stayed with him, practically living in Leon's villa for almost a third of the year. The Grand Druid wasn't able to match him for sheer time, but between the two of them, there was a tenth-tier mage in Leon's villa during at least half of the year. Those times when they weren't available, Leon and the Director made sure that he had a much larger security detachment assigned to his villa than usual. It wouldn't stand for long against an attack of the Keeper's caliber, but it was more than enough to make a statement. Leon had Ilion, Evergold, and Occulara with him.

Part of the reason why Leon hadn't had many problems—or so he assumed, anyway—was the new status quo in the south. The Sky Devils hadn't pushed much past the Sword, to everyone's surprise, but they hadn't left their garrisons on the Sword so understaffed that the island could be easily reconquered. There had already been two attempts made to reclaim the island, each led by the Sunlit Empire, but both had been repelled with little to show for them.

The Sky Devils made the occasional raid along the coast of the Free Cities of the Tam or the Pegasi States, but for the most part, they stuck to their own waters. Commerce was able to continue without too many interruptions, and the economic impact of their actions five years before was thusly blunted.

But the build-up of arms down in the south couldn't be ignored. It was obvious to anyone with any knowledge of the situation at all that the Empires were not content with this new status quo, and that they weren't ready to write off the Sword just yet. There had even been rumblings among the most hawkish sectors of the Empires to eventually push all the way to the Sky Devil's Hell itself, and finally put an end to their threat once and for all.

Leon didn't think such a thing was even remotely feasible, given how the Imperial fleets had been performing so far. He was quite content with the current situation, though he knew that it couldn't last for too long. The only thing he was concerned about was the sheer lack of information coming out from the Sword. He'd given Anshu plenty of leeway to try and get into contact with the Sky Devils, but in these five years, little progress had been made. He was hardly about to stop trying, though.

With these thoughts in mind, Leon readied himself to leave his workshop. He still had some thunder wood on his work desk, and all of that went right into his soul realm before he did anything else.

With Tikos, Helen, and Elise's help, Leon had managed to create more thunder wood about three years after the sack of Argos. It had taken quite a few tries, but they'd finally managed to find a suitable tree. Unfortunately, on that first successful attempt, they'd only managed to create a few splinters of thunder wood, but in the two years since, the process had been refined enough that Leon had enough of the material to use in the weapons of all of his retainers.

But weapons for his retainers wasn't the only use he had for thunder wood. One of the first things he'd used thunder wood for was to make a new bow. With the power of the thunder wood, any arrow fired from it would explode with lightning once it hit its target, and even without enchantments, it could still

shoot an arrow more than a thousand feet. *With* enchantments, the effective range of the bow was more than half a mile—it could shoot arrows even farther than that, but accuracy greatly suffered.

With that first bow serving as a good lesson, Leon made bows for the rest of his retainers, and then crafted an even newer, more powerful bow for himself. That particular bow didn't even need a bowstring, being able to fire off bolts of lightning instead of physical arrows.

He was able to create such a bow thanks to the advances made in Heaven's Eye during this time. He had a few working prototypes of a second generation Lightning Lance, which then helped to inform his bow designs. He'd not yet had much of a chance to test any of these new pieces of gear in actual combat yet, since he hadn't left Occulara at all in these past five years, but he felt like that was going to change sooner than he'd like. At the very least, they worked well enough in testing that he was confident they'd perform well in combat.

As he finished making sure all of his sensitive materials had been put away and his workshop had been properly locked up, Leon made his way back to his villa, where he found Tikos already waiting for him. His villa had been heavily damaged in the Keepers attack five years ago, but now, the structure and the estate as a whole showed no signs of such an attack ever taking place. All the damage had been repaired, and Leon had rebuilt his villa's defensive enchantments even stronger than before.

"Leon," Tikos whispered through the piece of amber in its wrist as Leon approached.

"Tikos," Leon replied with a broad smile. "I didn't think you were going to be here for another week, at least! Did something happen?"

"No, everything fine," Tikos replied. "Fact in, the apples have well grown, faster than expected."

With an almost theatrical flourish, the seventh-tier tree sprite conjured an apple into its hand. The apple was fairly large, though not overly so by apple standards. But it was the color of polished gold and glowed with a mesmerizing inner light. Leon knew that beneath its skin, it was less fruit and more concentrated magic power—though it was still just as sweet as a fresh green apple.

Leon had to restrain his instinct to grab the fruit right away, but it was damned difficult knowing that he was only one Hesperidic Apple away from the ninth-tier. Instead, he kept business at the forefront of his mind.

"How large was the yield?" Leon asked.

"For everyone, one," Tikos answered. "Two are extra."

Leon smiled, his greed greatly stimulated. His apple trees typically produced more than enough for all of his people to get at least one apple, but those few spare apples the trees occasionally gave him were reserved for other people. As beneficial as it would be to give one of his retainers an extra apple, he judged that it would be just as damaging to morale as a whole if he were seen to favor one retainer over another like that. On rare occasions, he gave a couple to Penelope, bringing her and the Director in on what exactly his apple orchard truly contained. Most of his spare apples, however, were reserved for Anastasios and the Grand Druid—they didn't ask questions after the first time, and Leon never gave any answers. They *were* allies, after all, and so far, during these past five years, neither the Director nor any

of the tenth-tier mages had yet given him any reason to doubt their sincerity and commitment to their alliances with him.

Thankfully, none of them made any unreasonable demands for more of the apples. The Director, in fact, hardly even seemed to want any, and Penelope had been extremely happy just to receive the two that Leon had given her. They weren't enough to boost her to the ninth-tier, but she was now getting quite close. Anastasios and the Grand Druid, meanwhile, both stated that they were going to give their apples to younger members of their Empires—the Grand Druid even specifically told Leon that she was going to give her apples to Cassandra.

Leon, now staring at the first of the latest batch, gritted his teeth to keep from licking his lips and said to Tikos, "Let's get everyone together, then. If the harvest has come early, then we eat early. No need to put this off."

Tikos nodded, and Leon took a deep breath as he used his darkness magic to call all of his family and retainers together.

It was time for him to finally reach the ninth-tier.

Chapter 793: Ascension

Leon, his family, and his retinue gathered in his training hall, all save for Anshu. Helen alone looked rather calm and serene, her sixth-tier aura balanced and still. Leon knew that training wasn't her thing, but the power boost of a Hesperidic Apple wasn't something even she could turn down. Gaius, Alix, Marcus, Alcander, Elise, Talal, and Anzu gathered around Tikos, all of them looking radiant with their seventh-tier auras flickering and writhing in varying states of excitement. Valeria, Anna, and Red, meanwhile, stood apart, calmer even than Helen, their eighth-tier auras solid and almost unmoving. Anna's war beasts, however, were not participating. As far as Leon was concerned, they were growing powerful enough without eating one of his precious apples.

For his part, Leon could barely contain his excitement. The next apple he ate would push him up to the ninth-tier, something he'd been working towards now for more than fifteen years. A level of power unthinkable to just about anyone in the Bull Kingdom, a degree of power held by less than a thousand people on the entire plane.

One of those people, of course, stood next to him, her bronze skin shining, her light brown hair lustrous, her gentle smile brilliant. [Ready?] she whispered into his mind, their connection stronger than it had ever been before.

Leon turned to Maia, smiled, and nodded.

"Tikos! Let's get it moving!"

"Working!" the tree sprite called back as it conjured all the requisite Hesperidic Apples from its soul realm and started passing them out in order of weakest to strongest.

Helen received hers without so much as a sound, but Alix loudly sighed as Tikos placed the apple in her hand. She'd been the most recent of Leon's retainers to reach the seventh-tier, having just done so following the last harvest.

“It’s going to be weird eating these again without getting fucked up,” she quietly observed.

“There’s one thing to miss about being sixth-tier,” Alcander wistfully added.

“I, for one, can do without having all of my worst failures thrown back in my face,” Gaius protested.

For obvious reasons, Leon had no personal experience with how the apples affected one in the lower tiers. As far as he knew, the specific effect was different for every person. However, from what he’d seen over the past few years, eating a Hesperidic Apple while in the sixth-tier induced intense dreams and vivid hallucinations. He’d had to corral his people on multiple occasions after eating the apples since their minds would often practically leave their bodies. Once, Alcander’s magic body even left his physical body and almost floated out of the training room, putting him in immense danger. It had been a nerve-wracking few hours trying to get the man back into his physical body, especially since he hadn’t been visible at the time, Leon only knowing where he was through use of his magic senses.

So, the apples were somewhat drug-like in effect, but fortunately, they induced no physical addiction—or so Helen and Elise determined after Leon insisted on medical examinations after their first harvest, when Valeria, Anna, and Anshu, who’d actually been present following the first harvest, all essentially passed out after eating their apples. Other than the ‘visions’, the apples had no undue side effects. Indeed, while the visions were apparently different for every person, they greatly aided those who ate the apples in understanding themselves, enough so that they were more easily able to construct their Mind Palaces, assert much greater control over their soul realms, and rise to the seventh-tier.

Fortunately, only Helen was weak enough to experience those visions, and Anna was more than ready to watch over her sister until she came back down, so Leon didn’t have to worry about herding a bunch of stoned high-tier mages.

Leon was the last to receive his apple, Tikos passing him the golden fruit as everyone else watched, their apples in hand.

“No need to wait for me,” Leon said with a smile, despite knowing they probably wanted to see his ascension first. Maia’s hadn’t been particularly extraordinary, but he couldn’t exactly say it would be the same for him. Most of his ascensions had come during battle or some other cataclysmic event. The battle with Jormun, the storm at the Cradle, the fight against Hakon Fire-Beard, the apparently massive storm kicked up by the awakening of his Inherited Bloodline.

His ascension to sixth and seventh-tiers came without much fanfare, though, so he was able to keep his own expectations low.

So, watched by everyone else, Leon brought the golden fruit to his lips and took a big bite. The fruit was delicious, putting just about everything else that Leon had ever eaten to shame. Sweet, refreshing, juicy, these words took on a whole new meaning when the food they were attached to was practically magic power in physical form.

As was usual, once the flavor hit his tongue, Leon devoured the fruit in barely more than a minute. Despite how it felt when he trained his magic senses on it, the insides were fairly standard for apples, but as the fruit settled into his stomach, he felt his body start to heat up.

Without much delay, he sat down and cast his gaze inward, taking in all that was happening.

It started relatively slowly, with power spreading throughout his body like heat, his stomach the source. But it quickly ramped up as the eaten apple became inundated with his body's magic power. Soon, before Leon had even managed to get entirely comfortable, he felt a sudden rush of power flood his body like a dam broke. However, instead of power surging through his body like a wild river through a burst dam destroying all in its way, this power was almost paradoxically soft and light, and rapidly changed to become indistinguishable from the power his body had naturally generated within his bone marrow.

Still, this was too much power for his body to hold all at once, so the pathway to his soul realm within his heart opened wider just by instinct, and the titanic power contained within the apple began rushing through the opening like water down a drain. A gargantuan amount of power flowed into Leon's soul realm, and he could feel it settling into him, pushing the power he'd already stored out further, pushing on the boundaries of his soul realm in turn and expanding it out into the Mists of Chaos.

His soul realm grew rapidly, but unlike the last time it had done so without the apples, it didn't feel uncontrolled, the result of an over-tuned enchantment designed to be used on someone else with a completely different Inherited Bloodline. There wasn't any intelligence behind the Hesperidic Apples, but if there had been, Leon couldn't have been that surprised, for the power the apple flooded him with was practically designed to get his soul realm to grow about as fast as it could without pushing it over the limit into more dangerous territory.

In less than ten minutes, Leon's soul realm grew twenty miles, and he cast himself down into it, his magic body taking off into the air even before he'd opened his eyes. In a flash of lightning and boom of thunder, he appeared at the edge of his soul realm and watched as the boundaries of his domain forced back the dangerous Mists of Chaos, until finally, after so many years, his soul realm exceeded one thousand miles in radius.

Leon felt the change resonate through the entire space. His soul realm shuddered, then suddenly expanded another twenty miles in much the same way someone might take off their belt after a feast and let their belly spill out. He felt the subtle currents of magic power within his soul realm shift, and he knew that his aura would change in response to reflect his greater power. His power was now, strangely, both more potent and tamer, more in control. The change from eighth to ninth-tier, power wise, wasn't that great, but it was still a significant step on his magical journey.

Leon watched as his soul realm continued to expand all the way until it reached a thousand and one hundred miles. It was a larger jump than he got from the last apple he ate, but he supposed the jump from reaching the ninth-tier was a big part of the reason for that. He'd been warned that the efficacy of the Hesperidic Apples would diminish as he grew in strength; never quite becoming worthless, but not remaining quite as useful if he ever achieved Apotheosis. He estimated, based on what how much he'd grown after eating the previous apples, that eating another one would grow his soul realm by another forty miles or so, instead of the fifty-ish that he was more used to at the eighth-tier. Three and half years since the first harvest, and he'd reached the ninth-tier. It would take at least another ten to reach the tenth, if his estimation was correct.

A staggering rate, to be sure, but he couldn't help but shiver slightly. Ten years, while not much in the grand scheme of things—especially to the lifespan of an immortal, post-Apotheosis mage—was still more than enough time for a lot to happen.

Thunderclouds appeared in the distance as he was contemplating the dangers that the future may hold. Knowing exactly what those clouds heralded, he sped back to his Mind Palace. He arrived just before the Thunderbird did, though she landed with much more aplomb. He touched down rather gently given his euphoria, but she hit the ground like a meteor, swapping to her human form just before she touched earth. Then, as dust filled the interior of Leon's Mind Palace, she sprinted forward, caught him in her iron grip, pulled him off his feet, and spun around, giving him quite possibly the biggest and most intense hug he'd ever received.

"Finally!" she roared. "Finally! Finally!"

Leon couldn't help but burst out laughing, himself, and he returned her embrace as tightly as he could. At the same time, she stopped spinning, and a moment later, let him back down. She didn't let him go, though; instead, bringing her hands up to cup his face.

"It's been a *long* time since any of my descendants have reached your level of power, Leon," she said. "You're making fantastic progress. Not the kind of progress that I *most* want to see, but still progress worth taking great pride in. You are *my* descendant, a trueborn heir of my Clan."

Leon burned with intense embarrassment and even more intense pride. He didn't know what to say—

"You don't have to say anything," the Thunderbird declared as if she could hear the thoughts in his head. "Just know that I'm proud of you."

"I'll give you reason to be even prouder," Leon, in turn, declared. "Just a couple decades more, I think. Jason Keraunos was the last Storm King, and I will be the next, sure enough."

"That's the spirit!" the Thunderbird bellowed. "Take what's been left behind! Make it your own! Show the bastards who hoped to capitalize on my Clan's downfall the error of their ways! Incinerate them in a storm of lightning! Crush them until nothing remains but a warning to all who might covet our power!"

As the Thunderbird continued her tirade, the storm clouds above grew more powerful, and by the time she finished, it had started to rain within Leon's soul realm—a rare occurrence, indeed, unless it was Leon's will. In this case, he allowed it to continue, finding great comfort in the change in weather.

"We mustn't get lazy, though!" the Thunderbird continued as she glared at Leon, her yellow eyes practically glowing with mania. "Now that you have greatly increased your power, I will expect much more from you! You must make the sky your own! You must make the weather itself bend to your will! When we're done, the mortals of this plane will worship you as a god, if they know what's good for them!"

"Let's not get carried away, now," Leon countered. "I don't care if they even know my name. It's the Nexus where my attention lies. The Nexus, and the Sky Devil's Hell."

"Mmm, yes, them," the Thunderbird crowed, drawing out the syllables as she glared out into the distance. "A good subjugation always lifted my spirits. You'll learn the same pleasures, I think, in time."

"Don't count on it," Leon playfully countered before his countenance grew more serious. "The Great Black Dragon. Will my ascension draw his attention?"

It had been five years since Leon had, if not mastered, then at least acquired conscious control over his black fire. His biggest fear in that regard was the Great Black Dragon himself taking umbrage with that fact, but in the past five years, he'd seen neither hide nor hair of the arrogant beast. The Thunderbird, whenever he brought it up during their training, remained rather dismissive of the giant reptile, so Leon had let it be. However, his anxiety over it had slowly but steadily grown over the years. He couldn't help but worry that the Great Black Dragon's silence didn't represent tacit approval, or even silent disregard, but a mounting furious pressure that would result in an explosion that would make the eruption of a volcano look tame in comparison.

"You don't need to worry about him," the Thunderbird said dismissively. "He's glanced your way several times in the past few years and done nothing but seethe in irrelevant darkness, where he belongs. With every aetos of power you gain, the less power he holds over you. So if you're worried about him, despite my protection and assurances, then there is only one thing to do: *get stronger*. Gain the kind of power that he can't deny, and he won't be able to exert any power over you."

Leon bitterly nodded as he snapped his fingers and conjured a black flame no bigger than a candle over his thumb. But even though it was the size of a candle fire, it crackled and waved with barely-contained violence, eager beyond words to burn anything and everything.

"I'll get right to it, then," Leon said. "Let's start tomorrow. Right now, I have some retainers to check in with."

"Good," the Thunderbird said approvingly. "A good leader sees to his subordinates before himself—in most situations, at least. Take care of them and they'll take care of you."

"That's the plan," Leon said as he just about skipped back to his throne. As he sat back down, he gave the Thunderbird one last smile, then his eyes turned in Xaphan's direction. Since the demon's recovery of his ninth-tier powers, his fires now burned even hotter, turning to a dull yellow-orange. His eyes, however, now burned a bright yellow-white. Leon had noticed that he'd been silently watching ever since Leon took his first bite of the Hesperidic Apple, and as they made eye contact, the demon nodded once in approval and congratulations.

Leon returned the respectful nod, and then sat down, moments later opening his eyes in the physical world.

He'd rather expected the rest of his family and retainers to have been clustered around him, eager to hear of his ascension. However, instead of hearing respectful silence as he opened his eyes, or joyful cheers, he heard confused and painful squawking, and the sounds of his retainers shouting in panic.

It took him but a moment to see why: Anzu was curled up and shrieking as his wings furiously beat, keeping everyone else far away from him.

"It's OK!" Alix tried to shout over Anzu's pained squawks. "We're here! Everything's going to be all right!"

In less than a second, Leon was on his feet and sprinting for his griffin. He didn't know what was going on, but his little buddy was in pain, and he couldn't let that stand.

Anzu had been, up until a few minutes ago, a seventh-tier griffin. Now, Leon could feel his aura changing to something on par with a human's eighth-tier, and he thought that might be why he was in such pain.

Sure enough, as he pulled up, he was halted when Red laid a hand on his shoulder.

"He's learning to take human form," she said aloud. "Give him some time."

Leon gritted his teeth, deeply frowned, but stopped. His heart raced with anxiety and fear for his best friend in all of existence, worried that he couldn't do anything for him, but he trusted in Red's analysis of the situation, knowing that she was more of an expert here than he was, despite his own ability to transform.

'Though, my own first transformation was brutal,' he noted. He'd initially chalked it up to his two Bloodlines warring within him for dominance since his subsequent transformations into his pure Thunderbird form always went much smoother, but it seemed the first time transforming might just always be painful.

As he stood there watching with a frustrating sense of impotence, Elise came over and took his arm. Valeria did likewise on his other side, while Maia hugged him from behind. The rest of his retainers took their lead from him and stood back, though Alix still called out encouragements to Anzu. Leon added his voice to hers, though he kept it silent, speaking to Anzu with darkness magic.

It seemed that he got through, as the griffin relaxed a little bit and turned his head in Leon's direction. He went quiet a moment later, his blood red eyes narrowing in fatigue.

And then he began to shrink. His snow-white feathers retracted into his body, revealing equally-white skin. Bones broke and bent with toe-curling crunches and cracks, his body rippled as flesh reorganized itself, and his wings shrank and retracted back into his shoulders.

It took a couple of minutes, but Anzu's griffin body quickly gave way to a human one. He was lithe, but still well-built, which was made all the more obvious by his lack of clothing. His skin was as pure white as to be expected given his albinism, as was his platinum blond locks, which erupted from his skull and fell down his back like a silver waterfall, eventually ending just above his hips. His face, however, was boyishly handsome and free of any facial hair. In fact, he was devoid of any body hair at all.

"... Wow..." Alix muttered, and Leon made the mistake of glancing at her for a moment and realized that her eyes were locked squarely on the eye-catchingly large weapon Anzu now carried between his legs.

Without a word, Leon conjured some clothes and a couple towels, using them to cover Anzu as best as he could. The griffin was out cold, but Leon wasn't going to let him lay there like that.

However, within, he was proud and kind of afraid in equal measure. In all their years together, Anzu had never once spoken to him silently, as he knew many powerful beasts could. Now, though, it seemed that Anzu was finally going to be able to give voice to his thoughts.

He just had to wake up, first.

Chapter 794: Family By Choice

Anzu was taken to a room adjacent to the training hall where he was laid out on a sofa to rest. By Helen's estimation, he'd probably wake in less than an hour. What might happen after that, though, was anyone's guess. Leon, however, had a few ideas of his own, and knew where to find a few more.

He didn't clearly remember his first time transforming. It had been far beneath the Serpentine Isles, and the enchantment array that allowed him to transform had stimulated his blood so much that the power had completely overwhelmed his conscious mind.

However, he *could* clearly remember his first time consciously transforming, just after bringing the fallen stone giants back home. He'd changed into his Thunderbird form, and promptly fell flat on his face. He hadn't known how to control a body so radically different from his own that he was hopeless in it, let alone proficient enough to know how to fly or fight. But after several days of practice, he'd managed to learn how to properly balance himself to stand up straight, then fly, and then fight. It had taken a fair amount of time, but less than he'd feared.

Anzu, he hoped, would have an easier time of it. So long spent around humans and not around other griffins, Leon thought that Anzu was as ready as he could be. Given his complete silence, though, Leon couldn't be sure. He was as certain as he could be that Anzu was fully sapient, but the griffin had still never once managed to speak, mentally or otherwise.

Leon speculated that this was because the griffin had little to no skill with darkness magic and had no idea how to learn. He'd rather assumed that such communication would come naturally, as neither Maia nor Red seemed to have any difficulties speaking in such a manner. Tikos, on the other hand, needed to create a piece of magical amber in order to communicate, so Leon was forced to admit that it wasn't exactly guaranteed.

As he laid Anzu down on the sofa, he left the griffin-turned-human under the watchful eyes of Helen, Anna, and Marcus, and returned to the training hall where the rest of his retinue were waiting.

It didn't take him long to evaluate their conditions: it seemed that he and Anzu had the most dramatic increase in power, each of them ascending a tier. Everyone else had grown in strength as far as he could tell, but there had been no other ascensions.

"How's Anzu?" Elise asked, her voice laced with worry.

"Physically, he's fine," Leon responded. "He's still out, but we'll see how he is when he wakes up."

Elise smiled in relief, her expression reflected in various ways on everyone else's face.

"For now," Leon continued, "I want everyone to get training. You all know the drill by now: you need to refamiliarize yourselves with your limits, as they've just been vastly expanded. Two hours of solo training, then we'll start pairing off and get to sparring."

In his experience, fighting with someone else was the best way to test your own limits. Given how much power the Hesperidic Apples would bestow, everyone needed to put themselves through their paces, or else their combat abilities might be compromised.

'Not much use in growing in power if you don't know how to use that power,' Leon thought as everyone slowly broke off, the elation at the results of eating another batch of Hesperidic Apples plain for all to see.

He turned toward Red, but before he could call out to her, Tikos spoke first.

"Leon," the tree sprite began, "Grew trees one extra apple. How should be used it?"

Leon raised his eyebrows for a moment. "Is that counting the one set aside for Anshu?"

"No."

He nodded, then said, "Give it to me. I'll figure out someone to give it to."

It wasn't the first time that his trees produced spare apples. Whenever they did, Leon didn't give them to his retinue, fearing that it might give rise to bitter feelings if he were seen to be favoring anyone unduly since there were never enough for everyone to get two. Instead, he kept those apples to be used as gifts for friends and allies—Penelope and the Director, usually.

Tikos dutifully handed over the apple, and Leon tossed it into his soul realm, setting aside the issue of who to give it to for the time being. Then, he finally turned towards Red, who'd walked off to a corner to sit and play with fire in, her legs crossed and eyes closed.

As Leon walked over, he watched as she summoned four tiny fire snakes and had them fly through the air around her. Despite their rather diminutive size, each of those snakes were extreme concentrations of power, burning with a ferocity that wasn't quite reflected in their brightness or speed of movement.

Each of those snakes could burn clean through a seventh-tier mage with ease, Leon guessed.

"Hey there, Red," Leon said as he sat down a respectful distance away. "Let's talk for a minute or two."

Red acquiesced, opening her yellow eyes and watching him with interest.

Understanding that he had her attention, Leon asked, "I was hoping to talk about your experience with transforming into human form."

Red briefly glanced at the door through which Leon had carried Anzu, then stoically nodded as she turned back to him.

"What was it like for you, the first time?" Leon asked.

Red cocked an eyebrow, then glanced upward in thought as her fire snakes danced about her head.

"... Confusing," she eventually stated. "Aggravating. Infuriating."

"Were you scared?" Leon asked, eliciting a glare from the wyvern-in-human-form. "All right, I remember now, you don't get scared, do you?"

Red haughtily raised her head, but Leon didn't believe her for a second.

"It required... adjustment," Red explained. "Learning to move my body was easy. Learning to accept that I could do what I could was harder. Learning to accept that I was able to change into a *weaker* form, that it had its uses, that it didn't make *me* weak."

"Did you have anyone else you could practice with?" Leon asked. "I know that your former mate had his harem and they were all strong enough to shift forms, but you hadn't fallen in with them yet, had you?"

“That came later,” Red stated. “We didn’t transform in front of one another—at least, not until we decided we needed to get in contact with you and your party while you were hunting our mate.”

“Didn’t want to show weakness in front of your fellows?” Leon cheekily asked, but the way that Red briefly averted her gaze and scowled, he thought he hit the nail on the head.

“It’s... hard to get used to,” Red whispered. “Weaker. Softer. Different senses. Honestly, I don’t know how you humans have survived as long as you have.”

“We’re tough little creatures.” Leon glanced back at the door. Anzu was still out cold, but his breathing was starting to accelerate. “Did you have a similar reaction? Your first time?”

“No,” Red almost condescendingly replied. However, after a moment, her expression turned more thoughtful. “I was disoriented, confused at first as to what had happened. Wyverns don’t write and we don’t teach. I didn’t realize what happened to me until decades later.”

Leon hummed in thought. “You know, that’s not even really something I’ve thought too hard about. I’ve met another Ascended Beast in my time: a basilisk. And that basilisk had taken to kidnapping women and trying to convince them to procreate with him—between bouts of piracy. I guess I wasn’t too surprised that Ascended Beasts continue to act as they always have, not really knowing anything else. It’s just... I suppose it’s strange, then, that the Sacred Bull went and built the Bull Kingdom, isn’t it? And that the Thunderbird built her interplanar Empire. Ascended Beasts fitting into human society.”

Red listened to him ramble utterly expressionless, at least until he asked his next question.

“How are you finding your time here?” Leon had already asked her that question many times over the past five years. Every time, her answer had been largely the same: human society was quite nice and very comfortable, but it would’ve been infinitely better without all the humans.

This time, however, she took some time before responding.

“There’s... a sense of purpose here that I find... fulfilling,” she stated. “I don’t like many parts of human society. Too many demands for ‘currency’, when a weaker one ought to do what I tell them to do. Constant recriminations for attempting to expand my hoard without ‘paying’ for it.”

Leon lightly cringed, having had to shell out some silver on multiple occasions for things that Red had stolen, usually some shiny trinket that had caught her eye as she wandered Occulara. He’d eventually gotten at least the most basic of basics of human economics hammered into her head so that she wouldn’t steal anymore, but keeping her swimming in new trinkets for her hoard was still a large item on his expense report.

“But,” Red continued, “I enjoy the idea that I’m working towards greater power, that there will be a place for me in a higher realm, that the secrets of fire that I have dreamed about are opening themselves up to me.” She snapped her fingers, and the dancing fire snakes whirled about before her, between her and Leon. “I never would’ve grown this strong this quickly had I not joined up with you. I will follow in your footsteps and see what new heights you can reach, and ascend to those heights myself.”

Leon smiled, recognizing this to be as close to an endorsement and encouragement as he’d ever get from her.

"Just let me know if you need anything else," Leon said. "By the way, Valentina will be coming over next week. She and Xaphan need to meet up in person for something. I was thinking of adding in some training with fire magic. I was going to drag Alcander into this as well, but wanted to extend to you this invitation to join, too."

As Red smiled, Leon sensed Alcander perk his head from across the room.

"Can't do that, boss!" he shouted. "Sofie and I have a date!"

"Dates can be rescheduled, can't they?" Leon only half-seriously complained.

"Not this one! Tickets to an exclusive show!"

Leon glared at Alcander, but he didn't put too much venom in the look. "You'll have to catch up, then," he growled as he turned back to Red. Grumbling under his breath, he said, "Exclusive, huh? What kind of show is exclusive?"

"You could order him to attend," Red said, drawing a look of ire from Alcander.

"Nah," Leon flippantly responded. "Any other excuse and I would, but family should come first."

Red frowned and looked a little wistful. She didn't look like she wanted to continue speaking in that vein, though, which Leon found all well and good since Anzu was starting to stir.

"Looks like he's about to wake up," he said as he rose. "Thanks for the perspective. We'll talk again soon."

Red wordlessly nodded as Leon walked back out into the adjacent room, where Helen and Anna were monitoring Anzu as he stirred.

"Everything all right?" he asked.

"Things are looking good," Marcus responded as he met Leon at the foot of the sofa. "No concerning vital signs; he's looking good in just about every way."

Leon nodded in gratitude, then quietly pulled Helen away from Anzu as he sat down next to the sofa, wanting to be the first thing Anzu saw when he woke up.

He didn't have to wait long. Within five minutes, Anzu's albino-white eyelids began to flutter, giving Leon a few glimpses of the blood-red irises beneath. Then, Anzu took a deep breath and shifted his sleeping position a bit, though not quite in as smooth a manner as he might if he'd been human his entire life.

After another moment, Leon heard a hitch in Anzu's breathing, signaling that he'd finally woken up. A second later, Anzu began twitching, then shivering as his eyes opened in panic.

"Anzu!" Leon shouted as the griffin-turned-human bolted upright. He placed his hand on Anzu's shoulder and pushed him back down into the sofa. Anzu resisted for a moment, but as his eyes landed on Leon and focused, all resistance left his body, and he let Leon push him back down. "It's all right, Anzu," Leon whispered. "It's all right. Everything's fine. Can you understand me?"

Anzu seemed to need a moment to process before quietly nodding.

"How are you feeling? Good?" Leon raised his right hand. "Bad?" He then raised his left hand.

Anzu's lips didn't so much as twitch as he glanced to Leon's hands, then slowly raised his right hand.

"Fantastic," Leon said soothingly as he glanced up at Helen, Anna, and Marcus, giving them silent permission to speak.

"Anzu," Helen said, taking the lead, "you've ascended! You've managed to transform into a human!"

Anzu's boyish features remained as still as if they were carved in stone, but his eyes glanced around before turning down to look at his body. He wasn't naked anymore, Helen having pulled him into some loose training clothes as they'd gotten him settled on the sofa. However, that did absolutely nothing to hide his own body from him.

A low whine built up in Anzu's chest and his lips started twitching, as if he were having trouble opening his mouth.

"Take it slow, buddy," Leon whispered. "It's not a permanent thing, you're just like Red. You should be able to transform back and forth."

Anzu suddenly turned his head in Leon's direction. His mouth snapped open and he began spreading his lips in random ways as a gentle hum resounded from within him.

"Eh..." the griffin sighed. "Heh... Meh... Mo... Mmm..."

Leon let Anzu experiment with his mouth a little bit. The griffin had never had lips before, just a hard beak, and he knew there was going to be a lot of adjustment needed before Anzu was comfortable with his new body.

After several long minutes of Anzu testing out his new lips and vocal cords, during which Leon's thoughts seemed mirrored in everyone else, he finally began to speak, though his tone was hesitant, plodding, and stilted.

"I... uhm... maaa... Humaahnn? Lyiiiieke... yooo?"

"For now," Helen helpfully chimed in. "Like Red and Leon, you should now have a power to shift between bodies at will."

"It's going to take some time for you to learn how to move like this," Leon said with a soft, yet didactic tone to reflect his infinite patience when it came to his closest friend. "Don't rush it. Do you remember when I first started transforming into my Thunderbird form? How many times I ate dirt on the way back from the Border Mountains back in the north?"

Anzu's eyes narrowed as he thought hard, but then nodded rather exaggeratedly. He began to sit up, though his balance and muscle control still made that clumsy at best. However, he soon managed it, until he was sitting up, looking Leon in the eye, blood red to bright gold.

"Faater?"

"Father?" Leon guessed. When Anzu nodded, Leon slowly sat next to Anzu. "Brother," he stated insistently. "You know that we're different?"

Again, Anzu nodded.

"We're still family, though, aren't we?"

Another nod.

"We are family by choice, not by blood. And to put myself in the role of father... That would be... well, I love you like a brother, Anzu. It would just be a little weird to think about being in that role, you know?"

Anzu was starting to get the hang of nodding, it seemed.

"So, how about that? Brothers?"

"Brot... Br..." Anzu struggled to form the word. Leon almost tried to get him to stop, but he held his tongue. Anzu needed to learn to speak, and he clearly *wanted* to keep trying. "Bro... t... t... h... th... ther! Brother!"

Leon smiled and pulled Anzu into a hug. He felt Anzu shift slightly in his embrace, but after some minor flailing, he felt Anzu's own arms wrap around him.

"I've waited a long time, Anzu," Leon whispered. "You've been with me a long time. I can't tell you how proud I am, no words are good enough."

Anzu seemed to whine, but it was a sound similar to the happy chirps he made in his griffin form, and Leon felt him shudder slightly. So, Leon pulled back, and found Anzu bawling his eyes out, tears streaming down his face like a waterfall.

"Anzu!" Anna cried out. "Are you all right? You aren't hurt, are you?"

"Noh," Anzu hastily replied. Then, his body began to expand, his chest growing as wings burst from his back. The clothes that Leon had set aside for him were torn right off as a tail sprang from just above his rear. Fur and feathers erupted from his skin as his face elongated into its avian shape.

Leon sprang back as Anzu reassumed his griffin form. It didn't more than a few seconds until Anzu was back, chirping with delight as he leaped off the sofa and began bounding about in joy. He surged toward Leon, rubbing on him like a cat, almost knocking him flat on his back as he expressed his jubilation.

But then, he paused, and his wings folded and started shrinking, his fur and feathers retreated beneath his skin, and body quickly returned to human shape—and, once again, stark naked. But Anzu hardly seemed concerned as he stood there, gently swaying with what Leon thought was a profound difference in his sense of balance.

"Bro... ther..." he said again as he looked to Leon and spread his lips in one of the widest smiles Leon had ever seen. It might've seemed fake on anyone else, but Anzu radiated elation.

"Come on," Leon said as he took Anzu by the shoulder. "Let's get you acquainted with your new ability. And clothes."

"You don't have to rush on that last one," Anna muttered as Leon slowly led Anzu back into the training room. Leon just sent her a cheeky smile in response. He couldn't muster any anger in light of his and Anzu's ascensions, especially since Anzu hardly seemed to care about what she said. He just wanted his

new brother to practice with his new form. He'd waited a long time for the griffin to speak, and he couldn't wait to hear what he might have to say.

Chapter 795: Unreasonable Request

The hours and days after consuming Hesperidic Apples were always physically hard. Leon pushed his people to find their new limits and to grow comfortable with them, so as to know how to fight if they were to be attacked at any point. Fortunately, their caution hadn't been all that needed in the past five years, but Leon wasn't going to get complacent. He'd been attacked enough times in his own home to keep his eye on the ball.

This didn't change following his ascension to the ninth-tier. If anything, he doubled down, wanting to show his people that even though he'd grown substantially in power, he wasn't going to ignore his people in favor of solo training. He trained often on his own, of course, but he pushed himself hard to see to his official duties, fulfill his obligations to his retainers, and to see to his own needs.

Fortunately, after several years, his people knew the drill and didn't really need him there constantly pushing them forward. Consequently, Leon spent quite a bit of time with Anzu, helping the griffin learn to walk and talk. Anzu seemed quite taken with the idea of Leon being his older brother, and Leon had to admit that he enjoyed the idea. Anzu was as much his family as any other blood sibling would be, as far as he was concerned, regardless of the label they put on it.

In this endeavor, he roped Red in to help. She was the only one there who had experience as a nonhuman who suddenly gained human form. Her aid was questionable in the end, but only because Anzu, being now eighth-tier, was more than intelligent enough to learn quickly. It hadn't taken Leon long to learn how to move and fly in his Thunderbird form, and he guessed that it took Anzu about as long to learn to walk.

Talking, however, needed some more time.

But, with such a leap in power, Elise and Valeria both cornered Leon to bring up something apparently of the utmost importance.

"We need to throw a party," Elise declared.

"Huh?" Leon asked, looking up from his work. He wasn't in his workshop, but in his study, dealing with procurement issues some of his labs were having—nothing unusual, just some overeager researchers not focusing their resources where they needed to go, even after said resources had been allocated.

It was here that Elise and Valeria had found him, head buried in a short stack of papers all needing him to read through and sign in several places.

"We need to *celebrate*!" Elise insisted as Valeria nodded her agreement.

"It's not every day that someone reaches the ninth-tier," Valeria said. "It's good to let loose once in a while, and I'm sure the others would love an excuse to drink."

"They don't need an excuse, though, do they?" Leon muttered.

"No, but one is always appreciated."

"Your birthday's also coming up, husband," Elise reminded him, and he felt his stomach drop a little at the reminder.

Thirty-eight. A momentous age in his mind, the very mention of which brought to mind thoughts of his father and his childhood home.

"What of it?" Leon gruffly replied. "I've never celebrated my birthday with a party yet, why start now?"

"To make a statement," Elise insisted, largely brushing aside his reluctant attitude—such was par for the course as far as he went, after all. "Having Chiefs of the other branches, the Director himself, Emperors and tenth-tier mages, all coming here for *your* birthday, to celebrate you reaching the ninth-tier! It's an opportunity we can't afford to miss!"

"I was thinking the exact opposite," Leon responded. "I didn't want to draw too much attention to my rising power."

"It's not like it's gone unnoticed, Leon," Valeria countered. "Anastasios and the Grand Druid have been here enough times in the past few years to know that you've been rising in power quite dramatically. Have they said anything about it?"

"A few questions, nothing more. I haven't told them that I have Hesperidic Apple trees."

"They might've guessed," Valeria said. "However, even if they haven't, it's not like your growth has been invisible. And they haven't made a big deal out of it, have they?"

"... No," Leon reluctantly admitted.

Over the past five years, Leon had worked fairly closely with Anastasios and the Grand Druid, though given the fact that he refused to leave Occulara—both of them agreeing with his desire to stay—the amount of use they could get out of him was limited to what they could bring him. Big things like any arks or massive weapons they might possess were out, but they brought him many more manuscripts and smaller magical items that he'd activated for them. They rarely gave him much time to really examine them before moving onto the next item.

Leon wasn't sure how much he was actually giving them access to, but they seemed happy with his work so far, so he didn't rock the boat.

"Husband," Elise said, "do you really not want us to throw a party?" She stared at him with the biggest puppy-dog eyes that he'd ever seen her make, and he felt his heart skip a beat in response.

Sighing, Leon replied, "You *really* want to throw that party, don't you?"

"It'll be *incredible*!" Elise insisted, her expression shifting in just a moment to something more greedy or ambitious. "If it goes well, it'll show the entire plane that you're no one's subordinate, but are actually the equal of some of the most powerful men and women in the land! It'll mean a huge leap forward for our family! Enormous gains can be made from the Lord Protector and Grand Druid alone agreeing to attend!"

"That's assuming they will," Leon said as he tried to keep a level head and not lose himself in potential delusions of grandeur. He was ninth-tier, but that didn't make him invincible, and the Keeper could still ambush him somewhere and end everything in a matter of seconds. "They have many duties that

demand their attention. Thank the Ancestors for that, because otherwise I think they'd have moved in with us years ago!"

As Elise laughed, Valeria hesitantly asked, "... If we're doing this, are there any limits on people we can invite?"

"Is there someone you wanted to attend?" Elise asked, confusion lacing her tone as she looked to the silver-haired woman.

"Kind of," Valeria said, growing a little bashful as both Elise and Leon started staring at her rather intensely. Leon himself wondered just who she was asking about and where she'd met this person, until it suddenly struck him as Valeria studiously avoided looking him in the eye. "My... father..." Valeria whispered. "I was hoping... he might come, too..."

Any joy in the room vanished in an instant.

"Your father..." Leon muttered as he furrowed his brow.

"He's..." Valeria hesitantly began before cutting herself off. It was a while before she spoke again, but neither Leon nor Elise interrupted her thoughts. Eventually, she closed her eyes and quickly said, "I know that you and he can never be on good terms and that he's done things that can't ever be forgiven but I love you and I want you and him to be at peace!"

Valeria went quiet and looked almost like a mouse caught in the hungry gaze of a lion as Leon stared back at her.

He loved Valeria quiet deeply. Anything she could ask for, he would do in a heartbeat. But this...

"... Are we not at peace already?" Leon quietly asked. "Why should he come and visit on that day of all days...?"

Elise gave Leon a strange look, but Valeria continued, "He's been wallowing in remorse, Leon. I think... I think it would be good for him and good for us if you were to see each other. I don't... I don't want us to always be on edge about this. I want my father back in my life, but I... It's hard. I understand if you say no. You have every right to."

"No," Leon said without hesitation, but his heart almost broke in two as a look of anguish momentarily appeared on Valeria's face.

"All... All right," she sputtered, tears already pooling in her eyes.

"Val—" Leon began, but Valeria just turned around and bolted for the door. Leon heard a sob as the door slammed shut behind her.

Silence fell upon Leon's study as he and Elise stared at the door. It felt like an eternity, but it was probably only a few seconds before Elise moved behind his desk, then behind his chair and laid her hands against his shoulder. Without a word, she began to knead at the steely tightness that Leon could feel.

Despite his wife's attentions, that tension remained.

Justin, while not carrying out the deed himself, had murdered his father. Leon had thought that he'd largely put that behind him when he decided not to kill Justin when he had the chance, but had allowed the man to come down to the Empires with him and his people. He loved Valeria, and Valeria loved Justin, and he didn't think it that great of a sacrifice to bring her father with them to make her happy.

But he still hated the man. The less thought he gave him, the happier he was. The less Leon saw him, the happier he was. He paid for the man's healthcare, making sure that the deep injuries he'd taken in Nestor's lab were treated, but apart from that, he paid the man as little mind as possible, and his mental health was all the better for it.

Now, however, on that birthday, on his thirty-eighth...

"It's all right," Elise whispered. "Whatever you decide, it's all right."

Again, Leon sighed. "Valeria wants her father here for this party. All the more reason not to throw one." He didn't particularly mean the second sentence, and his tone reflected that sentiment, but he'd said they could throw one and he wasn't going to back out of it just because of this.

"She'll understand," Elise replied, and Leon knew that she knew he wasn't being serious about going back on his word.

"She'll still be upset."

"She's not so emotional that she'll let that tarnish our relationship."

"I still don't like seeing her upset."

"But she's asking for the impossible." Elise's hands paused for just a second, and Leon could feel rather than hear the second part of that statement: *'Isn't she?'*

"She..." Leon began, but he trailed off. Thoughts of Artorias, Valeria, and Justin rushed through his mind faster and faster, and he found it hard to concentrate on anything. Out of frustration, he extended his hand and pulled all of the requisitions forms he'd been going over into his soul realm. He wasn't going to be doing much more work on them with his head like this. "Give me some time to think," he finally said as he reached up and stopped Elise's hands.

Elise gave him a radiant smile, one free of judgment and full of nothing but support for whatever he decided.

"I'll get started on preparations," she said. "Next month should be both soon enough to not be out of season, but far enough in advance for everyone to arrive. I'll have my thoughts for the guest list ready tomorrow. It's your party, though, so don't worry about me if you need to make changes..."

She leaned down and kissed him lightly on the lips. It wasn't full of heat and passion, but Leon could still feel every spark of love he felt for her and that she felt for him. He smiled as she pulled away and began walking towards the door.

"I don't deserve you," he whispered as she reached the door. "I don't deserve any of you."

Elise turned back toward him, her smile growing slightly wider. "That's not for you to decide, husband," she stated. "It's up to us who is worthy of our time. We've all decided to be with you. That means we all

consider you more than worthy. Every day we wake up and decide to stay is another day that we decide you're worthy. I love you."

"I love you too," Leon said as she walked out the door, closing it with a little more grace than Valeria had on her way out. Leon was left in stark silence, but that was exactly what he wanted right now.

'Justin...'

Elise would undoubtedly give him quite the guest list. All of the highest names in Heaven's Eye, with plenty of plus-one's for them to fill out with dates, spouses, and high-ranking subordinates. A birthday party for a Chief of Heaven's Eye was not going to be a small thing, and Leon knew that Elise was going to *make sure* it was no small thing, regardless of what he'd rather have.

He could grin and bear it, but the question of allowing Justin to attend wasn't one he could easily make. He stayed in his study for a while longer mulling the issue over. However, even after an hour, he hadn't been able to change his mind, despite his desire to see Valeria happy. His enmity with Justin ran too deeply to stand the man's presence. The more distance between them, Leon thought, the better.

To try and distract himself from his musings, he pulled his work back out and threw himself into it, but not even ten minutes later, he heard another knock at his door, this one a little more timid than any that his family members might make. He cast his magic senses out and saw that it was Anna at his door.

He took a moment to school his expression, ensuring that he was stoic and professional, as befitting a man of his station, and called out, "Come in!"

Without too much fanfare, Anna entered the room and closed the door behind her. She looked a little anxious, and Leon half-expected her to ask about Valeria, but he was pleasantly surprised when she spoke.

"Leon, I need your help with something."

"What is it?"

"Are you familiar with the war beast acquisitions department?"

Leon nodded. "That's one of the departments under Lady Emilie. All of Heaven's Eye's beastmasters—as well as all logistics required to see to their war beasts' needs—are organized by that department. Do you need them for something?"

"Kind of," Anna hesitantly murmured.

"... Is this a sensitive topic?"

"No, no, I just don't want to bother you with something that might be far beneath you..."

Leon dismissively waved his hand with a deep scowl. "You're my retainer. Whatever you need, feel free to bring it up with me and I'll see what I can do."

Anna smiled, but hesitated again before saying, "I've heard... something about some kind of auction going on with regards to that department. Happens every four years or so, as far as I'm aware. Those

wyvern eggs that we captured back during the last hunt? Sold during the last auction—along with a host of other beasts, besides.”

Leon nodded, grateful that he wasn’t going on this year’s hunt. With the arms build-up down in the south to try and protect the Pegasi States from the Sky Devils, there were going to be plenty of Imperial and Heaven’s Eye fighters down there that no new delegations would need to be sent to contain the wyverns.

“There’s an auction soon, isn’t there?”

“There is,” Anna confirmed. “Auctions happen all the time with Heaven’s Eye, of course, but these ones with the best war beasts are *very* exclusive. They only cater to the richest of the rich, allowing them to buy just about any prestigious, extremely rare creature that they might have a fancy for. This year, I’ve heard that there’s going to be a manticore cub.”

“Mmm, and you want this cub, don’t you?”

Anna nodded vigorously.

Leon leaned back in his chair, fully ready to agree, but he had some questions first.

“How did you learn of this auction? If it’s supposed to be so exclusive and private, then how’d word get out?”

“It’s still an event catering to those of great position,” Anna explained. “It’s not publicized, but it’s still a fairly massive undertaking to ensure that the event itself is as exclusive and luxurious as possible. A lot of Heaven’s Eye beastmasters are involved in its organization, and... well, I’ve kind of... been seeing one of them...” Anna flushed red, and Leon couldn’t help but raise his eyebrows in surprise. He’d had little idea that she’d been seeing anyone at all; her usual behavior and routines hadn’t changed, so there’d been damn near no sign at all of such a change in her personal life.

“And this ‘good friend’ of yours let you in on what was going to be at the auction?” Leon asked.

Anna nodded again.

“All right,” Leon said with a teasing smile. “We can go and see what we can do to get this manticore. How’re your other beasts, by the way?”

“Ladon is doing well,” Anna said, referring to her Attican Snapper. “Nidar and Astar are both growing pretty fast, though their magical power isn’t growing as quickly as I would like...” Her other two beasts were a pair of wyvernlings captured during the last wyvern hunt that they’d participated in. Leon had seen the two several times in the past couple of months alone, and they’d both grown to be larger than carriages—still dwarfed by Red, but quite large regardless.

Ladon’s growth had slowed, though, and seemed to have peaked at the sixth-tier. He hadn’t achieved sapience, though he seemed at least as intelligent as a dog. Nidar and Astar had both reached the third-tier, as well, and while their magical growth wasn’t particularly swift, it hadn’t seemed to have slowed.

“Have they been giving you any trouble?” Leon asked.

“None at all,” Anna quickly replied. “This thing is really quite something, it ensures that my boys are perfectly behaved!” She flashed the onyx bracelet that Leon had looted from the transformation cave—left there by Jormun, he presumed.

“Good,” Leon said. “Now, tell me about this person you’ve been seeing. I had no idea! How did you keep something like this under wraps for so long? Especially with people like Alix and Alcander around?”

“Like a pair of old women, aren’t they?” Anna quipped. “I’ve been seeing her for about a year. The facilities you helped to set up for my boys were great, but I had to ask for a bit of help with some beastmaster friends of mine, and they pointed me to her, and she’s been helping me keep my boys in good health since then...”

“You should’ve come to me if you needed help,” Leon lightly chastised. “You know I wouldn’t have let that stand...”

“I had it in hand,” Anna brushed off.

“What’s this lucky lady’s name?”

“Eirene.”

“Lovely name. I look forward to meeting her. In the meantime, let’s get on the same page about this auction. When’s it happening?”

“Next week,” Anna replied, and together, the two made a plan for that day.

By the time Anna left, Leon was in much better spirits, but as he was left alone once again with naught but his own thoughts for company, his mood soured. It seemed that regardless of who came, ‘his’ party wasn’t going to be one where everyone was happy.

Chapter 796: Auction

Getting into the exclusive beast auction turned out to be quite easy—not that Leon had been particularly worried about it. One visit to Emilie the night that Anna had come to him was enough. She’d even told him that if he’d come to her a week before he did, before they’d even announced what beasts would be in the auction, she would’ve let him buy the beast right then at cost. Unfortunately, the list *had* been sent out, and so the manticore cub couldn’t just be taken out of the auction even for Leon.

When the day came, Leon and some of his retainers, including Anna, Alix, Marcus, and Gaius all came out with him. Anzu was still learning to walk and speak, Alcander took some time off to be with Sofie, Helen and Tikos were preoccupied with new batches of thunder wood, Talal was busy running the parts of Magical Research and Development that Leon had neither the skills nor temperament for, and Red was simply uninterested. His family, on the other hand, was a little more complicated.

Valeria was the main sticking point. Though she maintained that she understood why Leon didn’t want to allow her father to come to his party, she was still a little upset. Leon was more than happy to give her the space she needed, especially since he wasn’t exactly feeling good about the situation, either. Elise, while content to defer to Leon’s opinion on this issue, also wanted to spend a little more time with Valeria to support her friend. She wasn’t, as she’d reminded Leon the night before, choosing Valeria

over him—she wasn't taking any sides at all, she was quick to add—she simply thought that Valeria needed a little more support on this one.

Maia, meanwhile, had simply fallen asleep before they left, and Leon hadn't the heart to wake her.

The auction was to be held in a private theater along the south bank of the Scamander and was scheduled to begin about an hour before midnight. The theater itself was fairly large, but had few seats, with about two hundred seats in luxurious boxes, and another four hundred below the boxes. From what Leon had heard, the theater was owned by one of Emilie's subordinates who was quite fond of theater, and frequently sponsored various acting groups to practice in his theater. He, his family, and many of his servants would attend these practice sessions and give critique.

For the auction, however, the boxes would be filled with both high-ranking members of Heaven's Eye, and influential members of the Ilian aristocracy. The seats below would be filled with their escorts and attending subordinates. Fortunately, Leon got a box all to himself box enough for his entire attending retinue to share.

So, they arrived about half an hour before the auction was due to start and were met outside by several of the theater owner's attendants. Once they were escorted to the box, they were largely left alone, though one fourth-tier attendant mentioned that he'd return once the auction began to record and announce their bids.

As everyone took their seats, Anna sat next to Leon and whispered, "Thanks for doing this, boss."

"Don't mention it," Leon replied with a flippant smile. He'd never attended any auctions before and was fairly excited to see how this one turned out. He fully intended to walk away with that manticore cub, but he wondered just how hard he'd have to fight for it.

"Don't just go brushing this off," Anna responded. "I mean it: thank you. Although... if you *don't* want me to mention it... there *is* something you can do make me drop it..."

Her tone took on a slightly more playful tone that Leon might've thought untoward had he not known Anna as well as he did. Alix, he thought, probably knew her even better, but that didn't stop his oldest retainer from teasing the older woman a bit.

"Ooh, Anna, are you propositioning our fearless leader?"

"He's married, you know!" Marcus added, his tone sounding mock-scandalized.

Gaius just leaned back in his seat with a smile instead of joining in, to Leon's relief.

"I don't mean that," Anna quickly replied. "I just mean..."

"Eirene's here, isn't she?" Leon asked. Anna looked at him in surprise, so he added, "You mentioned that she was involved in organizing some things here. Just figured that meant she was actually *here* for the auction and not just doing administrative work or whatever."

"She is," Anna confirmed, her face lighting up with loving joy as she did. "Could she... join us?"

Leon smirked, having never really seen Anna so anxious and flustered. Her face was a bright red, she was wringing her hands, and she was diligently studying the floor rather than looking at any of them.

"She's working here, isn't she?" Leon asked, knowing that he was most likely going to have to refuse..

"Uh... yes," Anna replied, her tone dropping as she realized what Leon was getting at.

"We can meet her later. For now, if she has a job to do, then let's let her focus on that, yeah?"

Anna nodded. "Sure... sure..."

The box descended into awkward silence for all of about two seconds before Alix leaned forward and wrapped an arm around Anna.

"Soooo," she drawled, "when were you going to let us know about your little girlfriend, hmmm? Scared we were going to embarrass you?"

"No, nothing like that!" Anna insisted. Leon saw her taking a subtle, though deep breath and steady herself. It took her only a moment to banish the awkwardness her previous question had raised and regain her composure. "Is it wrong of me to want to keep something to myself?"

"No, I'm just curious why you didn't say anything before now! Kind of hurts when friends keep secrets, you know? Even if there's nothing wrong with that..."

Anna reached back and pulled Alix into a tight hug. She didn't say anything, but Alix returned the friendly embrace.

A moment later, a knock came at the door.

"Probably the attendant," Gaius muttered. "I'll get it." He got up and opened the door, but instead of the attendant who would facilitate their bids, another man with sixth-tier strength stood in the doorway.

The man was finely dressed, but in a dark and muted style that nevertheless contrasted with his deathly pale complexion. He had no other secretaries, assistants, or attendants with him, all of which led Leon to think he was sent by someone rather than coming of his own accord. Still, Leon took a moment to study the man's aura, but he detected nothing notable.

"Who are you and what do you want?" Gaius asked about as politely as the questions could be asked.

"Carrying a message for Leon Raime," the man said with a frosty tinge to his voice. He held out a folded piece of paper with two fingers for Gaius to take. He leaned back slightly as Gaius reached out to take the paper, acting as if touching Gaius was beneath him—or so it came off to Leon, anyway.

Once Gaius took the paper, the messenger turned around and left without so much as a goodbye.

"Rude," Alix growled. "Leon, want me to drag him back here and show him some manners?"

"As fun as that might be, no," Leon replied. "One's arrogance isn't negated with another's. Besides, who is he to us, that his rudeness matters?"

Alix clicked her tongue in displeasure but said no more.

During that brief exchange, Gaius closed the door and opened the message, reading through it quickly.

“Looks like someone noticed your arrival, Leon,” he said as he passed the note to Leon. “Someone named ‘Narses the Black’. Almost thought it was the Chief of Security.”

Leon accepted the message as his thoughts turned back to the man he’d briefly met when once meeting with Emilie. The man was quite highly ranked within Heaven’s Eye, and acted as an inspector for the southern Tower Lords. Essentially, it was his job to monitor the ranking Heaven’s Eye administrators within large regions for signs of corruption or undue political activity. He had no power to enforce any regulations, but it was inspectors like him that the Director relied on to ensure that the Tower Lords were kept under control.

The message was a brief greeting that identified the sender, and when Leon turned his eyes out of the box, he scanned the room and, soon enough, his eyes landed upon the man himself. His remarkably black hair was still cut fairly short, his dark green eyes glittered in the dim light of the theater, and his eighth-tier aura was strong and robust—far more so than Leon remembered. The man had clearly been training hard over the past five years.

As they made eye contact, Narses raised a glass of wine in greeting, giving Leon a wide smile at the same time. Leon, however, found the smile quite unnerving, as it didn’t quite reach the inspector’s eyes.

Regardless, after a brief moment, Leon raised his hand in greeting. Nothing was said nor shouted to each other. They simply held eye contact for several seconds before Narses the Black finally looked away as the messenger appeared back in his box, the only one Narses appeared to have attending him.

Leon was a little perturbed, and it seemed like he wasn’t the only one as Anna whispered, “He looks familiar...”

“Does he?” Leon murmured. “How so?”

“Can’t place him,” Anna replied. “Know where he’s from?”

“Nowhere with last names for commoners.”

“Hmm,” Anna hummed.

They couldn’t say any more as the lights around the stage began to brighten, and several people walked out onto the stage. Two were clearly attendants, but the third was dressed to the nines. Leon thought him their host for a moment until he stopped behind the podium and announced that the auction would begin in only a few minutes, and for everyone to take their seats.

There weren’t that many people that needed to sit down, though. Half of the boxes were occupied, if that, and barely a third of the lower seats were filled. The theater was small by Occulara’s standards, and they still hadn’t even filled it, speaking more than words could about the exclusivity of the event.

Of course, the other attendees spoke to that as well. Leon recognized many high-ranking members of Heaven’s Eye, and even silently greeted them when they noticed his presence. He even saw two of his department heads in attendance, who seemed particularly nervous when they realized he was there, too.

‘I’ll have to remember them,’ Leon thought to himself as the auction truly began.

He wasn't that interested in beasts, if he were honest with himself. They were interesting, and he certainly enjoyed raising Anzu, but he'd had the assistance of many Heaven's Eye beastmasters for that tall order. He couldn't imagine putting in the time and effort that it would take to train something less naturally obedient than Anzu had been, and even with the onyx bracelet it would still be a chore that he simply didn't have time for.

Anna, on the other hand, watched the auction with great interest. She gleefully identified all of the beasts as they were trotted out for inspections—two basilisks, four enormous gray wolves, a lion with blood-red fur and a fish-like face, and so much more. None of them, however, were stronger than the fourth-tier. Leon's interest was slightly piqued when a wyvernling was brought out, still too young to have colored scales, but Anna already had two of those.

Each beast was auctioned off for spectacularly large amounts of money; Leon suspected many of the attendees overpaid by quite a bit, but when bidding competitions started, he got the impression that it was far more about the show than it was about the purchase itself. Many of those in attendance wanted to flaunt their wealth in front of many of their peers rather than hold out for a good deal. This was, after all, an auction, not commissioned work from Heaven's Eye.

It wasn't the end neared that the reason they'd come was finally brought out.

"... a wonder from the northeast, a beast so rarely taken that they can't even be ordered," the auctioneer hyped, "a manticore cub!"

Leon expected a bigger creature, but the beast that was brought out was carried out in the arms of a young woman with short blond hair and soft, cute features. Leon heard Anna's breath hitch, and he assumed the woman was likely Eirene. The manticore cub in her arms, meanwhile, was barely larger than a housecat. Its wings were tiny and folded up, not yet feathered or even half as large as they'd need to be to allow for flight. Its coat was a pale gold that shimmered in the light of the theater; its eyes were a bright green that almost glowed; its claws were jet black; its scorpion's tail was bound against its body capped with a thick bundle of cloth. Its claws were likewise bound. Its aura was perhaps the least spectacular thing about it; Leon estimated it was the human equivalent of first-tier.

As the cub was brought out, Marcus leaned forward and asked, "How dangerous are these things that their paws and tail has to be bound?"

"Their claws aren't nearly as sharp as they will be," Anna explained, "but they're still more than enough to pierce the skin of third-tier mages and below. Not many of those here, but still, better to be cautious than to accidentally spill the blood of someone about to give you money. Their tails, on the other hand, even in childhood will produce some pretty nasty venom that can put even a fifth-tier mage on their ass for a while. Their stingers, far more than their claws, need to be secured."

"Sounds like a fantastic war beast to have," Marcus whispered.

"That's the intent," Anna replied.

Leon agreed, though he couldn't help but remember the manticores of the Prota Forest. They were intelligent, and one had even helped him out after he'd healed it. They had great growth potential, but he wondered what the actual cost of the onyx bracelet's domination might have on the creatures under its sway. The Attican Snapper, despite its growth in power, didn't seem to show any sign of developing

true sapience, though Leon wasn't sure if that was due to it being a naturally dim creature or not. Anna's wyverns, on the other hand, were rather clearly capable of developing reason and wisdom, but they weren't even close to being powerful enough to do so.

He put those thoughts out of his head as the bidding started. He could wonder and theorize and hypothesize and moralize once the manticore had been bought, but it needed to actually *be* bought, first.

The bidding started out fairly quick, with many of those in the boxes tossing out spectacular numbers. The manticore started out at a million silvers, but its price went up tenfold in less than a minute. Two minutes later, it had risen to twenty million. Leon, for just a moment, wondered how high the price might get, but after letting fifty bids go by without putting in one of his own, Anna glanced at him with a hint of anxiety, and Leon decided to just throw his hat into the ring.

With just a few words, the attendant in their box called out his bid.

"Twenty-five million!"

He hadn't made a bid at all until now, so he hadn't known quite what to expect when his bid was announced. He knew that at least some people around knew who he was, so the response wasn't entirely surprising, but Leon still felt almost insulted.

After his bid was announced, silence fell over the theater as Leon felt hundreds of eyes turn in his direction. His bid wasn't startlingly high compared to the previous bid, but he knew his *position* was, at least compared to just about everyone else there. Many averted their gazes as he glanced around at the other boxes.

'*Guess they don't want to compete with a Chief of Heaven's Eye?*' Leon wondered, satisfied that it seemed like the manticore was already his. Unfortunately, his rank was, of course, only startling high compared to *just about* everyone else there, and the one man who wasn't so completely outranked by him wasn't done.

"Twenty-seven million!" an attendant called out just as the auctioneer was about to finish calling for other bids. *Narses'* attendant.

Leon glanced at the man in question, who stared back at him with a subdued, though still blatantly challenging grin.

"That guy..." Anna murmured again as her brow deeply furrowed.

Without hesitation, Leon raised his bid to thirty million, and Narses raised his again to thirty-one. Leon hit thirty-five, and Narses went to thirty-six.

"He's just pumping up the bid," Gaius said, his tone one of certainty. "He wants you to spend money, I don't think he cares that much about the manticore."

"We can play that game," Leon responded. He raised his bet to forty million. Narses then raised again to forty-one, and Leon, in contrast to his other bids, didn't immediately raise again. Instead, he let the bid hang there as the auctioneer began calling out for other bids again, his eyes rather unsobtly straying in Leon's direction.

Leon took a moment to glance around the theater. Many were watching what was going on with great intent, as if what was happening was nothing more than a show. Leon thinly smiled, not appreciating being put on the spot, but he also wasn't about to let Narses beat him. He turned his attention back to his competitor, and found that Narses' smile had slipped just a little bit as the auctioneer's countdown for new bids nearing its end.

"Leon..." Anna worriedly whispered.

"Don't worry," Leon replied, and he made his next bid.

Fifty million silvers. Narses didn't make another bet, Leon was glad to see. The manticore was theirs.

Chapter 797: Post-Auction Excitement

The manticore cub was brought to their box after the auction was over, fully secured and ready to hand off. Anna was particularly excited for its arrival, but her enthusiasm was mildly dampened when the cub was handed over by the host personally, accompanied by a few of his private attendants, rather than Eirene, who'd apparently been the primary caretaker of the cub since its capture.

Regardless, the handoff went smoothly, with Leon only having to stomach a few minutes of idle chit-chat with the host before the host departed to see to the other auction attendees.

Leon had to admit that the auction had been fairly fun. He'd enjoyed the back-and-forth with Narses the Black, despite knowing that he'd likely grossly overpaid for the manticore cub. Still, there were a few things that were priceless, and pride was one of them. Narses had deliberately provoked him, and Leon rather disliked that.

As fun as it was, Leon's anger and irritation from Narses' interference came to the fore. However, as Leon cast his gaze over at the man's box, he saw that it was empty; the man had left sometime while the host had been occupying Leon's attention.

"Anyone see when Narses left?" he asked his retainers.

None had, apparently, their attentions having largely been taken up by the new manticore cub. Leon blamed himself for that; he hadn't given any orders, implied or otherwise, to keep an eye on the man.

But as Anna was tending to her newest war beast, she paused and straightened up, casting her gaze over at Narses' box.

"I think I know him. Narses, I mean," she said, her tone hesitant and unsure.

"How so?" Leon asked.

"I... can't say. I've heard his name once or twice, but it's never struck a chord with me. His face, on the other hand..."

"Hmm," Leon hummed in thought.

Gaius was the first to ask, "Should we look into him, Leon?"

Leon smiled at his initiative. Over the past few years, especially since Gaius had made it known to him that he'd been feeling restless and purposeless, Leon had gotten him some work as one of his personal

agents. At this point, he trusted Gaius enough to let him act with some autonomy, usually acting in place of Leon when multiple things came up at the same time that needed his personal attention. Gaius was behind only Talal and Elise when it came to possessing knowledge of Leon's affairs as Chief of Magical Research and Development.

"Not... *officially*, at any rate," Leon murmured. "He was deliberately poking at me, and I didn't appreciate it. Not knowing why concerns me."

Either his words, something in his tone, or a combination of both had his retainers straightening themselves out and flexing their auras, to his deep appreciation. Five years of relative peace hadn't dulled their senses or their killing intent—if anything, Leon had made sure to keep them sharp and as ready as they could be for any unforeseen violence.

"I don't think we'll come to blows," Leon continued. "Let's wait to make any judgments until he gets into contact with me."

"You're sure he's going to try and contact you?" Alix asked. "Were I your enemy, I wouldn't call attention to myself and attack without you even knowing I was around."

"He's already called attention to himself," Marcus muttered. "His competition was designed to get Leon's attention, I should think."

"We can speculate all we want," Leon said, "but we won't know without more information. For now, let's head back to the villa and make sure this little one gets the care he needs."

Anna held the manticore cub close to her chest and grinned as she stroked the cub's pale gold fur. The cub seemed rather content with its situation, not struggling or thrashing about at all. It soon took up everyone's attention as they made their way back to Leon's villa, with Alix especially peppering Anna with questions. It was in this way that Leon learned the cub was male, healthy, and probably about two months old—slightly younger than what the auctioneer had claimed, he noted with some slight bitterness.

As they piled into his large personal hovering carriage, Anna took advantage of a slight lull in the manticore admiration to ask him quite the important question, "Leon, could I ask you a favor?"

"You can certainly ask," Leon cheekily replied.

"Would it... be all right if, uh..." She trailed off a bit, getting the shy and bashful look that Leon had only ever seen when discussing one person: Eirene.

Leon waited patiently for her to get her words straight, despite already guessing at what she was going to ask. He briefly glanced out of the window, noting that, despite the lateness of the hour—it was about an hour and a half after midnight—there seemed to be a fairly large number of carriages on the road around them. They were still close to the theater, though, so Leon chalked it up to those who attended still leaving. There were only so many roads they could take to leave the private venue, after all.

As these thoughts flitted through his mind, Anna finally got what she wanted to say organized in her mind and gave them voice. "Would you be willing to hire Eirene as a beastmaster?"

Leon looked back at her, her question exactly what he'd thought it would be. "Is she good?" he asked, though he wasn't expecting a particularly objective answer from Anna.

"The best," she replied. "I don't want you to think that I'm just shilling for my girl, Leon. She's *very* good at what she does. It's a large part of what attracted me in the first place. But I have to say that the job of taking care of even the three beasts we've already acquired is beyond me."

"That's why I've been having Heaven's Eye beastmasters helping out," Leon pointed out.

"Yes, but I would recommend that taking care of private war beasts should be done by private beastmasters. We don't want to rely entirely on your connections to take care of war beasts in your retinue, do we?"

Leon smiled, recognizing her logic, even if it was, at least in part, self-serving.

"All right," he said. "You've convinced me. Bring the matter up with Elise and let her know that what I think."

"Will do!" Anna exclaimed.

Leon's smile grew shallower as silence descended upon his carriage once more and his eyes turned back outside. Elise was the one who was most in charge of their personal affairs, since he had neither the time nor inclination to see to their staff and private businesses. If she also agreed to hire Eirene—probably after a fairly rigorous interview, as even with Anna's recommendation, she wasn't getting in that easily—then Eirene wouldn't be in Leon's retinue, she'd be a part of his household staff.

He would've continued ruminating on the matter for a while longer, but he realized that even after traveling a fair distance away from the theater the other carriages around them hadn't dispersed. There were three in front of them, two more behind, and they were boxed in on both sides by more carriages. None of them were particularly fancy, though all were at least wheelless and horseless.

Not too much further ahead, Leon realized that they were going to pass through a fairly secluded part of Occulara, with closed businesses to the north and a public park to the south—hardly anyone around, of note or otherwise, at this time of night.

As he glared suspiciously at the nearest carriage, he noticed that its windows were closed, though he could've sworn he saw *someone* staring back at him through the crack in the twin wooden covers. He couldn't feel even the slightest aura seeping from the carriage, let alone a hint of killing intent, but he was still disturbed.

With a frown spreading across his face, he hammered the driver's compartment behind him with his fist and opened the tiny window connecting it with the passenger cabin.

"My Lord?" his middle-aged, second-tier driver diligently said.

"Take the next turn. Get us away from those around us."

"On it," the driver responded, and Leon closed the window. Then, he shut the window next to his seat and ordered his retainers to do the same.

"What's wrong?" Gaius asked, his demeanor one of the utmost seriousness.

“Hopefully nothing,” Leon replied. “Maybe something. Carriages have been on us since we left the auction. I don’t like it.”

He glared back at the closed window, now blocking all visual light from entering or leaving. Leon had wanted some enchanted one-way glass for his carriage, but decided instead to reinforce the thing as much as possible. As a result, the carriage was steel he personally forged and enchanted, with a wooden finish to give it a more stately—and less threatening—look. However, with his enchantments running through carriage, he thought that it could take direct hits from a Bull Kingdom Flame Lance and not be overly damaged. It would take an eighth-tier mage at least to try to break in with any kind of confidence.

But those were just the defenses. *‘If these are hostiles, then they’ll not even have the opportunity to try...’* Leon thought with anticipation. He could still keep track of everyone around his carriage thanks to the enchantments allowing his magic senses out, but preventing anyone from spying on the interior in a similar way. Like that, he could use his carriage’s weapon enchantments quite easily.

The carriage slowed down as his driver began making signs to merge to the lane to their right, preparing to turn toward a slightly busier section of Occulara. However, the carriage to their right didn’t budge, keeping pace and forcing them to either stay in their lane or risk a crash. Likewise, the carriages directly in front of and behind them didn’t move, either.

Leon opened the window to his driver again. “Stop here. Don’t get out, no matter what.”

To his credit, his driver didn’t even blink before acknowledging his order.

To his retainers, he said, “Prepare for combat. Secure that mantichore.”

The entire atmosphere in the carriage changed completely as all of his retainers donned their armor instantly, pulling it from their magic senses. Everyone but Anna then armed themselves as Anna put the mantichore cub into a carrying cage that she’d brought with them for just this purpose. Then, she sat back and nodded to Leon.

Gaius and Marcus both wielded swords, though Gaius’ was longer—too long for a mortal to use with only one hand, though no mortal would even be able to *lift* Gaius’ weapon, let alone wield it. Marcus’ was the size of an arming sword, though Leon knew he also had a thunder wood bow that he frequently practiced with.

Alix, too, had a sword, one that was almost identical to Leon’s own. Given that she practiced both lightning magic and his family’s fighting style, Leon had forged for her a longsword to match his, that she could exploit her fighting style to the hilt.

Anna was the odd one out as her weapon was a long spear, one damn near pike length and certainly too long to fit in their carriage without risking putting out someone’s eye. Leon didn’t begrudge her at all for not drawing her weapon yet, knowing that she was ready to do so whenever.

All of their weapons had been heat-dyed and glowed with magical light. They were all weapons Leon had personally forged for them, and he knew full-well the power they possessed in his retainers’ hands. This, however, would be the first time they were ever going to be tested in a real battle.

And it was looking like it was going to *be* a real battle, as the carriages surrounding them stopped with them. Once they came to a stop, about two dozen men exited, each of them a powerful mage with tiers ranging from fifth to seventh.

'Powerful, but not enough for us...' Leon thought, a grin replacing his frown. He projected his magic out through the carriage walls and into the air, seizing control of the fairly overcast sky with such ease that he entertained the thought that it had already been his, and had merely been waiting for his guiding hand.

The leader—or the man Leon assumed was in charge, given he was the only eighth-tier mage among them—stepped forward and shouted, “Come out of that carriage, Leon Raime! Right now! Do so, and no one else will be harmed!”

Leon snorted, but then he took a good long look at the man. He was tall and gaunt, with dreadfully pale skin and pitch-black hair. He radiated confidence, and Leon could feel a hint of demonic power in his aura, leading him to conclude that he was dealing with vampires. Indeed, as he took a closer look at the other mages, he noted that each of them were pale and gaunt, too, and one fifth-tier mage was even snarling at their carriage like an animal, revealing sharp fangs where his canines should've been.

Without hesitation, Leon gave them his answer: a bolt of brilliant golden lightning fell from the sky without any warning, striking the snarling fifth-tier vampire and vaporizing him instantly. The thunder and magical wash that spilled off the strike nearly shattered the nearest carriage, had windows for what sounded like miles breaking, and shook the earth beneath them. All of the fifth and sixth-tier mages outside of their carriage were stunned by the pressure of the thunder, and several even started bleeding from the ears.

With a dismissive look, Leon glanced up at his carriage's roof. It was thick and loaded with weapons, but after this opening strike, he doubted he'd need any of them.

He turned his attention back to his retainers and asked, “Anyone feel like having some fun?”

His retainers flanked outside as their assailants scrambled for cover, and the handful of seventh-tier mages began arranging themselves in a circle around the carriage, creating some kind of magical formation that would amplify the power of whatever it was they were planning.

However, Leon simply sat there for a moment, waiting for their response, a carefree smile on his face.

“Let's go!” Alix shouted with a wicked smile.

“I'm in,” Marcus added almost dismissively.

“Aye,” Gaius added.

“Let's fuck them up,” Anna growled, her expression promising horrific violence for the first of their assailants she saw.

Leon didn't hesitate then to lead the way out the door, his three retainers right on his tail.

As soon as he showed himself, he exerted his aura a bit, and all of their fifth-tier opponents hit the floor, the pressure of his aura too much for them to bear. The sixth-tier vampires withstood it better, but he

could tell that their knees shook. The few seventh and one eighth-tier mage couldn't pale any further, but Leon relished their looks of panic as he showed himself.

"Well," he said as he stood opposite them, his retainers on his flanks, "I'm here now; you have my attention. Was there something you needed?" Leon locked eyes with the eighth-tier vampire, silently daring him to make a move.

Unfortunately, Leon didn't get an answer, much to his disappointment—though, he supposed this was for the best. He didn't want to let his guard down, or get too used to stroking his ego when enemies made their presence known. He was ninth-tier, and thus stronger than them, but he wasn't invincible.

So, Leon snapped his fingers, and a handful of lightning bolts fell, striking all of the fifth-tier vampires, annihilating them instantly. All of the sixth-tier mages, too, dropped dead under the tremendous force that spilled off of Leon's attack, the accompanying thunder obliterating the street beneath their feet and shaking the buildings around enough to crack their stone facades.

"Let's go," Leon said to his retainers, and they sprang into action. The vampires had brought a spectacular amount of power—far more than Leon had thought them capable of after their excising from Heaven's Eye—but they still only had one seventh-tier vampire for each of his retainers. Leon himself glared at the eighth-tier, locking him down with the weight of his anger alone as his retainers chose their opponents.

Anna was the only one with an explicit advantage, being one tier higher than the vampire she went up against. It was hardly a surprise when she appeared before him in a flash of light, drawing her spear from her soul realm in the same breath, and ran it right through the vampire's chest. Leon's enchantments within the weapon activated, incinerating the vamp from the inside out.

Gaius' opponent took a little more work, but he was still on the back foot from the word go as Gaius charged, his longsword glowing with magic power. Gaius pressed the vampire hard, but the vampire still let off a few blasts of potent demonfire. Unfortunately for the vamp, Gaius was wearing his armor, and the vampire's fire attacks only left him vulnerable to Gaius' counterattack. The first fire blast Gaius only dodged, but the second he answered by almost dismissively seizing control of the ground beneath his opponents feet and opening it up like a set of stone jaws. Gaius charged at the same time, preventing the vampire from leaping away and instead forcing him down into the spiky pit, where he was quickly impaled and killed.

Marcus' vampire went down even easier. At first, it didn't seem like he had the advantage, but as he bobbed and weaved around the vampire's sword swings and fire blasts, Leon realized that Marcus had his situation well in hand. Indeed, not even half a minute had passed since their duel began before Marcus' sword flashed with white light, conjuring a blade of light twenty feet long, and sliced clean through the vampire before the vamp could even blink, putting his speed as a light mage on full display.

Alix was the most surprising, despite having ascended to the seventh-tier most recently among all of Leon's retainers. She employed her lightning magic not so much as a direct attack, but instead using it to dramatically increase her speed and increase the damage her sword did. With every swing, her blade crackled and sparked with golden lightning, and even before Marcus and Gaius killed their opponents, Alix had run hers through and filled his body with lightning, frying him quite spectacularly.

“Well,” Leon said as the last of the eighth-tier’s fellows hit the ground, “looks like your people were ill-served by their bestowed power. Either that or they just didn’t know how to use it well. Now, are you going to surrender, or are we going to find out if you’re the same?”

The eight-tier vampire glared daggers at him, his hand shaking and his body language defensive. He cocked his head as if listening to something, and then snarled. But he restrained his aura and seemed to relax slightly as if he really were about to surrender, but before he could, a massive crossbow bolt exploded out from his chest. At the same time, his body detonated in a conflagration of demonfire. Fortunately, none of Leon’s people were harmed, though they had to jump backward to remain safe.

When the fires died down, Leon noticed the last few embers forming the shape of eyes; eyes that were trained directly on him.

He didn’t leave himself to contemplate that for too long before he spun around in the direction the crossbow bolt had come from and noticed Narses the Black standing on a nearby roof, five mages at his shoulders, a massive heavy crossbow in his hand.

“Leon!” he called out with a good-natured tone, though Leon noticed Anna freeze up as his voice echoed around the shattered street. “Hope you don’t mind me backing you up!”

Narses jumped down from the rooftop, but as he approached, Anna turned to Leon and whispered, “I *know* him!”

From behind her visor, Leon could see her eyes wide with fear, anger, and hatred. However, before he could ask any questions, Narses joined them next to his carriage.

“That was exciting, wasn’t it?” he said.

Chapter 798: Casimir

“That was exciting, wasn’t it?” Narses the Black said as he joined Leon’s retinue next to Leon’s carriage, the corpses of the slain vampires scattered all around them.

Leon thinly smiled at Narses and his five powerful followers. Anna was still obviously disturbed, and even took a few steps backward, away from Narses.

Fortunately, it seemed that Narses either didn’t notice or didn’t care.

“It was... *something*, all right,” Leon neutrally replied.

“Indeed,” Gaius added as he took up position at Leon’s shoulder, Marcus and Alix following suit a moment later. It seemed that Leon wasn’t the only one who noticed Anna’s strange behavior.

Righting himself, Leon quickly stated diplomatically, “Thank you for your assistance, Narses. Dealing with vampires is never pleasant, and anyone who can shoulder a little of that burden is welcome.”

“Nonsense,” Narses said as he waved his hand dismissively—if he were disturbed at how defensive Leon’s retainers were being, he didn’t let on. “Just a little professional courtesy between fellow members of Heaven’s Eye. It may be Narses the White’s *job* to keep the peace, but peace is a duty that falls upon all of us. Everyone one of us would look—”

Cutting Narses off, Anna stepped forward and bluntly asked, “Who are you?”

Narses blinked in surprise as his focus shifted from Leon to Anna. “I am Narses, often called ‘the Black’. Who might you be?” As he introduced himself, he ran his hands through his jet black hair, the eponymous trait that distinguished him from the platinum blond Narses the White.

Anna stared at him for a long moment before glancing back at Leon, then tersely replying, “No one.” Without another word, she turned around and walked back behind Leon, seemingly shielding herself from Narses’ eyes.

“All... right...” Narses whispered as his eyes narrowed slightly. “You have interesting taste in employees, Leon...”

Leon grunted in acknowledgement as his magic senses swept over their surroundings. It had barely been five minutes since his carriage had been ambushed, but large teams of Heaven’s Eye security forces were already closing in on their position, with many powerful mages leading them. Leon figured they would’ve arrived by now if his ambushers hadn’t had an eighth-tier and several seventh-tier mages amongst them, which necessitated a stronger response from Heaven’s Eye’s security forces than what was likely on call.

As Leon watched them close in, Gaius picked up some of Leon’s slack in the conversation and cynically observed, “Good thing you were so close to us. Who knows how that might’ve ended had you not been here.”

“I’m sure you would’ve been fine,” Narses unflappably responded. “That last leech wouldn’t have troubled you any, I’m sure.”

“We can never be sure when it comes to vampires, can we?” Gaius asked.

“I suppose not. In that case, I’ll happily accept your thanks!”

Leon wasn’t sure he remembered Gaius ever thanking Narses, but he supposed his own courtesy ‘thanks’ could be enough to represent his entire group. Regardless, he agreed with Gaius’ subtext that it was suspicious as the most devious of the hells that Narses had been so close. Leon hadn’t even realized that he’d been nearby—though, to be fair, wards that block magic senses were ubiquitous in the Ilian Empire. It was *soconvenient* that the man had been right here...

‘Need to have a chat Anna...’ Leon thought to himself. *‘She absolutely knows more about this guy than she’s telling me...’*

Before their ever-more strained conversation could limp on, a squad of Heaven’s Eye security forces finally arrived, flying in using half a dozen of Leon’s flight belts. They soon took over the situation, and Leon was happy enough to let them see to the investigation. For now, he had his own matters to see to...

—

“So,” Leon said as he and Anna walked into his study, having just returned from the auction and subsequent ambush, “is everything all right? You seemed a little out of sorts when Narses showed up.”

Anna frowned and paced around his study, flexing her fingers. Her aura was wild and chaotic, showing her mental state in a way that Leon could practically see.

"I..." she murmured. "I know him. *Knew* him..."

"I take it this was before you and Helen moved to Attica?"

She nodded. "We were young, then. Our... parents were still... still here."

It was Leon's turn to nod. "I remember you mentioning that a while back. Your parents were... they died due to vampires, I recall?"

"Yes. I didn't know it at the time. It wasn't until a family friend told us about it that..." She choked up a bit, and Leon walked over, hesitated a moment, then laid a hand on her shoulder. He almost pulled her into a hug, but that was a bridge too far.

Anna didn't agree, for a moment later, she threw herself into his arms and let out a loud sob as she buried her face into his shoulder. Feeling a little awkward, Leon stood there and gently wrapped his arms around his retainer and waited. Anna being Anna, he didn't have to wait too long before she pulled away, her composure rapidly returning.

"Sorry," she whispered.

"Don't worry about that. Take your time, tell me when or if you're ready."

She smiled and took another couple of minutes to solidify her demeanor. "What do you remember me telling you?" she asked, her tone still a little shaky, but otherwise seemingly recovered.

"The Evergolden ambassador to Ilion when we first arrived in this Empire was an old family friend of yours. She told you that your parents' deaths were caused by vampires. Other than that, I don't really have any details."

"She continued her investigation," Anna explained a little sheepishly. "She's kept me and Helen in the loop. She narrowed her list of suspects down to a small handful, but most of them have either been promoted or otherwise reassigned far away from the Sacred Golden Empire, so her investigation stalled. One of those she labeled a suspect was a man named Casimir, one of my mother's secretaries."

She paused, appearing to wait for his reaction.

"All right," he said after a moment. "I'm a little put-out that you were keeping that from me, but I understand that you might've wanted to keep it private. So, this 'Casimir'. You think Narses is Casimir?"

"I *know* he is," Anna resolutely said, looking a little relieved that Leon wasn't angry at her for keeping her family friend's investigation a secret. "I *remember* him from when I was young. He was one of my mother's secretaries, someone who was often around our estate. After he... after her death, many of our possessions went missing, highly valuable items that represented a large proportion of our family's—admittedly rather insignificant compared to yours—wealth. The possessions were stolen, of that no one was in doubt, and Casimir definitely would've had opportunity to take them—perhaps the *most* opportunity out of anyone."

"Why point to him, though? What about the other suspects?"

“They stuck around the Sacred Golden Empire for a time,” Anna explained. “Casimir vanished almost immediately after my parent’s m... *murders*. And like I said, now that I’ve seen his face and heard his voice, I *remember* him!”

Leon took a deep breath. Her story was shaky and if he were of a mind to, he felt like he could poke all kinds of holes in it. However, he trusted her. She was an eighth-tier mage, so her memory wasn’t nearly as faulty as that of a mortal, at the very least. And besides, the idea that ‘Narses’ was shady wasn’t exactly novel; he’d been acting strangely since Leon first laid eyes on him before the auction.

After a moment of thought, Leon asked, “Vampires, then. How do vampires fit into all of this?”

“It was vampires who... did it,” Anna clarified. “There were witnesses who attested to this. Casimir wasn’t among the vampires, but our current assumptions are that he was involved in no small way. The vampires were able to bypass our estate’s security and escape otherwise undetected. They had to have had insider information.”

“No possibility that they were simply good enough to get in?” Leon asked, arguing just to see her answer.

“Not with the power they showed off. Besides, we didn’t have anything valuable enough to attract those strong enough to bypass our security.”

“Or so you were aware,” Leon said. When Anna looked a little upset, he added, “I’m not saying I don’t believe you, all I’m saying is that we clearly don’t have the full picture. But something’s definitely up with Narses, and I’m going to look into it. If he’s involved with vampires in any way...”

“Leon,” Anna firmly said, pulling him out of his thoughts, “when—or *if*—you go after Narses, I want in. He murdered my parents the same as if he slit their throats himself. Helen won’t approve much, she just wants to live peacefully; but I can’t stand the idea of our parents’ murderers walking free. If you’re going after Casimir...”

Leon nodded, seeing a bit of himself reflected in her stalwart, quietly furious gaze. “I understand. So long as you can keep a cool head if we have to do anything... *delicate*, then you’ll be with me.”

Anna beamed in response.

“For now,” Leon continued, “let’s just focus on gathering some information on Narses and keep an eye out for any further moves from him. It’s clear enough that he wants my attention, and quite possibly wants me indebted to him for some reason. I’d rather have him dead-to-rights before he makes any bigger moves.”

Left unstated was the fact that Narses was still a member of Heaven’s Eye. Leon had thought that the guild had been thoroughly de-vamped, but if he found out that the Director had been hiding another vampire from him...

At the very least, he felt like he had a good place to start his investigation.

—

“Congratulations on your ascension,” the Director stated good-naturedly.

Leon, suppressing his impatience and mild suspicion, stood before the Director's desk with his arms crossed. It was early in the morning, but he wasn't at all surprised that the Director was already in his office working. The Director hadn't given him any real reason to suspect he'd been deceptive during the last five years, so he was inclined to believe that he had nothing to do with the ambush several hours ago, but still...

"There was an incident last night," Leon said.

"I heard," the Director replied as he stood up from his chair and walked around to the front of his desk, as he'd done every time he and Leon had met in the past five years. It was a small thing, but it was one that Leon appreciated. "Nasty business. Narses is personally looking into what happened."

A dangerous smile spread across Leon's face. "Which one?"

The Director gave him a blank look.

"The Black or the White?"

With a smile of understanding, the Director answered, "The White. Seems after all that... *unpleasantness* years ago, he's taken on quite a personal hatred for the creatures. Can't say I blame him, and given my own shameful part in it, I've given him license to do what he feels he must to root out any signs of vampiric corruption within our ranks."

"Trust him that much, do you?"

"I trust him with the guild."

"Well, then. It's good to see that you're so motivated to see an end to this menace." Leon grinned and gave the Director a meaningful look. He hadn't been all that demanding over the past five years, mostly content to let the Director do what he did without any interference. They were partners, but that didn't mean Leon had to have a say in absolutely everything that went on in Heaven's Eye. However, one area where Leon *was* demanding was vampires. "I have something that *may* be related that I wanted to look into..."

Leon then brought up what happened with Narses the Black, and while the Director had already heard that Narses had been involved in the fight at the end, the addition of his provocative behavior during the auction and Anna's suspicions had the Director frowning by the end of Leon's explanation.

"That *is* concerning..." the Director murmured.

"He's one of yours," Leon said. "That means looking into his affairs is a difficult thing to do."

"It isn't, really," the Director replied. "His powers are limited. As a regional inspector, he acts as one of my Eyes, not my Hands. That means he watches the Tower Lords and other high-ranking members of Heaven's Eye, but he has no real power over them. He simply informs me of what he sees, and occasionally makes recommendations."

"And that makes him easier to look into?"

"Very much so. Without the authority of one of my Hands, while he has influence, he doesn't quite have the power to hide from any other Eyes or Hands I turn in his direction."

“Good. I want to know everything about him. His history, any aliases he used in the past, where he was born, his favorite color, everything.”

“I’ll get right on it,” the Director said.

“Mm. Thanks.”

—

With the Director on it, Leon didn’t think that there was much more he needed to do in regard to Narses the Black. However, he made sure to warn both Narses the White and Emilie about his suspicions about the man, though he made sure that they knew he was dangerous.

As almost an aside, while he was with Emilie, he made sure to give her one of his two spare Hesperidic Apples, to her immense delight. In fact, the only thing he thought he could give her that would’ve brought her more joy would’ve been grandchildren.

Once that was over, he made his way to his own office in his branch’s Tower, where he spent a few hours knocking out some of the work he couldn’t delegate. However, he was only partway through it when a knock came at his door, and after he called for it to be opened, the stark white face of Anzu appeared.

“Anzu!” Leon shouted with glee as his griffin-in-human-form slowly walked into his office.

Anzu nodded, then contorted his lips a few times and said slowly, enunciating every syllable, “Bro...therrrr...”

Without hesitation, Leon got up from his desk and came around to clap Anzu on the shoulder. His human form had gotten something of a make-over, courtesy of Elise and Alix. As both stated, his looks were too good to waste looking like some wild barbarian.

Leon wasn’t sure exactly how to take that, if he were honest.

As a result, Anzu’s long hair had been cut into a fairly short, though still exceptionally stylish, length, and had been dressed in tight clothes dyed silver that had been trimmed in bright blue. His clothes showed off his lithe, athletic body without actually showing off much skin, and Leon had to admit that Anzu pulled off the look of a well-built pretty boy quite well.

“What brings you here?” Leon asked, noting that Anzu had come alone.

“Exploring...” Anzu slowly stated. However, a moment later, his red eyes widened for a second and he pulled out a letter from his soul realm. “Narses...” he said in explanation as he handed the letter to Leon.

With a deep frown, Leon took the letter. He knew which Narses had sent it, as he’d just spoken to the White not even two hours before and the Chief of Security hadn’t mentioned anything about a letter then.

Opening it, Leon lightly scowled in suspicion as he scanned the letter’s contents.

Narses had ‘done some digging’ of his own, and discovered the location of a blood farm. He now invited Leon to join him in destroying it.

—

“This is a trap,” Valeria firmly stated.

Leon glanced at her. She’d been awkward around him since her request, but now that they had something that needed their serious attention, she’d put all of that behind her to focus on the task at hand. Leon took only that moment to admire his lady before doing likewise.

“I’m about ninety-nine percent in agreement,” Leon replied. “There’s always the *possibility* that it isn’t a trap, but...”

“Let’s be real here,” Alix said, “this is a fucking trap.”

Leon glanced around at his family and retinue. All seemed in agreement. In particular, his eyes landed on Valentina, the only one present not an official member of his retinue. Despite this, given her connections with the vampires, Leon had brought her in on his strategy meeting for consultation.

“If Narses is who I think he is,” Valentina said, “then Alix is right, this is a trap.”

“You don’t know who you were working with?” Marcus asked, disbelief dripping from his voice.

“Vampires aren’t known for being trusting,” Valentina replied. “Besides, a researcher in deep cover doesn’t have much opportunity to interact with anyone, let alone one of the Director’s Eyes. I know other powerful vampires by sight, but not by name alone.”

“If you got a look at Narses, then, you’d know if he is or isn’t a vampire?” Valeria asked.

“No,” Valentina replied. “Or, not necessarily, I suppose. If I’ve met him before, then yes. If he’s unfamiliar to me and he’s hiding his nature, then there won’t be much I can do.”

Leon nodded and asked, “Would you be willing to come with us, then? Assuming I decide we should join this operation to destroy this blood farm?”

When Valentina nodded, Leon wasn’t too surprised; she’d given Narses the White plenty of information on vampire movements not long after signing on with Xaphan and successfully abandoning her vampirism.

“How should we play this, then?” Alcander wondered aloud. “I’m not comfortable just ignoring this, but if it’s a trap then walking into it would be about as smart as putting your head in a lion’s mouth.”

“The simplest way to reveal a trap is to spring it,” Marcus disagreed, drawing incredulous looks from all around the room. “I’m serious. If we know it’s a trap, then we can plan ahead for it. And if we spring it, then we can spring a counter-trap.”

“It’s not a bad strategy,” Gaius agreed. “How well it works will depend on the situation we find ourselves in. The terrain, the numbers we’ll have available, our enemy’s own awareness level. Anyone as highly-ranked as Narses is could very well be tipped off if we don’t play our cards close to our chest.”

“If we’re walking into a trap,” Anna said, her voice intense and laced with hate, “then we should bring a whole spirits-damned army! Crush them underfoot like the insects they are!”

“If they see an army coming, then they won’t sit still and wait to be crushed,” Valeria pointed out.

"If we move quickly enough, they won't have a chance to react," Anna countered. "Just bring Narses in and we can handle everything else from there."

"It's a hard thing to bring someone in without proof," Leon mused. "That tiny chance that everything's on the up-and-up

Chapter 799: Blood Farm

"Leon!" Narses the Black called out as Leon arrived at their prearranged staging point.

It was a fairly innocuous camp on the edge of the Ilumerian Wetlands, hidden by the thick canopy of the swampy forest. It largely consisted of a few hastily built stone huts, all of which were little more than single-story cubes with little in the way of decoration.

Narses now stood in the doorway of the largest of the handful of buildings waving Leon inside. None of the buildings had much in the way of defensive wards, so Leon was easily able to count a dozen more mages here, too, and all of them fairly powerful, ranging from the fifth to the seventh-tier. Narses himself was an eighth-tier mage, bringing the power potential of his force up quite a bit. However, even with all of that, Leon alone still outclassed him and his group.

And yet, Leon forced himself to stay on-guard, even as he plastered a relaxed smile over his face. There were plenty of ways to hide enemy forces, and Leon knew he was walking into a trap. Better to stay alert than be caught off-guard and take casualties.

With Leon was Anzu, Anna, Valeria, and Gaius, all flying at his side as he touched down in the center of the camp, and all of them fully armored—in Anzu's case, he wore a suit of armor that Leon had made for practice several years prior and kept just in case. He and Sid would make the griffin a suit of his own in time, but for now, Leon's spare armor would do just fine. They were all tense and ready for battle, but Leon didn't think that Narses' trap was going to be sprung here. There just wasn't enough magic around for him to think that this was the place, and given his skill in the enchanting arts, hiding such preparations from him would be a feat unto itself.

So, Leon led his small force forward to greet Narses the Black.

"Narses," Leon replied in greeting.

"Good to see you're here," Narses said, grinning at Leon in a way that Leon could only see as predatory. "I was almost afraid that you'd leave this to me..."

"If there's a threat," Leon stated as he walked over, "I deal with it as quickly as I can."

"So I've heard," Narses replied. "With you here, this operation should go off without a hitch."

With a smile of his own, Leon stated, "Here's hoping. Why don't we step inside and go over your plan?" As he spoke, Leon removed his helmet and approached Narses.

'Better for him to steer me into another prepared location if he wants to spring a trap...' Leon mused. He was a ninth-tier mage, and Narses knew that. A typical ambush, as clearly demonstrated by the one two nights before, wouldn't work, not with the power that Narses and Leon had, respectively.

Narses waved Leon inside, and with a look, Leon directed Anzu and Valeria to follow him, while leaving Anna and Gaius outside. The rest of Narses' retinue appeared gaunt and pale, but none of them out-and-out looked like vampires—though Leon guessed that they all were. It would've been quite the coincidence if they all just so happened to share some vampiric traits just as they were hunting vampires...

The stone building that Narses led them into amounted to one barely-furnished room, though Leon had been able to tell that from miles away. The room was empty save for a table in the center and two more mages, one rather pale but the other quite dark of skin. On the table was a surprisingly accurate hand-drawn map of the region, complete with markings indicating their camp, the blood farm, and several approach routes.

"This is what we're looking at," Narses said as he indicated the map. "About thirty miles west of here, in the middle of a dense swam, is our target location. Large, fortified estate, robust defenses, surrounded on all sides by a swamp."

Narses pointed to the location, and Leon saw six marked buildings. One was quite large—some kind of rural villa, he guessed—while the other five buildings appeared to be smaller guest houses or supporting structures. All the buildings were surrounded and linked by a reasonably thick wall.

"How many people are inside?" Leon asked, wondering just how detailed Narses was prepared to be.

"We've counted more than fifty guards just outside the central structure," Narses explained. "The entire place is surrounded by a wall that's been heavily reinforced with magic. We can't see inside with magic senses, so we've had to rely entirely on using our eyes to see. Unknown number of persons inside, captured or otherwise."

"Hmm," Leon hummed in response. "Gatehouse on the south side, not too far from the swamp's shore. Could hit there."

"The gatehouse is particularly reinforced," Narses warned. "Plus, those two towers on either side."

Leon lightly frowned and projected his magic senses, hoping to see the estate for himself. As Narses warned, however, he was only able to see the outer wall and couldn't get his magic senses past the wards within the stone. Just seeing the outer wall, however, was enough for Leon to get a general feel for the kinds of wards present within it, though not to get a good grasp of the enchantments themselves. At the very least, he revised his earlier assumption up from 'villa' to 'castle'.

"No warding against flight," Leon observed.

"An aerial assault would make this fairly easy," Narses commented.

Valeria added, "A ground assault could still come in handy."

"Then Narses' people will attack from the ground," Leon decided, "and we'll attack from the sky. Does that sound good?"

Narses smiled without a hint of bitterness. "I'm not exactly happy about it, but I agree that's probably our best bet. We can approach from the east, where there are the fewest towers and get the attention

of the defenders. You head into the main structure from the sky while the defenders aren't looking and see to the hostages."

"I don't suppose you could even hazard a guess at how many people are being held and farmed for blood?" Leon asked.

"I can't say," Narses admitted. "Could be ten, could be a thousand, I have no way to tell."

"Let's hope it isn't that many," Leon growled. "For now, let's get organized. I won't dictate to you how to get your people there, but let's launch this thing in... how about three hours? We'll head out now and hit the estate once you get the defenders' attention..."

"That sounds good," Narses said, once more smiling at Leon quite pleasantly, though to Leon it looked like a grin of triumph.

The two went over a few more details before they had their plan. Without much ado, Leon and his people turned around and left the building, linking back up with Gaius and Anna before taking back to the sky.

As they rose, Leon left his helmet off and sent a quick mental message to his waiting reinforcements. If they were going to spring this trap, then he needed his hidden reinforcements moved up.

—

As Leon hovered over the target compound, he found himself wondering if he was mistaken in Narses' intent. If Narses *was* luring him into a trap, then he was mobilizing quite a few resources to do so—or at least, sacrificing quite a few resources.

There were more than fifty guards on the walls; Leon counted at least eighty. Within the walls, he counted at least another eighty, let alone those inside the keep itself—and it *was* a keep, his revised assumption proving accurate. Heavy fortifications, ramparts, towers, crenellations, machicolations: the place wasn't as hardened a target as a castle could be, but it was quite close.

Leon felt no small amount of pleasure knowing that, in hovering over the place, he was rendering most of those physical fortifications moot.

As he observed the compound, he watched half a dozen guards escorting ten chained and manacled individuals from one of the outer buildings into the keep. He didn't notice any overt signs of vampirism, but it was clear that there was some kind of human trafficking going on here. A little more concerning, however, was the dock on the west side of the veritable island in the Illumerian swamp, which hadn't been marked on Narses' map. If Leon had to guess, these people were pirates of some kind, though their ship wasn't present, meaning some of them might not get swept up in this operation.

Leon could only sigh; that was a problem for another time, and one that he wouldn't be dealing with. He'd brought with him some people who *could*, though.

Deeper in the swamps to the east, he could see Narses and his people creeping through the swamp as best as they could. Narses and his top mages were strong enough to get through without exerting any effort at all, but the swamp was thick enough that his party's weaker mages were struggling a bit at the back. In all, his group numbered twenty-five, with four seventh-tier mages among them.

As they waited in the air, Leon covered his people by conjuring a fluffy white cloud beneath them, letting it slowly gather and spread. No one below seemed to notice the sky growing more and more overcast.

By his estimation, about ten minutes before Narses got into position, Leon, his helmet beneath his arm, felt a brief pulse against his mental defenses from a familiar source. It seemed that his people were in position, just waiting for his signal. One quick exchange later, Leon put his helmet back on and readied himself for violence.

Right on time, Narses got his people into position, and then opened up on the walls with a torrent of flame. A veritable ocean of bright orange fire erupted from him and crashed upon the walls, but to their credit, the walls held. Barely. The same couldn't be said for those within, as they were roasted in the towers.

At the same time, Leon let the charge he'd been building up in the clouds he'd conjured loose. Twelve tremendous bolts of lightning fell upon the compound, killing more than twenty guards with their strength. The force of his thunder shook the castle to its foundations, and Leon grinned like a madman when the section of the wall weakened by Narses' fire partially collapsed.

"Let's go!" Leon roared, and he and his people descended upon the castle like the wrath of a furious god.

A number of guards had started pouring out of the castle keep, and Anzu was the first to his them, tearing into them with his hands. He'd manipulated his wind magic into extending his fingers like razor-sharp claws, ripping through the guards with practiced ease. Anna came next, her expression—what little of it that was visible behind her helmet—one of tranquil fury as she swung her blade and sent a wave of white light hitting those guards that Anzu hadn't taken care of, tearing them all to pieces.

Valeria and Gaius followed, though neither had much more to do with Anzu and Anna having taken care of most of their opponents. However, perhaps due to feeling a little left out, Valeria glanced back at the nearest tower, which held five guards desperately firing enchanted crossbows in a vain attempt to keep Narses' people from advancing, and outstretched her hand. A moment later, a massive iceberg seemed to grow out of the earth at her feet, enveloping the tower completely in thick magical ice, likely killing those guards within.

Gaius, oriented on the goal, went to the castle's heavy, reinforced front door and slammed it open with seeming ease, storming inside with Leon just behind him. Leon prepared his lightning magic, but he didn't even need to bother as Gaius took one look at the atrium within and killed the three guards within by conjuring stone spikes to impale them from the floor.

Once inside, Leon projected his magic senses, finally getting an idea of where to go and what awaited them. He was a little confused to see no hostages or captives, despite seeing at least ten earlier, but he immediately mapped out the interior of the castle and all of its inhabitants. Then, he led his people to storm right through, cutting through all that dared to raise their blades against them. On occasion, a few of the guards would surrender, and Leon would spare time only to tie them up. But no matter what those who resisted did, Leon's party tore right through them, hardly slowing down at all.

Fortunately, their interior defenses mostly consisted of magically-reinforced doors, but in the face of a ninth-tier mage, their doors might as well have been open for all the obstacle they posed to him.

The castle was four stories tall and contained about thirty total rooms. Within were about fifty guards, and of them, only seven surrendered.

When they reached the top floor, only five guards remained in the last room, defending their leader, a sixth-tier mage who looked as pale as the driven snow, was so gaunt that he appeared little more than skin and bones, and emitted an aura that Leon found rather demonic in nature. It was no stretch of the imagination to identify him as a vampire; the only one that Leon had found so far that was unambiguous as to what he was. His hair was as black as midnight, and by looks alone, he seemed physically strong and was no stranger to violence. The sword in his hand was wielded with practiced ease, and dark red demonfire sparked at his off hand's fingertips.

Leon wasted no time in smashing his way into this man's bedroom, and with barely more than a thought, swung his blade and fried his five guards with silver-blue lightning. He didn't hold much back, and each of the guards practically exploded as his power washed over them, leaving little more than blackened ash of the men they once were.

The vampire, however, Leon didn't touch. Instead, he stood there, suppressing the man with his aura, slowly exerting pressure until the overwhelmed vampire fell to his knees and dropped the sword in his hand.

Only then did Leon deign to speak, the rest of his party forming up at his shoulders and letting their own auras settle upon the vampire.

"Blood farm," Leon growled. "Where?"

The vampire sputtered a bit, showing off his fangs in the process, and gasped, "Down... below!"

"Show me," Leon growled, but the vampire's eyes simply widened in sudden fear before he burst into flame. In barely more than a second, and with a stomach-turning scream, the vampire was rendered into a few clumps of ash as he was consumed by demonfire. Within that demonfire were two familiar malevolent eyes, burning like coals in a furnace, glaring at Leon—or rather, at Xaphan within Leon's soul realm—with undisguised hatred.

And then the fire died as quickly as it began, leaving Leon's party standing alone in the vampire's bedroom, the castle cleared of all enemies, their weapons covered in blood.

"... He said, 'down below'," Gaius said, breaking their brief silence.

"Hidden cellar, maybe?" Leon wondered aloud, noting that the sounds of violence outside had died out. With a brief glance, he noted that it seemed that Narses' people had massacred the remaining guards on the wall, and were moving onto the outer buildings.

Leon quickly led his people back down to the first floor where he tasked them with searching for any hidden doors. As he stepped away, however, he wondered if the 'down below' referred to something in the outer buildings... until barely more than a minute later when Gaius shouted, "Over here!"

Leon's party regrouped on him, finding him standing over a section of the stone floor that had been covered by a carpet that Gaius had thrown to the side. He now knelt on the floor, his off hand pressed against the stone tiles.

"I can sense empty space right below me."

Leon concentrated his perception on the area of stone around Gaius, but couldn't sense anything magical. "Seems like it's only a physical lock, then?" he theorized. He gestured at Gaius, and with a nod, the former nobleman sent his magic power into the stone.

He was proven right as his magic peeled the stone away like peeling a banana, revealing not only a surprisingly ornate and well-lit staircase that descended below the castle, but also the mechanism that would've opened the stone hatch had Leon felt they had the time to look.

Without a word, Leon led his people down the stairs, tasking Anzu with watching their backs. He noted his new brother sigh in relief, and he could understand; he didn't much appreciate the idea of heading underground, either, but that's where they were going.

What they found was remarkably similar to the last blood farm that Leon had knocked over with Narses the White, only much greater in scale. At least three hundred people in a large underground chamber, held aloft with several dozen thick stone pillars. The people were lightly restrained in simple wooden chairs as blood magic enchantments slowly siphoned just enough of their blood to not kill them. All looked exactly as malnourished and weak as that would imply, save for the ten closest to the stairs, who Leon recognized as having just been brought down there.

There were also twenty more guards—a small number for the number of people they had down there, but given how weak everyone was, twenty seemed almost like overkill. At the same time, there were ten men who seemed to be workers, though given they were already cowering at the other end of the chamber, Leon couldn't say exactly what their job was.

Those twenty guards surrendered as soon as Leon filled the chamber with his aura, their weapons clattering to the ground, followed shortly by their knees. There weren't any more doors down there, but Leon did note that about a hundred bottles of blood were by the stairs, so he guessed they were being stored in one of the outer buildings.

As everyone relaxed, Leon had Gaius start restraining the guards and Anna see to the captives. Anzu he ordered to watch the stairs, leaving him to speculate with Valeria.

They didn't immediately speak, some of the recent awkwardness still there. Fortunately, it didn't last too long.

"So," Leon whispered to her, having to raise his voice a bit to be heard over the ecstatic cries of the captives at their rescue, "any of this seem off to you?"

"Much," Valeria tersely replied. "Lots of assets here. Strange that Narses offered it to us. He *is* a vampire, right?"

"I'm quite confident he is," Leon replied. He frowned and glanced up the stairs. "I wouldn't feel too bad if we're wrong, to be honest. But I don't yet think we are. Good traps need good bait, after all. Stay on your toes."

Valeria nodded, and they turned their attention back to seeing to the captives. Leon, however, found himself growing tenser and tenser as he waited for whatever Narses was planning—the *real* fight, as far as he was concerned—to kick off.

Chapter 800: Vengeance Taken

Leon walked out of the castle with a strange sense of calm. He breathed easily, despite the lives just taken by him and his, the smell of death hanging thickly in the air. As he inhaled, he removed his helmet, feeling the ping of darkness magic from his reinforcements echo through his mind.

Narses the Black waited for him in the castle's bailey, standing between Leon and the gatehouse, nearly all of his retainers there with him. All were facing the castle's front door. All were glaring, their auras still roiling and churning, just waiting to be unleashed. Leon rather felt like they were waiting for him to walk out and were mere moments away from attacking him.

However, as he took a few steps out of the door, Narses, still smiling pleasantly, said, "Is the castle secure?"

"Yes," Leon confirmed. "We found several hundred captives down below. They're going to need some help."

Narses didn't even blink at the news, but Leon wasn't expecting him to; instead, he glanced around at the man's retainers, noting that not a single one looked even remotely concerned about the fate of the captives. They were simply staring at him, their weapons and magic at the ready.

Narses himself, despite smiling, didn't come forward, choosing instead to stay with his people and speak with Leon across practically the entire bailey. Leon didn't move closer, either, remaining by the door with his people as they filed out after him, his own magic still inundating the sky.

Silence descended upon the bailey as the two groups stared at each other, neither seeming to be willing to make the first move. There they stayed for what seemed an eternity but was more likely just thirty seconds or so. Neither Leon nor Narses looked away from each other at all during this silence, and neither did they let go of their weapons or restrain their auras.

Narses, still smiling at Leon, stated, "Leon... How much longer should we keep this farce going?"

"I was going to leave that up to you," Leon replied. "You gave us a large blood farm; I have no idea what else you might've offered up."

Narses darkly chuckled. "One blood farm's enough," he growled. "Giving up any more of my assts would not be... *advantageous*..."

They stared at each other for another long moment, tension building rapidly in the air.

"I have to ask..." Leon said, "why have a ruse like this at all? Why send those vampires to their deaths? Seems like a waste of power right there..."

Narses grinned. "Better to sacrifice vampires who have no loyalty to me than let them run free. I should thank you for that, actually; those vampires were a rival for my patron's favor. With them gone, all the other vampires on this plane will have to bow to me, and to me *only*."

“That’ll be hard for them to do once you’re ash on the wind,” Leon replied, his tone as light as air.

Narses grinned and chuckled. “You’re rather nonchalant, Leon. You don’t understand the position you’re in, do you?”

“I have a pretty good idea of my situation...” Leon replied as his eyes finally peeled off Narses and scanned the area. The flow of magic was subtly different, so it was clear that Narses had set up additional wards, likely meant to counter anything that Leon could do. But what exactly Narses had done wasn’t yet clear, and he guessed wouldn’t be clear until they started fighting. As it was, though, Leon still had command over his magic, so he didn’t think he or his people were in too much danger.

So, he turned to Anna, who was glaring at Narses with such intense hate that Leon did the thing he was already planning on doing, and what he thought was the only thing he could do. He nodded to her and stepped back, while reaching out as subtly as he could with his darkness magic to coordinate with those outside the wall.

Narses cocked an eyebrow in surprise, but when Anna spoke, his expression froze on his face.

“Do you remember me, Casimir?”

“... I have no idea who you are,” Narses growled, though Leon noted the sudden shift in his demeanor. Instead of the light, joking attitude he’d had with Leon, he completely iced up, though his smile hadn’t slipped.

“That’s fine,” Anna replied, her tone fairly even, though Leon could sense her aura flexing and straining against her self-control. She wanted Narses dead; and quite terribly, too. So badly that she was barely holding herself back, despite her calm voice. “It’s been a long time, Casimir, and though you don’t remember me, I remember you.

“I was only a girl when last we met, barely more than sixteen years old. My sister was even younger. You worked for my mother, spending enough time at our estate that I recognized you almost as soon as I saw you, more than sixty years later.”

Anna fixed Narses in a vicious glare, and Leon saw Narses slowly tensing his sword arm.

“You murdered my parents, Casimir. I know you did.”

Narses’ frozen expression softened for a moment and his smile widened. “Did I?” he asked. “If you’re hoping for me to remember them just from that, you’re going to be disappointed. I’ve murdered many in my life, and I can’t possibly be expected to remember them all.”

“That’s also fine,” Anna replied. “You’ll remember when I’m done. Or you’ll be dead. That’s acceptable, too.”

Anna then lunged forward with her spear, the weapon glowing with brilliant white magic power. In the same moment, Leon summoned a dozen bolts of lightning to fall upon Narses’ people, and he saw his other retainers making their moves, as well.

However, Leon’s bolts struck a cloud of dark red demonfire of titanic power that sprang into place just in time, his bolt dissipating within without reaching the other side. Anna barely got more than ten feet from the front door before being repelled by another wall of demonfire. Valeria attempted to cut

through it with a wall of ice, but her magic power melted away before even touching the fire's smoke. Gaius attempted to open the earth and sever the wall of fire that way, but even though the earth shook, his magic power was unable to pass the line or affect the ground beneath it. Anzu, on the other hand, attempted to bypass the wall entirely, striking at Narses with blades of wind, but his wind was warped and destroyed by the heat of the wall.

In the next moment, Anzu took to the skies, the first of Leon's people to do so, but almost immediately, he hit an invisible wall and almost fell back to the ground. Leon glanced upwards at it and, with it now triggered, recognized the enchantment as similar, though far more powerful, to the wind enchantments that the Royal Legions of the Bull Kingdom put on their camp walls to keep their enemies from simply leaping over them.

"I'm afraid that you're not going anywhere!" Narses mockingly shouted from the other side of the demonfire wall. "This shield is quite impenetrable! My patron himself has lent me his power, ensuring your deaths!" As he spoke, the wall of fire began to grow and advance, and when Leon glanced around, he noticed that the wall completely surrounded the castle. Even if they were to retreat inside, the demonfire would follow them, eventually catching them.

"Nothing's impenetrable!" Anna roared back, taking the words right out of Leon's mouth. "Your power source won't last forever! I'll break through and take your traitorous head!"

As she screamed, Anna hit the shield repeatedly with her spear, but made no progress that Leon could see. The shield had stopped a dozen of his bolts of lightning, he didn't think it was going to flicker too much against her weapon, as strong as it was.

"Keep wasting your energy, then, girl," Narses calmly said, "as strong as you are, you won't be breaking through *this* power!"

Leon had to admire Narses' confidence. It was well-earned, as far as he could tell—the wall of demonfire was powerful, and it was keeping their offensive magics away from Narses and his people. However, it wasn't preventing Leon's magic senses, nor his ability to communicate with Maia outside the castle.

[Boy,] Xaphan growled, [release me.]

[That's not needed,] Leon said, a confident smile spreading across his face. Narses seemed to think that he was in control of the situation, having backed Leon into a corner. However, Leon had his own trap to spring... [All right,] Leon whispered to his waiting reinforcements, [time to bring the heat. Blast open the walls, but watch out for those outer buildings; there might still be civilians in there.]

[On it,] came Maia's reply, and Leon smiled uncontrollably as he calmly put his helmet back on.

As Anna kept striking at the demonfire with her spear and light magic, her magic being consumed with every attempt, Narses began to confidently stride forward, his followers obviously relaxing as they followed, arrogance clear in all their demeanors. They advanced toward the demonfire surrounding the castle, demonfire of their own starting to burn in their hands, but their backs were left covered by nothing but the castle's curtain wall.

It took a few seconds for Leon's reinforcements to make themselves known, but it was just long enough for Leon to enjoy watching Narses come right up to the burning wall and arrogantly smirk at him and Anna.

"Reel in your howling dog," Narses commanded as he stared at Leon, "then we can discuss what we're going—"

Before he could finish, the gatehouse behind him erupted with incredible force, hit by a projectile traveling at an insane velocity, shattering the stone building in an explosion of golden lightning. Narses and his people were thrown to the ground by the blast, and the wall of demonfire, began to flicker. It didn't die completely, indicating some level of redundancy in Narses' demonic trap, but it was obviously weaker.

Before anyone could recover, another blast of lightning erupted on the castle's west side, punching a hole ten feet wide through the thick curtain wall. Another blast hit the east side, knocking another hole into the curtain wall. The north side wasn't destroyed, but a tremendous roar rolled over the castle, and appearing as if from nowhere, Red landed upon the wall in her massive eighth-tier wyvern form, and the wall nearly collapsed under her tremendous weight.

Leon didn't waste a second, conjuring his anti-fire magic gem into his gauntlet and firing it at the demonfire. A hole was almost immediately punched through it, and through that hole went Anna, not an ounce of hesitation to be found within her. Leon and the rest of his retainers charged through right on her tail.

As they charged through the demonfire wall, dozens of Heaven's Eye security officers began pouring through the destroyed gatehouse and holes in the wall. They were all sixth-tier or higher, more than strong enough to massacre Narses' vampires. Leading these forces were familiar faces: Alcander, Alix, Marcus, and Narses the White. Not too far away, standing next to one of the armored carriages that had blown open the holes in the curtain wall with mounted Lightning Lances, was Valentina. Looming over them all was a massive serpentine water dragon, within which Leon would sense Maia, though she was merged with the water.

With a roar of his own, Narses the Black sprang to his feet, his arms alight with demonfire. He became as a volcano, spewing fire and smoke all around him with little regard for who or what was near him. Leon even had to squint at the outpouring of power—Narses was clearly being boosted with power from Amon.

In the same breath, the rest of his vampiric kith started launching balls of demonfire at everyone who now surrounded them. However, they weren't facing just any Heaven's Eye force, they were facing Leon. He had dragon blood flowing through his veins; handling demonfire was no tall order.

He extended a hand, flooding the castle bailey with his magic power. He held little back, letting all of his aura crash down upon them, seizing control of all fire in the area. The demonfire thrown by the vampires dissipated before finding their targets, and the fire streaming out from Narses the Black was contained into a small cylinder around him.

Leon didn't have to issue any orders at this point; his retainers knew what to do. Gaius surged forth, cutting one vampire down with his sword in one hand, while petrifying another with his other hand.

Valeria cut one vampire in half with a single swing of her glaive, while at the same time launching a wave of ice that consumed four more.

Anna, however, was the fastest to react to Leon's dominance of the battlefield, and the most focused. She ignored all of the other vampires, running past them and leaving herself open to strikes from behind, while lunging forward with her spear. The glowing weapon pierced Narses' demonfire, but didn't find purchase in the vampire's body.

At the same time, the rest of Leon's retainers and those who Narses the White attacked. Red spewed fire, killing four; Maia crushed three vampires with her water dragon; Alcander, a fire mage himself, and not as powerful as Red, used only his massive ax to split two vampires in half; Marcus shot two more in the neck with a bow of thunder wood; Alix impaled one on her sword, practically vaporizing the vampire as she filled it with golden lightning.

Narses the White and his security team charged, putting an end to the other remaining vampires. Those who weren't immediately killed quickly burned as their patron extracted his remaining due from their mortally-wounded forms.

In barely more than a few seconds, Narses the Black, barely visible in the swirling cyclone of dark red demonfire, was alone, all of his retainers now dead.

"Wait!" he shouted, his tone hateful. "Attack me, and you'll—"

Leon, still containing the man's demonfire, punched a hole through his fiery cloak with his antimagic gem, and Anna's fist connected with Narses' jaw before he managed to squeak out his intent. As Leon held the Narses' demonfire back, keeping his attempted counter from hurting his retainer, she followed up with another blow. But then Narses's aura flared up with power, and his fire surged beyond Leon's ability to control, hurling Anna off with apparent ease. However, he was now surrounded by the entire force Leon had assembled to counter his trap, and Leon knew there was no way he was going to get away from them. Leon focused and redoubled his efforts on keeping the man's demonfire contained, and for a moment, everyone just stood there, staring at Narses, the vampire glowering back.

"Get back!" Narses shouted, his words slurring together from his jaw, apparently broken from Anna's punch, though still more than decipherable. "None of you will take me! Back off or you will all die in fire!"

Leon, ignoring the sounds of the rest of Narses' vampires being finished off, advanced upon the circle of demonfire.

"Is that so, *my friend*?" Leon asked. "Let's say it is: just for kicks, what are your demands?"

"Let me leave!" Narses shouted. "You can't kill me! Cease this and let me go!"

"Fuck no!" Anna shouted, and Leon didn't see much reason to contradict her.

"I can give you information!" Narses shouted, suddenly switching tack. He suddenly slammed something down on the ground and Leon felt some kind of enchantment activating, though it seemed to concentrate around Narses. "I will surrender to you if you guarantee my life! Give me what you gave Valentina!" He glanced over his shoulder in Valentina's direction, a look of desperation and panic on his face.

"What kind of information?" Leon curiously asked, drawing a look of disgust from Anna, which he responded to with a conciliatory smile—he wasn't looking to accept this offer, but he wanted to hear what the man had to say. "I can't imagine you have anything of value..."

"I have much!" Narses insisted. "Vampire dens! The networks they use to evade capture! Magical secrets taught to me by my patron!"

"Chatty, isn't he?" Gaius quipped as he took up position at Leon's side. "Wasn't all of this just a trap meant to kill us? Or you, I suppose?"

"A mistake!" Narses the Black slurred.

"How are you not being roasted alive?" Leon asked. "You're offering to surrender, is Amon happy with that?"

"I've managed to block his influence," Narses explained. When Leon gave the dark red demonfire surrounding him a pointed look, Narses added, "... To a degree. He cannot kill me, nor can he cut off my power."

"That sounds... *interesting*," Leon admitted.

"He has to die!" Anna shouted.

Responding, Narses the White said, "That information on vampires and their hiding places is *very* interesting to me. Blocking out influence from hostile demons is even more so."

"I can't..." Anna muttered, tears beginning to pour as she glanced from Leon, to Narses the Black, and back again. "... I can't let him live... He killed my parents..."

Leon was tempted by Narses' offer, he had to admit. However, Anna's heart-wrenching tone had him second-guessing himself. Before he could say anything, however, Narses the White stepped forward and said, "Leon, this is a matter for the Security branch. I'll take our wayward Eye into custody and pump him for information. He'll answer for his crimes after that."

"I can live with that, so long as you guarantee my safety" Narses the Black struggled to say, practically jumping at the opportunity. "I hereby surrender myself into your custody, Narses."

"I accept your surrender, Narses."

Anna suddenly lunged forward, screaming in anger and hate as she plunged the spear Leon had forged for her into the demonfire, aiming right for Narses the Black's heart.

Her spear passed through the demonfire, the white glow of Anna's light magic tarnishing as the steel heated up orange-hot. But with Narses the Black relaxing with the White's acceptance of his surrender, the demonfire barrier weakened enough that the spear made it through, finding its target. The power of the weapon, backed by Anna's eighth-tier magic and all the rage she could pack into a single thrust, cut clean through Narses the Black's armor and pierced his body. Narses the Black didn't react until it was too late.

The eighth-tier vampire screamed in pain as Anna's spear slipped between his ribs and found his heart. His body, for just a moment, illuminated from within as Anna used her light magic to obliterate everything within the vampire, and Narses the Black went limp.

As he died, the body burst into flame, turning to ash as it was consumed by the dark red fires of Amon, whose eyes appeared in the air above Narses' sudden funeral pyre. The eyes glared at Leon, and for the first time, Leon realized they were staring *at* him, not *through* him, to his soul realm where Xaphan resided. Amon was glaring at *him*.

And then Narses' body disintegrated, leaving nothing behind but Anna holding the back third of her spear, the rest destroyed just as Narses' body had been. The demonfire dissipated in the air and Amon's eyes vanished. For a long moment, silence fell upon the broken castle, only breaking when a disbelieving and furious Narses the White stepped forward.

"... what are YOU DOING?!" Narses the White roared. "I had ACCEPTED his SURRENDER!" The Chief of Security advanced, wrath writ large upon his face.

Anna collapsed, sobbing, not even seeming to hear Narses the White, staring at the blackened spot where Narses the Black