

Storm King 851

Chapter 851 - Path to Hell II

The man Anshu had guarding their door knocked, and Anshu went to open the door, Leon and the rest of his retinue continuing to stand in a semi-circle around the opening. When Anshu opened the door, the man in charge of the smuggling outpost stood there, flanked by half a dozen of his goons. Only the outpost commander was seventh-tier; the rest were sixth-tier.

The commander was a fairly large man, standing about six and a half feet tall and quite well-built. He wasn't overly handsome, but neither was he particularly unattractive, by conventional standards—his skin tone was somewhat tanned, enough so that he could just be tan or a little darker-skinned than Leon, but his features were otherwise so plain that Leon couldn't even fathom a guess as to where he hailed from. However, he smiled with the arrogance of a man fully in charge of the situation, despite the fact that Leon and all of his people were either of equal tier or stronger than him.

"Anshu," he said in a surprisingly high-pitched voice. Continuing, he spoke with all the arrogance that his demeanor held, his words coming in through a thick accent that Leon couldn't place, only serving to further enshroud his place of origin, "May I come in?"

Without waiting for a response, he made to enter the room, but Anshu, being eighth-tier, easily blocked him from doing so, to his clear surprise. It wasn't until Anshu glanced back at Leon, Leon nodding in response, that he moved aside and allowed the man inside. The other six, however, Anshu again blocked.

"My men mean no harm," the commander drawled, his confident demeanor cracking with anger. "They but wish to keep me safe. They can follow, yes?"

Leon, still unarmored, smiled at him, letting the question hang for a moment before saying, "They can come in, Anshu."

Anshu grunted and then moved, but stayed within arm's reach of the door as the commander's six escorts entered the room. They took up flanking positions around the commander, looking decidedly not as arrogant as he did, their eyes flickering to and from Leon and his retainers with varying levels of fear.

"I would offer thanks," the commander said as he availed himself of the nearest seat, "but this outpost is mine. We have this place, it is owned!"

Leon, ignoring his tone, growled, "Who are you?"

He received the desired outcome, as the commander snarled and said through clenched teeth, "I will now introduce myself: I am Remi. None more is needed, save that this is my outpost."

Leon cocked an eyebrow and barely lowered his head in acknowledgment. "I'm Leon," he replied.

"Know this, I do," 'Remi' replied. "It is why I am here, now. To find out what a Chief of Heaven's Eye is doing skulking about in my outpost."

Leon's expression hardened, though he gave the smuggler-commander a half smile. "Not your business," he replied, offering no more explanation. He could feel his people getting a little restless, but

he wasn't going to cooperate with this man when he had the tavern surrounded by more than a hundred armed men and women.

"When it involves my outpost, my business it is!" the man insisted, his anger flaring for a moment before he clamped down on it and leaned back on his sofa, his arrogant smirk returning. "There have been stories flying about, numbering great, of recent happens in this swamp. Sky Devils, yet no attacks after. Why did they come, I ask myself. And now here is a Heaven's Eye Chief! Enough to make a man wonder more..."

Leon glanced briefly at Anshu, who frowned back. Leon knew that the operation to safely bring the Jaguar to shore and further inland required more than just Anshu's small crew, but as far as he knew, those who'd participated had been independent, not affiliated with the Saltwater Road. If one of them had talked about that operation to anyone, that would be a problem, but as far as Leon knew, none of them had known exactly whom they'd picked up.

'One of them could've put two and two together and loosened their lips,' Leon thought. 'If that was the case, then did they connect the Sky Devils to Anshu, and then to me? Did they even know about me until I showed up here with Anshu?'

He sighed. Using outside smugglers had been a necessity, by Anshu's admission, but Leon could still regret doing so, especially since it was now giving him trouble. Regardless, he said to Remi, "What a man wonders doesn't concern me. I'll be plain here: I have no desire to speak with you. I ask you to leave."

"But I have desire to speak with you, Leon," Remi said. "Proposals I have for you; I will not outline them—"

"You will do no such thing," Leon interrupted. "We are not going to be working together. Extinguish whatever delusions you have."

"Such is shame," Remi said sarcastically. "Much riches can be gained with joined hands, ours. If it is insisted that no hands are joined, then other means are used to claim riches. A Chief of Heaven's Eye appearing in our outpost is rare, and of interest to many..."

"Why Remi, are you blackmailing me?" Leon asked, his smile growing wider as he tightened his control over his power. It was taking a nonzero amount of concentration to keep his killing intent from spilling out and flooding the room. Remi's guards weren't quite so disciplined, the room already growing thick with their auras and modest killing intent, but Leon was gratified to see that none of his people were losing control, not even Red despite the fire in her eyes.

"But seeking riches am I, and friends," Remi replied. "A Chief of Heaven's Eye would make powerful friend, yes? And friends are cherished by me; none would learn of any Chief's visit to my outpost were he my friend. None would learn of my friend's friends, either, should they come through my outpost, either."

"We're not friends," Leon bluntly stated. "It sounds like you're blackmailing me. This will be your final warning not to try. I don't take kindly to threats, veiled or otherwise."

Remi smirked and seemed to drop his façade. Wind began gathering about him as his aura began to spike in intensity. "Would be better if we're friends. But since we aren't, then allow me to speak of plain.

Many have seen you here. You are now known here. Word has spread about my network, and will get out if we do not—”

Before Remi had a chance to finish, Leon, in a flash of lightning sprang to his feet and crossed the few feet between himself and the outpost commander, the thunder that followed in his wake so strong that it shook the entire outpost.

Not that Remi noticed, for Leon had drawn his family’s blade and sank it into Remi’s chest, impaling his heart and killing the unarmored and otherwise unshielded seventh-tier mage instantly.

“Well, my decision had been made already, but this just confirms it,” Leon said as Remi’s guards flinched, the reality of what Leon had just done taking a moment to sink in. Leon took that moment to glance around at his people. “Kill everyone with a weapon. We’re destroying this outpost.”

His retainers, prepared as they were, didn’t miss a beat. Red was the first to move, turning as soon as Leon said ‘kill’. She took a few threatening steps forward, seeming to relish the growing fear of Remi’s guards. As Leon finished speaking, she lunged forward, fire erupting from her hands and consuming the guards, and in barely a second, all six had been rendered into piles of ash.

Leon felt the enchantments keeping the tavern intact flexing and straining under the weight of Red’s magic. Had Valeria not reinforced them, he guessed that the entire building would’ve gone up in smoke from that strike.

At the same time, Alix and Marcus leaned out of the windows, their thunder bows in hand. Neither bow had an arrow nocked, but as they brought their fingers to the string and pulled them back, a lightning bolt gathered where an arrow would’ve been, the enchantments Leon had lain upon the bows working with the thunder wood’s apparently endless ability to generate lightning magic.

Each of them held their arrows there for a moment, only loosing once the lightning stopped growing. Again, the tavern was shaken by thunder, but this time, the targets were outside; each lightning arrow exploded amid the mages Remi had gathered outside to try and intimidate them, killing a handful each.

And neither Alix nor Marcus had to expend much more than a spark of magic power to do so. They were seventh-tier mages, so their magic was powerful, but the thunder bows were powerful weapons that allowed them to conserve their magic power.

The mages outside began scrambling for cover while those who survived the attack with injuries began screaming in pain. Some of the mages just began screaming despite not being touched by the lightning, and Leon was more than a little amused to see about a dozen simply drop their weapons on the ground and run as fast as they could either for the office building or the tree line.

“Catch those trying to run!” Leon shouted. His retainers sprang into action. Gaius and Valeria sprinted out of the door, Anshu’s last remaining guard looking almost shell-shocked. Alcander and Anzu took more direct routes outside, hurling themselves out of the windows as Alix and Marcus pulled back to prepare another salvo.

Alcander hit the ground like a meteor, fire erupting from his body and washing toward a group of mages like an ocean wave. Anzu touched the dirt only a moment later, wind spiraling about him like a tornado.

This twister expanded rapidly, and gusts were thrown toward a dozen smugglers that ripped the skin right off their bodies.

In that landing, Leon estimated another twenty mages died.

Red was a bit more leisurely as she exited the tavern, walking after Gaius and Valeria, but it didn't take her long to get outside, and as soon as she did, her body practically exploded into her wyvern form.

She was a little bit bigger than she'd been when Leon had met her, her new power having increased her body's size as well. Her ability to fly remained unimpacted, however, and she took off with agility and grace. And it was with agility and grace that she began strafing the outskirts of the outpost, ensuring that those who'd attempted to run were forced back. It wasn't quite what Leon had in mind, but he supposed that it did the job well enough. It was just unfortunate that the stronger of the mages that attempted to flee were those who were caught up in Red's attacks, disintegrating when her fires rolled over them. The weaker of those attempting to flee were the ones who were forced back to the outpost.

Maia and Anshu were the only ones who didn't do anything. Maia, Leon could understand; from their connection, he knew that she felt nothing but dismissive contempt for the smugglers and that killing them she felt was beneath her. Anshu, however, Leon gave a questioning look.

Anshu shrugged. "I've worked with these people for years, now. Most of them deserve death, I'll agree with you there, but I'd rather not be the one to kill them. We had a good working relationship until now."

Leon hummed in acknowledgment, deciding not to force the man to move against the outpost. Instead, he turned his head to watch his people carry out his orders to slaughter all those with weapons in the outpost.

In all, seventy-three smugglers died in the outpost. An additional forty-eight either surrendered or were taken prisoner.

Leon had no idea what he was going to do with these people, though. For the time being, he had them all restrained and left in the tavern, which was fortunately still intact despite the damage the building had taken in the fighting. He then had Anshu and Red keep an eye on them—Anshu to convince them not to try and escape, and Red to deal with them if they tried anyway.

Unfortunately, none of the smugglers remaining were of any real rank within the outpost. All were either fifth-tier or weaker, and only a few of them had worked in the office. Doubling his misfortune, when some of the smugglers had apparently tried to run, they'd instead gone into the office and started burning all the sensitive material they could find. All but one of those individuals had been killed when Alix, Alcander, and Anzu stormed the building. The last one was the man that Leon was essentially appointed the leader of the prisoners, though he'd not yet had anything useful to say—he simply repeated Remi's threats that Leon had just made an enemy of the Saltwater Road.

For his part, Leon didn't much care. He'd tasked most of his retinue to sweep through the rest of the outpost, including all of its warehouses, and make sure that it had been completely secured, while he

went into the office and, after arranging some privacy measures, brought out his comm lotus and called the Director.

The Director was a little dismayed at what had happened during what was supposed to just be a place for Leon to stop, rest, and make contact with the Jaguar again, but Leon noted that he wasn't that surprised. Fortunately, the Director assured Leon that he would use his contacts to make it clear that Heaven's Eye would not tolerate any moves that Saltwater Road would make against Leon.

Leon wondered if the biggest smuggling ring on the plane would care for the Director's threats, but he supposed leaving the matter to the Director would be the wiser course of action. If the smugglers decided to escalate this matter, Leon would be only too happy to hit back.

After the call ended and Leon exited the room he'd been using, he found Gaius and Valeria waiting in the next room.

"Leon," Valeria said. "We found something..."

"Slaves," Gaius, clearly in no mood to play around with words, clarified. "We found slaves. About twenty-five."

"And one more," Valeria added. "Santiago. He's here too."

Leon's eyebrows shot up. He remembered Santiago: he was the leader of the soldiers-turned-bandits from the Cortuban Alliance that he and Elise's caravan had dealt with on their journey from the Bull Kingdom to the Ilian Empire. After capturing the man, Leon had, for a short time, contemplated asking him to join his retinue, but had been talked out of it by his other retainers. He was grateful they did, but in the end, when Santiago had been condemned to die in the arena in the Alliance's capital city, Leon intervened to save his life. He didn't know what Santiago had gotten up to in the seventeen-ish years since.

"Really?" Leon said with a frown. "He's fallen back in with bandits and criminals, then? Perhaps I shouldn't have—"

"No," Valeria interrupted. "He's one of the prisoners."

"Oh," Leon whispered with a little embarrassment. "Take me to him. And the others."

Gaius and Valeria led him into one of the larger warehouses, and Leon found the place emptier than he'd imagined it to be from the outside. Most of the shelves were empty, with perhaps only a third stocked with any wares. A full quarter of the warehouse's footprint, however, had been devoted to cages and cells, and all quite well-built and as well-enchanted as the office had been. They were sturdy enough by Leon's reckoning to hold at least up to third, possibly even as strong as fourth-tier mages.

Santiago, however, was a sixth-tier mage the last time Leon had seen him, but his momentary confusion was put to rest when Valeria pointed to the back corner of the cells, wherein Leon saw a dark figure chained up with what looked like hundreds of pounds of enchanted steel. Marcus and Alcander were working on getting the other imprisoned people free, so Leon entered the prison area and smiled at the recently freed who were profusely thanking his retainers—and now him—for freeing them.

By the time he'd gotten to Santiago's cell, he'd gotten a better picture of the man. He was far gaunter than he'd been years ago, with the obvious signs of maltreatment marring his form. His skin was covered in what looked a lot like torture scars, being too clean and even for battle wounds, and Leon sensed the man's aura, while still that of a sixth-tier mage, was weak and flickering.

Santiago groaned in pain but looked up as Leon approached.

"Ahh, Leon Raime," he croaked. "It seems... you've saved me again..."

Leon just stared back at him, unsure what he ought to say. Eventually, he simply said, "... Don't sound so put out. Saving you was an accident, I assure you."

Santiago laughed, but it sounded more like a weak gurgle that had him coughing after only a few chortles.

When Santiago managed to get himself back under control, Leon asked him, "What happened to you? How did you end up here?"

Santiago momentarily glanced at the other prisoners, now freed and on the other side of the cell bars, then down at the chains that restrained him completely and prevented him from using his magic power. Leon noticed the looks, but when Santiago turned his eyes back toward Leon with a pointed, but silent question, Leon just stared back, wordlessly demanding the answer to his question.

With a weak sigh, Santiago said, "You saved me from the arena, but not my dishonor. It followed me out of that arena, and after I was escorted out of Andalus, one of the larger slaving guilds captured me. Given who I am, no one tried to stop them. I doubt the Cortuban government was even informed."

"It seems that captivity has treated you quite harshly," Leon observed.

"I... was not a good slave," Santiago said. "No matter how much they tried to make me one. I was not one. I refused to submit to their orders, and I was repeatedly sold to whatever fat shitstain thought they would be the ones to break me. And now I'm here, languishing in chains, waiting for any delusional slaver who hasn't tried yet to make a purchase offer."

"How long have you been here?"

"I can't tell you, it's been a while and I don't have any way to track the time."

Leon hummed in thought and stepped away from the cage. "I hope it's not too much of a surprise or insult that I'm not freeing you right away."

"I'm not going anywhere," Santiago wheezed. "Take your time. Gods know that I've had to learn patience in these past few years...."

Leon nodded and gave the man an awkward smile, then turned away.

'What the hells should I do with him, then?' he wondered.

Chapter 852 - Path to Hell III

As Leon walked away from Santiago, he found Alix waiting just outside of the cages. The rest of his retinue who'd come with him were tending to the rest of the recently freed slaves, handing out food

and healing spells, and while they were all giving him some curious looks, Alix had been the only one to wait.

“So,” she matter-of-factly began, “we freeing him, boss? Or waiting?”

“Waiting,” Leon answered as he glanced back at Santiago. It seemed that their short chat had tired the man out, for he’d slipped into unconsciousness almost as soon as Leon exited his cage. “I’d rather get a—”

“You’re not freeing him?” one of the slaves asked a little indignantly.

The slave was a slip of a girl, barely five feet tall and thin as a rail. Despite this, she was still quite pretty, despite being dressed in rags and looking like she hadn’t had a good night’s sleep in weeks. She was fairly magically weak, being only of the first-tier, and judging by her appearance, Leon estimated that she was in her mid-to-late twenties.

Her question drew the attention of the other former slaves, and Leon felt all of their eyes turn to him, most of them appearing just as indignant as the girl who’d asked him was.

“Not immediately,” Leon answered. “We have a... history with this guy. He used to be a bandit, one that ran a rather rapacious group of deserters from the army of the Cortuban Alliance. I haven’t seen him in almost twenty years, and—”

“Whatever he was before, he’s changed!” the girl declared, and at first, Leon was tempted to write it off as naivety. However, even the older and more magically powerful former slaves behind her were nodding in agreement.

“Why do you say this?” Leon asked, keeping his tone soft to avoid sounding too confrontational.

“He protected us while we’ve been here!” she practically shouted, though Leon noted that Santiago didn’t stir. “Whenever one of those beasts tried to beat us, he would always shout and insult them, drawing them to him! And after it was all done, he’d comfort us when things seemed dark! He’s not a bad man!”

Leon cocked an eyebrow and glanced again at all those behind the girl.

“Do all of you agree with this woman’s assessment?” he loudly asked.

“I do!”

“So do I!”

“And me!”

The strongest of the mages amongst them answered, and about three-quarters of the others nodded in agreement. Those who didn’t nod at least didn’t seem like they were disagreeing, either—more like they were simply opinionless and wanted to leave.

“All right then,” Leon responded. “I’ll consult with my people, but we’ll take your opinions into consideration.”

None of them responded, but given the way some of them stared back at Santiago, Leon used his darkness magic and silently ordered Alix and Gaius, [Guard Santiago. No one frees him without my say-so.]

Alix subtly nodded and took up a position in front of Santiago's cage, while Gaius posted up on the other side of the warehouse.

"In the meantime," Leon said after a few moment's pause, "why don't we all get out of here and get someone more comfortable?"

It took about three hours for Leon to get all of the former slaves comfortable in the tavern. He'd had to move the captured smugglers since most of the slaves not only saw them as captors but had also personally suffered at many of their hands. Leon wasn't averse to executing the smugglers since he couldn't spare the time to make sure they reached the care of the Pegasi States, but he also didn't want to just kill them all without exploring their other options first.

So, he had all of the smugglers put into the cages that the slaves had just come out of, slapping down some privacy wards to ensure they were isolated in their cages, and then had his retinue assemble in the warehouse while the former slaves rested and went through the tavern finding all of the possible supplies they could.

"So, what should we do with him?" Leon asked, nodding pointedly at the still-unconscious form of Santiago. He'd had both Marcus and Anshu see to the man's wounds, ensuring that he was at least stable, so he wasn't worried that the man was still out.

"Has he changed?" Gaius wondered aloud. "I've rarely heard of former bandits—they usually either die while carrying out their illegal schemes or never change their nature. This man wasn't just any old bandit, either, he led a massive group of deserters who had been sworn to the Cortuban Pentarchy. Desertion, banditry, and all the other crimes that his people perpetrated aren't things that one can just walk away from."

"And he didn't," Alix pointed out. "He was imprisoned, nearly executed as a slave gladiator, and then, as far as he told us, spent the next years enslaved. It's not like he just went back to his old ways. Besides, didn't those bandits desert the Cortuban army because they weren't paid or supplied?"

"Crimes done to you don't excuse crimes you do to others," Gaius protested.

"I'm with Gaius on that point, at least," Marcus interjected. "His crimes back in the Alliance were great. And yet, the slaves we freed here seem to hold some affection for him. That's... promising, at least."

"Kill him," Red declared without giving anyone else time to respond. "He is a threat. Kill him now. If those pitiful humans argue, kill them too. They owe us their lives."

"We're not killing those we just saved," Leon admonished.

Red shrugged. "I didn't think you would, but it would be the best course of action, wouldn't it? Killing this man? If you don't know if he's a threat, then burn him before he can grow and prove himself one."

[Heh,] Xaphan whispered from Leon's soul realm, [I like her. She knows the value of fire.]

[Does she? What value does fire have if you use it to solve all your problems? Gotta conserve it, demon, else it's going to depreciate.]

Xaphan just chuckled and went quiet as Leon's retinue continued to debate their options.

"I'd prefer we didn't jump straight to killing this man," Marcus protested. "Still, I don't trust him, either."

"Would you lose any sleep if we did give him my ax?" Alcander asked as he hefted the weapon in question, his killing intent spiking for a moment.

"No, but we're not barbarians." Marcus turned his eyes over to Leon. "... Are we?"

"We are people who want to live," Leon replied. "We're people who don't want to unleash a reaving, raping, murderous sixth-tier bandit upon the world."

"Are you planning on trying to recruit him again?" Valeria whispered, silencing any reply Marcus might've had.

"No," Leon said without hesitation. "That was a mistake on my part. Not making that again."

Valeria nodded and took a step back.

"I would prefer we didn't kill him," Anshu said. "I think he would be fine if we released him. Those who know him best as he is now are those we just freed. If they're on his side, then doesn't that show us all we need? Besides, he can help them get to safety, and we wouldn't have to turn them loose into the swamp."

"But how much do they know of his past?" Gaius asked. "They don't understand what he did in the Alliance! All they know is what he did for them, and from the sounds of it, it wasn't even that much!"

"He provided comfort in a situation where they could expect none," Anshu coldly replied. "He distracted the guards when they grew violent."

"Guards who considered you a fellow just a few days ago," Gaius darkly mumbled.

Anshu's expression grew wroth, but Leon immediately interposed himself between them.

"That's enough!" he loudly stated, his aura flaring as he suppressed them both and kept them from doing anything to each other. When he was sure they were backing down, he said, "The decision is mine, but I value all of your opinions. Does anyone have anything they'd like to add to the discussion?"

He looked at each of his people in turn, making eye contact with everyone. He lingered a little longer with Anzu and Maia, seeing as they'd both been silent, but it was clear enough that neither of them had much of an opinion on these matters. However, he did note that Anzu was still watching him, and Leon was reminded of the example that he wanted to set for the young griffin.

"All right, then," he said. "Marcus. Al. You're both on guard duty. I'm going to talk to the people and see what they have to say about Santiago. I'll come to my decision within the hour. Gaius, Alix, head to the main office and give the building another sweep. Everyone else, get helping them with gathering supplies."

With only one last rather vitriolic look exchanged between Gaius and Anshu, his group went to work, and he sought out the former slaves for questioning. However, all of the information gathered largely matched up with the impression he'd received when they'd assumed he wasn't going to free Santiago earlier. All of them either thought of Santiago positively or had no real opinion of the man. He even heard a few rather grisly stories about certain 'powerful' men who'd come to inspect Santiago, and the agonies they'd inflicted upon him during their inspections.

With all of that now floating around in his mind, Leon took another half hour to think, and as the former slaves were finalizing their gathering of supplies, Leon made his decision.

Santiago practically fell to the floor as the chains were removed. Despite his power, he was weak and emaciated, and several of the former slaves rushed forward to help Santiago up.

Most of Leon's retinue wasn't particularly happy with this outcome, but Leon felt at least a little vindicated that people were willing to help the man in this situation.

Santiago was a little more conscious at this point, but he was able to mumble no more than a few thanks before the former slaves whisked him off to the tavern.

"I hope that doesn't come back to bite us in the ass," Gaius said.

"I'll have him watched," Leon said. "I'll hope for the best, but if he turns back to his old ways, I'll deal with it personally."

That seemed to mollify those of his retainers that weren't enthusiastic about his decision. So, while Santiago was being seen to, he finally decided to take care of the bit of business he'd come to the outpost to conduct.

Leon sat alone in the most private room in the outpost: Remi's old office. In front of him was a silver and glass container, within which was his comm lotus. He'd given an identical copy of what now lay in front of him to the Jaguar when the Sky Devil had departed, ensuring they could communicate when they needed to.

Leon began activating the enchantments on the container, keying in the specific code for the Jaguar's lotus. Before the man had left, it had been with the understanding that Leon would make this call once he was in the south and ready to head to Kataigida. It would only be then that they would work out the specifics of how exactly that would happen, as the situation in the Veins of Vigilance could change at any time and complicate Leon's arrival.

It took a worryingly long time for Leon's comm lotus to connect with the Jaguar's. He'd assumed that it would work fine since it was able to connect him and his family when they were in Occulara and he in the Forest of Black and White, but the longer the projected screen over the silver and glass container remained simply opaque light, the more he worried that he'd have to proceed without the Jaguar.

Just as a scowl was carving its way across his features, the screen flashed and then began to grow distinct. Leon perked up as a figure began to take shape within the screen, and slowly, that figure

resolved into the familiar visage of the Jaguar. To Leon's relative shock, the man wasn't alone, but stood with two aged figures to his right and left.

"Leon," he growled, his deep voice resonating through the connection of their comm lotuses. "Apologies if I took too long to answer you, I had to find my fellow elders."

Leon smiled. "That's... fine. I'm not generally keen on surprises, but this is fine. Perhaps introductions are in order?"

"Yes," the Jaguar replied. "This is Ioannis," he said as he indicated the man on his right, and the man on his left he introduced, "and this is Nicanor. Our Tribe has many elders, but these two can represent the whole council for this talk."

"Greetings," Leon said, wishing that the comm lotuses were able to read auras so that he could gauge Ioannis and Nicanor's power. As it was, all he knew about them was that they were fairly tanned and aged and that neither of them were dressed particularly ostentatiously. "I am Leon Raime, the only living heir of the Thunderbird."

"An honor it is to finally meet you," Nicanor immediately stated. "I assure you that our entire Tribe awaits your arrival with bated breath! To have the long-lost bloodline of our ancient Kings finally restored to us... oh, the thought alone brings me joy!"

Ioannis was a little more circumspect, but he nodded in time with Nicanor's words.

"Mm. Yes. My arrival is exactly what this call is supposed to establish. Now, as it is, I and my followers have flown down to the Pegasi States, near the coast, about parallel with the midpoint of the Sword."

"That... is a dangerous area," the Jaguar replied seriously. "It was a long shot in the first place, but I don't think there's even the slightest chance that we're going to get a ship to you from there. You're going to have to get to the Sword, and then we'll be able to pick you up."

"And your people on the island won't try to attack us?" Leon asked.

"I've taken the liberty of sending some of my best people to wait there, just in case, along with several of my Tribe's fastest ships. They will abide by our agreement, and they will do so discreetly, ensuring that none of the other Tribes are aware of your presence until you've arrived on Kataigida."

"How wise is that?" Leon wondered aloud. "You would make me King, yet demand that I slink unseen into the lands of those who you would have acclaim me their ruler? I rather think that showing up as the Thunderbird reborn would make more of an impact."

"What a splendid idea!" Nicanor obsequiously gushed. "No good man of the Ten Tribes would ever protest your enthronement then!"

"There are problems," Ioannis growled, his voice even deeper than the Jaguar's. "We don't know if you'll be able to penetrate the misty veil that guards our fair island against all interlopers. The barbarians on the mainland are able to get through, but their ships are strong, and they've had many millennia to figure out their way through. Even then, they cannot penetrate the veil without danger."

"How high does this veil extend?" Leon asked. "I can fly just about as high as anyone can without venturing out into the empty Void."

“The mist itself only rises so far, but the magic that protects Kataigida forms a shell around the island,” Ioannis said.

“Not a perfect one,” the Jaguar corrected. “The Imperials, using some of those new flight devices that have been popping up recently, have managed to get some scouts through in the north, though I know not how.”

Leon felt that, were he not already concentrating on smiling pleasantly, he might’ve reacted more obviously to that statement. As it was, he let it go by without confirming that it was likely his flight suits and flight belts that made this possible.

“There can be other ways to reveal you to our people and our fellow Tribes,” the Jaguar insisted. “Right now, it is my firm belief that we ought to get you here to the lands of the Jaguar Tribe, where we can make clear our support. If we do not, who knows what the Thunderer and those that support him might do? If they get wind that an heir of the Thunderbird approaches, they might do anything to make sure that you don’t reclaim the power that they’ve usurped.”

Leon’s smile finally did flicker slightly. The Thunderer was, as far as he knew, a tenth-tier mage, though one much more recently ascended compared to the Lord Protector or the Grand Druid. Only the Sunlit Emperor had been tenth-tier for less time. So, while he wasn’t the strongest that he could be, Leon could still see the wisdom in not giving the Thunderer any possible opportunities to act against him until he had more local support on the island itself.

“Very well,” he relented. “We’ll just have to come up with something more suitable for announcing me, then. For now, why don’t you explain where your people are waiting, and I’ll lead my people there.”

“It won’t be easy,” the Jaguar said. “We can get word to those waiting to expect you, but there are other defenses that have been extended around many places on the Sword. Getting anywhere without notice has been made nearly impossible.”

Leon gave him a blank look and then shrugged. “Have your people cast off, then. We’ll bypass the island and land directly on your ships as they leave the Sword. Let’s not make this rendezvous too complicated if we don’t have to.”

The Jaguar frowned slightly, but after only a moment of contemplation, he nodded. “We can do that...”

They went over the finer details for a little while longer before their call had to end. But once it did, Leon smiled, for he was now set to reach the Sky Devil’s Hell in only a few days.

Chapter 853 - Path to Hell IV

With the outpost in hand and plans made with the Jaguar, Leon decided that it was time to leave. There wasn’t any point in staying other than to rest, and his people were strong enough that they didn’t need much of that.

‘Better to just get to the ships waiting for us,’ he thought as he left the outpost’s office. As he walked out, however, he found a rather heated discussion taking place in front of the tavern between Santiago and several of the older former slaves.

“... doesn’t excuse barbarity,” Santiago whispered, but Leon was still more than able to hear him.

"It's not barbarity!" the oldest of the former slaves insisted, his expression contorted with anger. "It's justice!"

"That sounds more like vengeance than justice," Santiago replied. "Let's not go down this path. We won't become monsters, we don't need to—" He cut himself off as he saw Leon appear, Maia and Anzu right behind him. "Leon!" he called out, giving Leon a respectful nod.

Leon hesitantly returned the nod and asked as he approached, "What's going on?"

"Justice," said the former slave that seemed in charge, if his assertiveness was anything to go by.

"I'm trying to talk these people out of taking vengeance on the prisoners you've taken," Santiago explained. "Such actions are unnecessary and immoral."

"Arguing morality, are you?" Leon asked.

At that moment, Gaius and Alix exited the tavern, briefly acknowledging Leon before glaring at Santiago. "Rich statement, coming from you," Alix growled.

Santiago visibly cringed and replied, "Yes... yes it is. But it's never too late to try and be better, is it?" His last words sounded almost pleading as he turned his eyes to Leon.

"No, no it isn't," Leon answered.

Santiago sighed in relief, then, addressing the three former slaves, said, "I will not allow you to touch the prisoners. That's the end of it."

The former slaves did not seem happy, but with Leon and several of his people around, none of them seemed willing to continue their argument, so they simply bowed slightly to Santiago and went back inside the tavern.

As the door closed behind them, Santiago sighed again. "Thank you, Leon. And all of you. Thank you."

Alix snorted, while Gaius offered a half-hearted, "It's good to see that you're not baying for blood. Unexpected."

"I..." Santiago hesitantly began before falling silent. After a moment of what looked like rather intense thought, he said without a shred of dishonesty to be seen, "I'm sorry. I've made many mistakes in the past. The men I led did terrible things, and I allowed them to carry on unchecked.

"At first, I thought that rebellion against the pentarchs was justified; they didn't supply my forces with food or pay, after all. But any claims to justice were washed away in the tears and blood of those who suffered due to my actions.

"I did not set out to become a bandit. I merely wanted to protect my men. But in doing so, I compromised my honor repeatedly, in larger and larger ways, always in the belief that it was the lesser evil. I can see now that I have more distance from the problem that I could've prevented myself from becoming a rebel, a bandit, a man without honor. But walked that path, and now I'm here. Years of torture and slavery behind me. And an unknown future..."

His eyes found Leon's, an unspoken question glimmering within.

“We’ll let you go,” Leon said. “Wouldn’t have unchained you if I was going to kill you a mere hour or two later. Besides, those we freed will need escorting to the nearest bastion of civilization, as will those we’ve taken captive. Are you up to that task?”

Leon registered some curious looks from Alix and Gaius, but neither argued his decision.

Santiago mulled Leon’s question over for a few seconds, flexing both his fists and his aura. “I... think that I am,” he said. “I’ll be even readier after a few hours of rest and with some food in me.”

“Then see to yourself. I and my people won’t be staying long, we’ll probably be leaving before you do.”

“Understood. I can see to everyone.” Leon nodded and was about to head into the tavern, but he paused as Santiago continued, “And Leon? Thank you. Not just for freeing me, but for giving me the chance to redeem my honor. Whether that part was intended or not. I will not squander this gift you’ve given me. Its value is beyond measure, greater even than my very life.”

Leon turned that over in his head for a moment, his eyes searching Santiago’s face for any signs of deceit. Finding none, nodded and said, “Prove me right. It would be mighty embarrassing to have to hunt you down if you fall back into old habits.”

“And even more so to die at your hand,” Santiago chuckled.

With that, Leon nodded once more and headed back inside the tavern. He had to make sure his people were informed of what their next steps would be, namely flying to the Sword and finding the spot where the Jaguar’s people were waiting for them.

It was going to be risky flying over the Veins of Vigilance—Leon could only speculate as to the defenses and monitoring magics that the Empires and the Pegasi States had active in the region, let alone the Sky Devils who might mistake them for Imperial spies—but Leon was at least comforted with the knowledge that he wasn’t abandoning these people he’d freed to a hard trudge through dangerous swampland back to civilization.

Leon’s estimate proved prophetic; he and his people, after only a couple hours spent in briefing and at rest, departed the smuggling outpost before Santiago and the free slaves did. Leon had made sure to call up the Director again to make sure that Santiago would be watched when he returned to civilization, and that however many people were accompanying him would be counted. If Santiago proved himself a liar in his stated desire to regain his honor, Leon fully intended to hunt him down and put him to death himself.

At the same time, Anshu had ordered his people to head back out into the swamp and return to their usual duties. For the next leg of their journey, it would just be Leon and his retinue, without anyone else.

As Leon led his people into the sky, leaving the freed slaves to cheer and wave as they departed, he put Santiago out of his mind. He had more important things to focus on, now.

After rising several hundred feet into the air, Leon and his people turned invisible and turned eastward. The Sword wasn’t that far, relatively speaking, and they could cover that distance quickly if all went well.

At first, all didn't seem like it went well, for they'd barely made it out over the water of the Veins of Vigilance before an Imperial patrol ship came cruising past. Fortunately, it didn't seem to notice them.

After about an hour of flying, however, a larger Imperial patrol came sailing past, and this time, they'd blanketed the surroundings with some kind of element-less magic that Leon had rarely experienced before—someone on the leading ship was using an enchantment to greatly enhance their magic senses. In Leon's experience, this sort of thing was usually done when trying to zero in on something specific, such as demonic magic. He couldn't guess from the magic he sensed alone what they were looking for, but he counted himself lucky both that his people were flying through clouds at the time, and that they'd been giving the patrol a wide berth already, and when the pulsing magic coming from the patrol disturbed their invisibility, the ships made no moves to indicate that they'd seen Leon's group.

Needless to say, despite not being caught, Leon's confidence in his invisibility when going up against Imperial ships was shaken, and he ordered his people to fly even higher and stay even further away from all ships they saw at sea, for he could easily envision the so-called 'dread ships' of the Sky Devils having similar capabilities, and he didn't want them to see his party and assume they were Imperial spies.

'Better to keep all encounters to a minimum,' Leon had thought.

After that Imperial patrol, Leon only had to order his people to stop once when an ark came speeding several miles ahead of them. Judging by its markings, Leon guessed it was from the Sunlit Empire, which just gave him even more reason to keep his distance.

Soon enough, they reached the shores of the Sword. The island had long served as the staging point for Imperial navies that kept the Sky Devils confined to Kataigida, and from the air, Leon could easily see how it had done so, and why the Sky Devils had targeted it. An island-covering enchantment prevented magic senses from being used there, but Leon could see that every settlement upon the island was some kind of fortified structure. There weren't many farms or other civilian infrastructure, it was fortresses and dockyards just about the entire way around the island.

The interior of the island was completely undeveloped as far as he could tell with just his eyes, with all of the fortifications concentrated within just a few miles of the coast. These fortifications had been occupied by the Sky Devils for years, now, and Leon could see their influence. Totems had been erected, fields had been cleared to support war beasts, and the Sky Devils' dread ships patrolled the shallows in numbers so great that Leon didn't think there was a single inch of the coast that didn't have at least one eye upon it at any given moment.

Leon didn't spend too long taking in the sights; instead, he turned his attention to the southeast, where the Jaguar's tribesmen would be waiting. He remembered how the vampire Bran had been detected during the Bull Kingdom's war with Talfar, so out of an abundance of caution, he led his party along the coast, remaining outside of the Sword's airspace and keeping his eyes open for the landmarks that the Jaguar had told him about.

He knew he was getting close when his people had moved about the southern tip of the island and began the turn northward, and he saw the first of the landmarks: a long mountain sitting at the mouth of a bay so shallow that it essentially became a lake at low tide.

A little further north was a small river that wound its way north to a proper lake that had once been used as a training location for Imperial navies, but now lay nearly abandoned, save for a few Sky Devil occupiers making sure no Imperials snuck back in. The lake was perfectly circular, indicating it had been created by magic, and from what Leon could see, had no rivers feeding it. The river flowing out was narrow and shallow, but the lake also had a short canal connecting it to the ocean.

Within the lake's training docks, Leon spied eight dread ships, three of which were the ships he was looking for. The Jaguar had told him what to look for, and he quickly spotted the totems of the Blood Thunder Jaguar and the founding members of the Jaguar Tribe on the command tower of the largest ship at the dock. A totem of the Thunderbird was also present, prominently displayed on top of the command tower in a manner that he'd never seen any other Sky Devil ship do before, and he couldn't help but smile when it caught his eye.

The ship itself was quite large, about on par with that of a Bull Kingdom dreadnought, but with a complement of four Lances instead of only two, and with an outer hull of enchanted steel and a deck of even more-heavily enchanted wood. Standing on the deck was what looked suspiciously like an honor guard, led by an eighth-tier mage and more than a dozen seventh-tier mages.

The eighth-tier mage matched the description of the man the Jaguar had told him to look for: golden skin, several prominent moles on his cheeks and forehead, and long hair tied back into a loose bun. His features were severe, almost gaunt, and his eyes were sharp and constantly flitting about his ship. He wore a perfectly-tailored crimson suit with a charging jaguar emblazoned upon the chest.

With dozens of people assembled on the deck clearly waiting for someone—waiting for him—he dove, alighting upon the deck with an ease and grace that he ensured was seen as he'd disabled his invisibility enchantment during his descent, his party doing the same.

Without missing so much as a beat, all of those waiting on the deck made their allegiances and attitudes known as they, as one, fell to a knee.

"It is my honor," the eighth-tier Sky Devil loudly declared, "to be the first to declare that the Jaguar once more bows to the Thunderbird!"

The others then shouted, "With bloody fangs, our enemies will tremble!"

Leon smiled and pulled his armor back into his soul realm, though he'd ensured that his retainers knew to keep theirs on until directly ordered to relax. In the same breath, he clad himself in rich silkgrass, dyed brown, trimmed in gold, and with dozens of golden flecks gleaming throughout, invoking the Thunderbird's coloring.

"Please, rise," he said. Though he acknowledged the necessity of it, he wanted the ceremonial part of this over and done with. He walked forward until he stood just a pace away from the eighth-tier mage, who rose to greet him. "Your fidelity is greatly valued."

"The Jaguars have always stayed true to our people," the eighth-tier mage said. "We have never forgotten the dynasty that made us a power to be feared. The Thunderbird Clan is our rightful ruler, the only dynasty that we will ever accept. And now that you are here to claim your throne, we all know that the world is returning to its proper order."

“Hmm,” Leon hummed. “Why don’t we get underway, then? While I’d appreciate the world falling back into place, I’d rather not make gravity do all the work.”

To emphasize his point, he waved his hand through the air, silver-blue lightning dancing about his fingers. Every eye on the deck of that ship watched his hand like it was the single most important thing any of them had ever seen in their lives.

Only a moment later, the eighth-tier mage lightly smiled, appeared to relax slightly, and began calling out orders to get their ships back to Kataigida as quickly as possible.

The journey to Kataigida was quite easy. Leon and his people were given quarters that were about as luxurious as could be expected on such a ship, and he quickly suspected that the ship’s captain had given up his cabin for Leon’s personal use. The captain himself, the eighth-tier mage, was named Yun Neh, and one of the Jaguar’s most experienced naval commanders, having led some of the Ten Tribes’ most successful scouting missions of the past few centuries. In fact, while no one ever claimed as much, Leon got the impression that his scouting had been critical to the swift invasion of the island by the Ten Tribes.

Under normal conditions, he might have enjoyed staying on the Sword for a few days, discussing the invasion in greater detail. However, the Jaguar Tribe hadn’t been present for the fighting, having been preoccupied with the sacking of Argos, and they hadn’t been tapped to occupy the island. The Thunderer’s army had left years before, leaving the occupation to three Tribes: the Lions, the Rock Mane Bisons, and the Heart-Stabbing Hawks, none of whom could be assumed to be on Leon’s side yet.

‘None of them likely even know about me,’ Leon thought. He conceded that it might be possible that they did, but he wasn’t going to assume so. At the very least, it was better to get to Kataigida as soon as possible where he could link up with the Jaguars and start networking with the elders of other Tribes to shore up his support before the Thunderer could respond, so sticking around was a bad idea all around.

Perhaps it was because of Yun’s experience sailing between Kataigida and the Sword, but they made great time, finding a current and riding it at fairly good speed had them approaching Kataigida in a matter of days.

The ride there was fairly uneventful, though there was a brief moment where Leon thought they were about to be attacked: an ark appeared flying through some clouds, and it was quickly determined to be of Imperial origin. Leon’s ship and its two escorts nearly started firing off their Lances to get it to leave when another ark came flying in from the opposite direction, this one of the Ten Tribes, and being more heavily armed. The Imperial ark quickly flew away, pursued by the Ten Tribes’ ark, though given their speeds, Leon didn’t think the Imperial ark was going to be caught.

All told, though, they made their final approach to Kataigida in good time.

Kataigida had one of the most potent defenses Leon had ever seen: a veil of mist that surrounded the entire island. He wasn’t quite sure how it had been accomplished, and Yun wasn’t privy to that information either, but the veil ensured that all but Ten Tribes and Imperial ships were lost, either run aground of the many islands and sharp rocks within, turned around and sent back the way they came, or destroyed by storms that the veil frequently conjured.

Hearing of these defenses, Leon expected to at least see or sense something interesting as they passed through, but as far as he and his magic senses could tell, the mist was just that: normal mist. That it all swirled in a thick, never-moving band didn't even seem unnatural, with all of the magic in the air around it seeming quite undisturbed.

He'd been hoping for something a little more spectacular moving through it, but it seemed that fate decided to reserve the excitement for after he'd passed through; as soon as their ships emerged on the other side of the misty veil within spitting distance of the port of Raimondas, a group of seven Ten Tribes warships, three of them larger and even more heavily armed than Yun's ship, turned toward them and began moving to intercept.

All seven of these ships were flying a black banner of ten small stars arranged in a circle around a large star—the colors of the Ten Tribes as a whole rather than any one Tribe specifically.

Leon had been standing on the observation deck of the command tower with Yun at the time, and the captain muttered, "Those are ships from the Thunderer's fleet. We'd best prepare, it looks like they want to stop us from reaching the port!"

Chapter 854 - Return of the Thunderbird Clan

"Captain! We're being hailed!" shouted one of the bridge crew tracking the oncoming ships.

Leon watched in fascination, wanting to see just how the Ten Tribes communicated amongst themselves in times like these. His only naval experience had been during the Bull Kingdom's campaign in the Serpentine Isles, and for the most part, they used visual signals, such as flags and flares. The Bull Kingdom did have comm stones, but only on their dreadnoughts, and there had only been two of those in the task force sent to the Serpentine Isles, and hundreds of other ships in the armada.

It seemed that the Ten Tribes, however, had a different solution, though it wasn't quite obvious at first. Leon watched as the massive ship leading the task force moving to intercept them flashed a series of lights at them, and as their ship flashed lights of its own back, and for a short time, that was all they exchanged.

"Keep our distance!" Yun shouted at the rest of the bridge crew. "Keep weapons on standby and prepare to defend this ship! I want all warriors armed, armored, and in their deployment zones!" He then finally turned his attention to the crew member tracking their interceptors. "What are they saying?"

Alarms began sounding off throughout the ship as the crew member answered, "They demand that we halt and await further instructions!"

Yun glowered at the approaching ships. "Have our escorts spread out, no need to make us good targets if this turns violent..." His eyes turned toward Leon and he said, "Apologies for this, my King. This is unexpected, the Thunderer's fleet is small compared to those commanded by the rest of the Tribes, and they never perform duties such as these."

"Please, no need for formalities," Leon said. "And let's all calm down, shall we? Unless we're assuming hostility?"

Yun grimaced. "We fly under the banner of the Jaguar Tribe. Even if we weren't immune to inspections, it should be our own ships that would perform them! The Jaguar of the West himself has been defending this coastline for centuries with our fleet! That the Thunderer's ships are here at all can't mean anything good."

Leon frowned slightly. The ships moving to intercept them outnumbered their own, and their lead ship was larger and more heavily armed than theirs. If things took a violent turn, he didn't like the chances that the Jaguars were going to come out ahead of the Thunderer's own.

'I might need to take action,' he thought with some distaste. It would bode quite ill if the first action he took upon reaching Kataigida was to kill a bunch of tribesmen.

The crewmember watching the oncoming task force shouted, "Looks like they're sending a vox bat!"

Leon cocked an eyebrow, wondering what a 'vox bat' was, but he didn't have to wonder long as a giant bat nearly five feet tall and with a wingspan longer than he was tall landed on a rather inconspicuous metal bar just outside of a window of the bridge. It looked so at ease on that bar, perched like a bird rather than a bat, that Leon could only assume that allowing a perch for this bat was the reason for the bar's presence.

Yun nodded to another crew member, who opened the window. Once he did, the bat's eyes turned completely black, and it opened its mouth and began to speak as naturally as if it were human.

"This is Captain Jace, commander of Wave Cutter. Upon the authority of the Thunderer, no ship may access Raimondas without proper authorization. You are ordered to heave to and submit to an immediate inspection."

For a moment, Leon thought that the bat was simply relaying a message, but realized there was more to it when Yun shouted back, "The Thunderer has no authority to interfere with a Tribe's private business!"

Jace's voice responded through the bat, "The safety and security of all of the Ten Tribes is precisely the Thunderer's business. Heave to and prepare for inspection, else hostility will be assumed, and more decisive actions will be taken."

The bridge was silent for a moment as Yun scowled, broken only when he slammed the window shut in the bat's face. Leon tempered his curiosity about the bat and asked, his voice calm and steady, "Do you have some kind of protocol for this?"

"No," Yun replied. "We have never been stopped at port before. Bringing you here was done under the utmost secrecy, the Thunderer shouldn't have known you'd be here until we made the official announcement!"

"Well, so much for that," Leon said. "Is there any reason not to submit to the inspection?"

Yun looked at him in disbelief. "The Thunderer does not have the authority to stop us! The Jaguar Tribe controls the sea on this side of Kataigida. Interfering with us upon the sea is a violation of our rights and responsibilities."

"That can be useful," Leon said.

"You are a threat to everything the Thunderer stands for," Yun insisted. "You cannot be discovered until we are ready!"

Leon simply smiled and said, "Don't worry about that. I wasn't a fan of sneaking onto Kataigida, anyway. Here's what I'm going to do..."

He quickly outlined a plan to Yun. They had only a few minutes to hash something out, so he kept it brief and simple, but when he was finished, Yun's expression turned downright horrified.

"That is beyond dangerous! What if—"

"That is what I'm doing," Leon interjected. "You want me to be King. I will not creep into these lands like a thief in the night. Now, if you're true and want me to be your King, then follow my order."

Yun looked like he desperately wanted to argue, but in the end, his expression slowly turned to one of determination. "Very well, Your Majesty. We will follow you."

Leon smiled and nodded, and as he cast his gaze around the bridge, he saw some fear, but most of the bridge crew were steeling themselves for what was about to happen.

Without another word, he clapped Yun on the shoulder and left the bridge.

His party was waiting for him on the ship's deck, looks of confusion on just about all of their faces.

"What's going on, boss?" Alix called out as Leon walked over to them.

"The Thunderer," Leon answered. "I'd wager he got word that I was on my way and posted some sentries to wait for us."

"Mole?" Marcus wondered aloud as he stroked his chin in thought. "Did someone in the Jaguar Tribe leak this information?"

"Probably," Leon replied with a shrug. "I don't really care about it right now. I'm more concerned about a bunch of ships between me and my destination."

"We're not... killing them, are we?" Gaius asked.

"No," Leon readily replied. "If anything, I'm glad they're here. I could use the audience."

"For what?" Gaius asked, sounding more than a little nervous.

Leon smiled and quickly outlined his plan.

"... and make sure that you're flying under your own power, not using one of my flight belts. We want to make a scene, not attract hostile attention."

"I think you're going to attract that regardless," Gaius observed.

"I'll do it," Red said, quieting Gaius just like that. Leon cocked an eyebrow and glanced at his wyvern retainer with some surprise.

"Just like that?" Leon asked.

“The humans here ought to know that their betters have arrived,” Red arrogantly stated. She then flashed Leon a smile and added, “If those who would rule over them didn’t remind them of the power they have over them, then what’s the point of even having that power?”

Leon felt compelled to push back a little bit against that idea, but Jace’s task force had come too close, now. The incoming task force was now slowing and turning to bring Jace’s ship up alongside Yun’s, undoubtedly to facilitate their ‘inspection’, which Leon thought was more than likely just a reason to hunt him down.

“Let’s get going,” Leon said, not wanting to wait another moment.

Most of his people began moving immediately. Red, Maia, and Anzu, in particular, rose into the air without a second of hesitation, Valeria, Anshu, and Alix only a moment behind them. Marcus and Alcander only hesitated long enough to exchange one look before they, too, took off into the sky, lifted by their elementless power. Gaius hesitated the longest, but even then, he only stayed on the deck for long enough to sigh and stare at Leon for a second or so before joining the others in the air.

Leon smiled, gave the incoming task force a dismissive look, and then followed the example of his party. He could see people on Jace’s ship noticing them, and he felt a spike in killing intent that could only have come from a group of warriors preparing to engage hostiles—it seemed that Jace’s crew believed that he and his people were about to attack them.

But no, Leon was resolute in his desire not to announce himself to the Ten Tribes by killing many of their kin.

Instead, as he lifted off, he found himself staring at Jace’s command tower. The walls were enchanted steel, not allowing him to see through, but there were sailors on the observation deck, along with a group of strong mages, led by one that was eighth-tier.

‘Captain Jace, I do believe,’ Leon thought as he shot into the sky.

He wasted not even a second and pulled his clothes into his soul realm. But he wasn’t swinging in the breeze for even a tenth of a second before his power entered his original transformation enchantment and his body practically exploded into the near-identical copy of the Thunderbird that he’d used for almost two decades at this point.

As he beat his wings, his magic power exploded outward from him, inundating the environment. Dark storm clouds grew from nothing until they filled the sky in but a moment, and the wind, rather pleasant when Leon lifted off from the deck, had picked up into a howling gale by the time he had wings and feathers.

The wind buffeted him, lifting him even higher, his people just behind him. Anzu and Red had taken their original forms as well and fell in beside him on his right and left. Maia transformed into a flying Serpentine water dragon and, along with Valeria, flew just behind him, while his other retainers spread out into a wide V-shape from her. Despite the sudden storm that Leon’s power conjured, the raging wind did nothing to get in their way, and as the clouds opened up with a torrential downpour, the rain parted around them as if it were actively avoiding them.

The killing intent that Leon felt from Jace's ships grew more and more powerful, and as he glanced back down, he noticed that the Lances they had on their ships were powering up, most of them turning in his direction while the rest put Yun's three ships in their sights. The sea was turning extremely choppy, but Jace's ship remained steady, his six Lances just about ready to fire.

So, Leon reached into the sky and let his power resonate within the clouds. The sky was his domain, and he began to truly feel like a King as he felt the building charge above him. Before any of Jace's ships could fire their deadly payloads, a dozen bright bolts of silver-blue lightning erupted from the clouds. Six raced downward only to arc back up into the clouds, while the remaining six all struck the sea around Jace's ship, finally doing what the suddenly-rough seas couldn't and rocking it hard enough to force its Lances off-target.

At the same time, the killing intent he could feel from the ships noticeably faltered, and only dropped further as more silver-blue lightning raged throughout the sky.

Leon paid Jace's task force little more mind and led his people into the city of Raimondas.

Raimondas was one of the most important cities in Kataigida, having one of the island's largest ports and shipyards, and being the capital of the Screaming Eagle Tribe. The Screaming Eagles quickly proved their name as Leon and his retainers entered their airspace, as three arks lifted off from various parts of the city and several hundred powerful mages followed suit, most taking to the skies with various flying war beasts, but a few of the stronger mages doing so under their own power.

Some of those mages were strong enough to give Leon pause, with three ninth-tier mages and more than a handful of eighth-tiers. He counted himself lucky that, as the silver-blue lightning of the Thunderbird flashed around him, apart from getting into a more defensive formation, no one moved against his people as they advanced upon the city.

His destination was a large gathering hall at the top of a hill not too far from the port. There was a large courtyard in front of the hall, and in the center of that courtyard stood a large totem pole, with the Screaming Eagle itself at the bottom, followed by the founding members of the Tribe ascending upward, and capped at the top with a carving of the Thunderbird herself. Though heavily stylized, Leon was gratified to see that her coloring had stayed true in its depiction, being painted brown and flecked with gold.

He proceeded over the city, with the Screaming Eagles moving to surround him and his people, but none daring to get too close as Leon's silver-blue lightning continued to arc around him and his party. Not a single bolt fell upon the city itself, but each bolt instead wreathed itself around them, keeping them separate from everything else in the city and making it as obvious as it could be exactly from whom this lightning was coming.

One of the largest groups of strong mages had formed up over the city's gathering hall, and while they were clearly prepared for a fight, they didn't immediately respond with violence as Leon's party came close.

Leon then had something of a choice. He was entering Kataigida as he wished to, announcing his presence as loudly as he could. But he didn't want to antagonize the Screaming Eagles too much in this

endeavor. He felt that if he wasn't careful, if he acted too aggressively, then his entrance would do more harm than good.

So, as he approached the gathering hall, he beat his wings and slightly altered course. Instead of flying directly to the Tribal Totem as he'd originally intended on doing, he instead went on a wide circuit around the courtyard, his people at his wings and back.

As he flew, he stared at the man who seemed to be the leader of the powerful force around the courtyard, an aged figure that nonetheless radiated strength and power. He was one of the ninth-tier mages that Leon could sense in the air, and his deep brown eyes tracked Leon as he flew in his circle, never once wavering from him despite having an eighth-tier wyvern and a ninth-tier river nymph flying with him.

Leon tried to discern what was going through the man's mind, but his chiseled features might as well have been literally chiseled from stone for all the insight they gave him into the man's thinking. So, Leon did the only thing he felt he could do in this situation and stared right back.

He completed a circle of the courtyard but didn't stop. He continued flying in his circle, not allowing a single hint of killing intent to spill from his body, his eyes locked on the ninth-tier Screaming Eagle, quickly completing another circuit, and then a third. In all, he circled the courtyard ten times before he altered course and finally flew over the courtyard.

None of the Screaming Eagles made to stop him as he flew in, alighting upon the image of the Thunderbird while his family and retainers all landed on the ground around the totem pole in a defensive circle.

The Screaming Eagles remained in the air, with those who'd taken to the skies around the city converging upon the courtyard. All three arks took up defensive positions some distance from the courtyard, keeping it in between them all. The other two ninth-tier Screaming Eagles, however, joined their comrade in the air, all hovering in front of Leon, though about a hundred feet distant. Hundreds of other Screaming Eagles then formed around the courtyard. At the same time, Leon noticed thousands more armed and armored Screaming Eagles rushing into the storm-wracked streets and fighting their way through the rain and the wind in the gathering hall's direction.

While all three of the ninth-tier Screaming Eagles were generally impassive, not letting a single expression betray their inner thoughts, most of those around them were not so controlled. Leon reveled in the looks of shock and awe on their faces as he stood perched upon his Ancestor's image, silver-blue lightning continuing to arc around him and even strike him directly, though doing nothing more than dancing about his form.

None of the Screaming Eagles made a move against him or his people, so Leon spared a moment to check in on Yun's small fleet, and was gratified to see that Jace hadn't fired upon any of Yun's ships. Instead, Jace had increased his distance from Yun's ships, though none of his Lances had powered down. Now, all of Yun and Jace's ships were simply lingering at sea several miles from Raimondas, and he couldn't help but think that they were more occupied with watching him than with continuing the 'inspection'.

So, with a smile in his heart, Leon restrained his power, allowing the storm above to visibly dissipate. The rain ceased, the wind slowed, and the sea stilled. Even the near-constant lightning stopped, though the thunder it had brought still echoed throughout the city and its hinterland beyond. In a moment, the sky was clear, not a single storm cloud in sight, and Leon had returned to his human form, clothing himself in a moment as he stood upon the totem and stared back at the three ninth-tier Screaming Eagles.

He took a deep breath and roared, his voice backed by his ninth-tier strength so that it could be heard throughout the entire city, "I AM LEON RAIME, LAST DESCENDANT OF THE THUNDERBIRD, AND I HAVE COME TO ANNOUNCE THE RETURN OF THE THUNDERBIRD CLAN!"

Chapter 855 - Screaming Eagles

After making his declaration of the return of his Clan, Leon leaped down from the Screaming Eagles' totem. Even if the specific image he's been standing on had been his own Ancestor, it still felt disrespectful to remain perched up there while what seemed to be the cream of the Screaming Eagles' fighting forces were assembled around the courtyard.

As his feet touched the stone courtyard, the three ninth-tier mages began to descend as well, along with most of the eighth-tier mages. With these people showing themselves, Leon noticed that, despite there being hundreds of mages in the air, only these men and women had feathers woven into their hair.

'Some mark of office, then?' he wondered. Given their power and the fact that most of these mages appeared to be at least in their thirties by mortal standards, he guessed that these people were the Tribe's elders. Given their age and power, he guessed that the three ninth-tier mages were the highest ranked, or at least most senior of the Tribe's elders.

As they pulled in closer and surrounded him, Leon quickly counted eighty, only twenty-one shy of the Tribe's total number of elders.

The man that had defended the courtyard on Leon's approach seemed to take charge, the other two ninth-tier mages even falling in half a step behind him as he strode toward Leon.

Halting a pace in front of Leon, the man, without a shred of deference to be found in his demeanor, said, "We should speak. Inside."

Leon, a light, confident smile on his lips, nodded once, though he added, "I'd rather the Thunderer's fleet didn't come to blows with the Jaguar Tribe."

The ninth-tier man paused as he made for the gathering hall and glanced in the sea's direction, his aura pulsing as he projected his magic senses. He then nodded to one of the other ninth-tier mages, who frowned for a moment before taking back to the skies and flying toward one of the arks still hovering in the air.

With that assurance, Leon, with a few silent looks and a quick wave of his hand, ordered his people to stand down. Maia, Red, and Anzu returned to human form, while the rest of his retainers pulled their armor back into their soul realms.

Putting more confidence than he felt on display, Leon followed the ninth-tier Eagle into the gathering hall, followed by his retainers and the rest of the Screaming Eagles with feathers woven into their hair.

The interior of the hall amounted to a single massive room. Both sides of the hall were lined with benches enough to seat several hundred, while massive braziers were arranged in a line down the center of the hall.

Everywhere Leon looked in the hall, he saw avian figures, from carved reliefs along the walls and on the decorative columns, to ceiling and floor murals, to carved birds on the braziers themselves. Were he anywhere else on Kataigida, he would've assumed these figures to be the Thunderbird, but given he was in the gathering hall of the Screaming Eagles, he guessed all of these birds were meant to be this Tribe's ancestor, the eponymous Screaming Eagle.

The hall was empty of people before this. Only the two ninth-tier Eagles were in there when Leon walked in.

Wordlessly, the ninth-tier Eagle that seemed in charge gestured to Leon to join him at the far end of the hall where he stood upon a slightly raised dais. The other ninth-tier mage was sitting on one of the benches closest to the far end of the hall, her eyes rarely straying from Leon even as she took the opportunity to relax.

Leon did as invited, his people following suit. He wondered what he ought to say then, but as he pondered his words, the rest of the Tribe's elders streamed in behind him, nearly all eighth-tier, and those that weren't were still at least seventh.

They quickly took seats on the benches as close to the dais as they could, but as they did, Leon noticed them sitting according to some method he couldn't discern.

'Seniority, maybe? Or maybe wealth? Influence? They're not quite sitting according to power...'

The latter observation was technically true, but the stronger of the eighth-tier mages did generally sit closer to the dais, but it was clearly not a hard and fast rule.

As everyone was getting situated, the third ninth-tier Eagle elder entered, taking a seat just across the hall's central aisle from the other seated ninth-tier.

"All ships are heading to port," he said. "There will be no violence in this city between them."

"Thank you," Leon responded, bowing his head slightly in gratitude.

"I rendered no favor; peace is a duty borne by all," the Eagle said, waving his hand as if to dismiss Leon's thanks.

"A wise philosophy," Leon observed. "I wished more people in this world felt the same."

"Do you?" the Eagle asked.

Leon smiled a little wider, but before he could respond, the leading elder on the dais with him quietly said, "We ought to begin properly." To the rest of the room, he declared, "Though not all of us are here, the events of a few minutes ago demand that our Tribal council assemble. Let it be known that the council is now in session!"

Turning back to Leon, he said, "I am called Exallos Aetos. I am Lawspeaker for this council."

Leon fought the urge to laugh at the man's name. He'd used 'Aetos' as an alias before, never having expected to run into anyone actually using the name.

As for the man's title, Leon, thanks to the Jaguar's briefing, knew that a Lawspeaker was little more than first among equals to a Tribal council. He had little executive power, possessing duties that amounted almost exclusively to mediating disputes between other elders and managing business when the council was called. The position usually went to the oldest or most powerful within a Tribe's council, but a couple of the other Tribes appointed Lawspeakers by election by the council members, or by lot.

"Well met. I am Leon Raime."

"Yes, you introduced yourself just a moment ago," Exallos Aetos said.

"And made a bold claim," the female ninth-tier Eagle said.

"A claim backed up by power," the male ninth-tier pointed out. He glanced around at the other elders and asked them all, "I was not the only one who heard the voice of our Honored Ancestor, was I? That was the Thunderbird's lightning, called forth by a man who took the form of the Thunderbird itself! To ignore this is to ignore all of our Ancestors!"

He stopped for a moment, rose from his seat, and approached the dais, his eyes locking upon Leon.

"The Thunderbird Clan was our rulers for hundreds of generations. They led us to prosperity that we, today, can only dream of. When the Thunderbirds fell, we were all lessened." He fell to a knee and declared, "I welcome the return of the Thunderbird Clan! Our rightful ruler has returned! The world is setting itself to rights!"

Many of the Screaming Eagle elders began hurriedly whispering amongst themselves, and while Leon found himself fighting an unabashed smile, he was reserving his attention for the ninth-tiers—specifically, the other two, who seemed less than thrilled at the first man's declaration.

However, addressing the man, Leon asked, "It gladdens my heart to see my Clan so fondly remembered. What is your name, my loyal friend?"

The kneeling ninth-tier replied, "I am Ipatameni Timi."

Leon smiled and nodded, then glanced at the ninth-tier woman, nodding to her in a silent request for her name, as well.

She seemed to need a moment to think it over, but she eventually said, "Chrysi Pisti."

"Well met," Leon said. He noticed that the other elders were still talking amongst themselves, but before he could begin asking for their names as well, Aetos cleared his throat, and his power, for just a moment, erupted from his body like a massive tidal wave, sweeping away all conversation and leaving the gathering hall silent as the grave.

"The power is not in doubt," he sternly said, glancing between Chrysi and Timi. "Matters of politics, however, must be discussed and agreed upon. No one man can declare what is right or the course an entire Tribe can take."

The doors of the gathering hall suddenly burst open and a rather harried-looking man radiating eighth-tier power burst in, followed by a handful of equally-ragged seventh-tier mages. Leon recognized all of them: the eighth-tier mage he presumed to be Captain Jace, having seen the man on the observation deck of Jace's ship. The others, he thusly assumed, were adjutants of Jace's.

Sure enough, Timi shot to his feet and roared, "Impudence! None may intrude upon private Tribal business! Not even you, Jace!"

"This matter affects all Ten Tribes!" Jace retorted.

Aetos cleared his throat again, and with a simple expression of power, the gathering hall fell silent once more. "Opinions can be had," he said. "But for now, Captain, please wait outside until summoned."

"No," Jace refused. His eyes shifted from Aetos to Leon. "We have allowed an outsider entrance—"

"Outsider?" Timi shouted in exaggerated disbelief. "No scion of the Thunderbird shall ever be an outsider amongst our people!"

Dozens of Screaming Eagle elders murmured in agreement.

"I find myself agreeing with Jace in this matter," Chrysi said. "Power is power. But what does Leon know of our ways? I mean no disrespect, Leon, but the Thunderbirds have been gone for such a long time. Our ways have changed."

"We have struggled in the absence of our true and rightful Lords!" Timi cried out.

"We have seized independence!" Jace shouted back.

"From whom?" Timi asked with a deep sneer. "We once sailed through the stars, wingmates with the Thunderbird itself! Without our Lord, we now find ourselves scrapping with planar barbarians, now possessing but a shadow of the power we once held! What is independence if it leads to such a miserable existence?"

"Our power is resurgent!" Jace shouted. He was about to continue, but Red loudly laughed, drawing the attention of the entire hall.

"You are worms, unfit even to be burned," she growled, fire in her eyes.

"You dare!" Jace shouted as he took a threatening step forward.

Leon, however, raised a hand and, using only his elementless magic, stopped him. Gently.

"I apologize for my retainer," he said to the entire hall. Red clicked her tongue, but when he glanced back and glared at her, his killing intent spiking for a moment, she backed down. "I came here neither to insult nor to conquer."

"Why have you come, then?" Chrysi asked. "No one announces themselves as you did for no reason. What is your aim, if not to assert authority?"

Leon smiled at her, nodding respectfully before turning his attention back to the hall as a whole. "I would rebuild the Thunderbird Clan to its former glory. I'm sure there are many different thoughts about the fall of my Clan—some might celebrate it, while others curse the day for having made

vagabonds of us all, relegated to a backwater corner of a backwater plane. I will achieve Apotheosis and make for the Nexus, returning my Clan to glory, but... I can't help but ask myself what kind of Storm King I could ever possibly hope to become if I left behind the loyal vassals who'd followed my Clan to this plane in the first place. Left to squabble with the locals over ancient grievances long absent from living memory."

He took a deep breath and regarded the entire hall, making eye contact with every Screaming Eagle elder and Jace and his adjutants.

"I meant it when I said that I'm not here to conquer. I but came to present a choice to you all: to follow me to the Nexus and reclaim your old glories as well, or to stay on this plane, eternally bickering with the Empires over land on a single plane and fighting over the scraps that my Clan left behind.

"You would have us as your slaves?" Jace spat.

"Far from it," Leon corrected. "I have no need for slaves."

He glanced around the room again, noting with some pleasure that many of the Eagle elders were nodding along with what he said while others were smiling in agreement. This reaction was hardly universal, but it seemed that it was at least in the majority, even if only just.

"Your Clan followed mine to this plane," Leon continued. "And I saw it outside: you remember my Clan, honoring my Ancestor just outside of those doors! Such loyalty cannot be ignored! I ask all of you to join me as I rebuild what we have all lost, and more! To reclaim our lost power, and then surpass it! To meet the status quo of our Ancestors, and then exceed it! To build something that we can all take pride in, and that benefits us all!"

"You say much, yet little," Chrysi observed.

Leon softly chuckled. "I'm more a warrior and an enchanter, in truth, all of this politicking is new to me."

Chrysi gave him a shallow smile in response, but before she could respond, Aetos said, "Then let's speak in more concrete terms. But first..." His aura spiked and his power settled around Jace and his adjutants. "... we will discuss this as a Tribe first. If we have anything to share with others, it will be shared. You need not concern yourself with these matters."

Jace and his adjutants were lifted off the ground, completely unable to do anything about it despite their power—or unwilling, Leon wasn't sure, but the end result was the same—and were carried by Aetos' power right out of the hall, the door quietly shutting behind them.

Without missing a beat, Aetos intoned, "Matters of governance are to be decided upon first by the Tribes, and then by the Elder Council. The Thunderer has no place in this hall until we are of one mind."

Leon smiled. The Tribes would debate matters until they decided upon a course of action to take within their own structures, then the Tribes would gather in the form of the Elder Council and make their positions known. Action—at least if it affected all Ten Tribes—wouldn't be taken until all of the Tribes reached an agreement. If he wanted to be the King of these people, he would have to ensure that he had the support of at least half of the Tribes before they even reached the Elder Council. Going into that particular meeting without knowing the outcome was unacceptable in his mind.

"Well then, where were we?" Leon asked.

"You were going to elucidate your position," Chrysi said. "Your offer? For our support?"

"Why should he need to make an offer?" Timi scoffed. "He has the power. He is of the blood. It is only right and proper that we unify behind the blood of the Thunderbird. There can be no other considerations!"

"Right," Chrysi said. "And I suppose jumping on the wagon before it gets crowded isn't your goal?"

Timi looked both scandalized and incensed at that remark. Aetos subtly stepped forward, not quite interposing himself between the two, but making sure that they both could see his presence. When Timi took a step toward Chrysi in anger, he didn't take another with Aetos just about between them. Had Aetos not done so, Leon felt like he would've seen Timi and Chrysi come to blows right then and there.

After a moment of silence, Aetos said, "Leon Raime. We are honored by your presence, but it has given us much to consider. If it pleases, would you kindly give us time to sort through our thoughts on the matter? I do not believe we are all in the right mindset for political negotiations."

"Of course," Leon replied. "I came here with Yun Neh of the Jaguar Tribe. The Jaguar of the West has already declared that his Tribe supports me, so I will be staying with them at least for the foreseeable future. I will return, though, and we can speak more then."

Aetos bowed slightly, and while Timi appeared willing to argue about something, a quick glare from Aetos had him quieting down. Leon couldn't help but marvel at the man's ability to control the Tribal council despite being of the same tier as Timi and Chrysi. While Timi was the most sympathetic towards him of the three, he found that if he had to choose anyone to negotiate with, he'd probably pick Aetos.

"Thank you all for your hospitality," Leon then said to the rest of the hall, and of all the elders present, about sixty rose as Leon made for the door. Upon seeing so many of their fellows rise for Leon's exit a handful more rose, as well. Timi was one of the first on his feet, while Chrysi remained seated even as Leon and his party reached the gathering hall's doors.

Upon exiting the hall, Leon found Jace standing in the square, his adjutants now reinforced with triple their number, and all sixth or seventh-tier.

"Leon Raime," Jace growled as Leon and his retainers shut the door behind them.

"Captain Jace," Leon said with a grin as he strode forward, not concerned at all with the fact that Jace's people had surrounded the door. "Lovely day, isn't it? I'm more a fan of overcast skies, myself, but I can't help but appreciate the great beauty in a clear, sunny day..."

Still smiling, Leon walked right past the man, his retainers just behind, though only Maia was as relatively unconcerned as he was, everyone else eyeing up Jace and his people as if they were expecting the Thunderer's people to start something right then and there.

But Jace didn't say another word, and none of his people made a move, though most gave their Captain some expectant stares.

Regardless, Leon continued walking, only slowing down slightly as he passed the totem pole in the center of the courtyard. He took a moment to glance up at the carving of the Thunderbird at the top, her wings spread, the gold flecks glittering in the sun.

And then Yun came running up into the courtyard from the direction of the port, many of his subordinates at his back.

"Leon!" he gasped. "Is everything all right?"

"Everything's fine," Leon said, casting one final glance behind him at both Jace and his party, and the Screaming Eagles' gathering hall. There was little to note of the latter, but of the former, Jace and his people were standing between them and the hall, glaring back with undisguised hostility. "Bit of a frosty welcome, but that's to be expected," Leon said. "Now, why don't we head for the Jaguar Tribe? I'm eager for this journey to be over and to get at least a day or two of rest."

Yun nodded, and though he looked like he would've liked nothing more than to throw down with Jace, he acquiesced to Leon's suggestion.

As they walked away, Leon couldn't help but reflect on the past couple of hours. All-in-all, he didn't think it went terribly—in fact, it went quite well, with many of the Screaming Eagles' elders seeming to support him just with his appearance alone. If they sided with him, then it would be a magnificent start to his quest to gain the support of the Ten Tribes.

Somehow, though, even if the Screaming Eagles declared for him without any further work on his part, he doubted the other eight Tribes he'd need to contact would be so easy.

Chapter 856 - Loyalty of the Jaguar I

An age of resurgence. Of glory and regaining lost honor. An age of unity that their people had never, not even when they bowed to the Thunderbird, seen before.

Such were the words that the Thunderer always spoke of, words that Hector had needed to hear when he'd first met the man who would become the Thunderer years ago. They'd resonated with him in a way that words hadn't since the days when he and the Jaguar had been young men, when their friendship had still been strong. Now, his friendship with the Jaguar was irrevocably dead, and Hector's loyalties had shifted to the Thunderer.

There was a part of Hector that regretted how things had turned out between him and the Jaguar, but when he'd learned several months ago that the Jaguar Tribe was attempting to discretely canvass some of the other Tribes for support for something that sounded suspiciously like treason, any lingering good feelings Hector still had left for the Jaguar died. He already hated the spotted man, but treason against the Ten Tribes was a special crime that Hector simply couldn't abide by.

'He knows this,' Hector had thought at the time. 'All these years and nothing's changed.'

Through calling in a few favors, Hector had learned that the Jaguar Tribe planned on bringing someone back from the mainland. Given the rumors of just who the Jaguar had encountered in Argos, Hector could guess who that person was. Someone who could not, under any circumstances, be brought to Kataigida. Even if he wasn't an imposter, pretending to be the descendant of the Thunderbird who many in the Ten Tribes still venerated as much as their own Ancestors, Hector wouldn't allow this person to

the lands of the Ten Tribes. Eighty-thousand years they'd gone without a King, and they didn't need one now, not when they were finally striking back against the Imperial barbarians, winning glory and reclaiming lost honor.

They didn't need a King. What they needed was unity, what they needed was to leave their tribal social structure behind and become a true nation, a single nation of one people, not a nation of ten peoples that oftentimes only begrudgingly worked together. If they were to ever truly thrive, then the Tribes had to go.

The Thunderer never said that in so many words, but Hector believed that such was his intention—he wouldn't have been strengthening the central government if that wasn't the case.

Hector had gone to the Thunderer with the news that the Jaguars were bringing the so-called descendent of the Thunderbird to Kataigida, but the Thunderer hadn't readily responded. Hector had pressed the issue, insisting that they kill this pretender off before he even touched their shores. The Thunderer had refused such 'drastic action', claiming that their people wouldn't take kindly to violence at someone even rumored to be the descendent of their long-lost god.

'Yet another reason we must abandon the old ways,' Hector had thought at the time. 'Such superstition can only hold us back. The Thunderbird is dead and gone, its Clan likewise. We ought to celebrate, but instead of focusing on the future, our people wish for the chains to be put back, to return to the time when they were slaves to the very creature they venerate.'

When Hector gave voice to his thoughts, the Thunderer had merely smiled and had him dismissed.

The descendent of the Thunderbird would be dealt with in his own way, the Thunderer had said. Hector didn't need to do anything.

But Hector didn't agree. He'd invoked his rank as the Thunderer's aide to put Jace down in Raimondas on alert and begun making discrete inquiries of his own, attempting to get some people inside the Jaguar Tribe's tribal council to tell him precisely what was going on, and how the other Tribes were taking the news.

He wasn't much of a diplomat and his attempts to liaise with the other Tribes didn't go far, but Jace at least accepted his orders readily enough. Hector's frustrations with their tribal ways only intensified in the weeks since. When Jace used his vox bats to send word back to Stormhollow of what had happened in Raimondas, however, those frustrations turned to rage and hatred, not burning quite as intensely as what he held for the Jaguar, but still lighting a spectacular fire within Hector. He'd marched straight to the Thunderer's office after hearing Jace's report in the eighth-tier man's own words.

Bursting in despite the Thunderer's secretaries desperately trying to keep him out, he found the Thunderer huddled over a table with Linda, the High Inquisitor, a map of Kataigida spread out before them. The most prominent feature of the map was a detailed depiction of the territories of all Ten Tribes.

"Hector," the Thunderer warmly said despite Hector's rude entrance. "It's good you're here, Linda and I were just discussing a matter of great importance." The Thunderer then dismissed his secretary and waved Hector further into his office.

"Lord Thunder," Hector said as he joined the other two around the table. After making sure that the door was closed and the office's privacy wards had been raised, Hector said with no small amount of contained wrath, "Are you two aware of what happened in Raimondas today?"

"There was an unfortunate commotion caused by a newcomer," Linda drily stated.

"You can fucking say that," Hector growled. "Someone we ought to deal with. We can't allow such disturbances to find dry kindling in our lands, lest they start fires that we can't control."

"Are you proposing some kind of direct action?" the Thunderer calmly asked, his almost placid demeanor annoying Hector quite a bit.

"What else?!" Hector loudly said. "The Jaguars have been making noise for years about the necessary reforms that we've made! And now, after Lord Jaguar's criminally light sacking of Argos, he conveniently found a descendent of the Thunderbird itself! And now he's brought that man here! This is a threat that could destroy everything we've worked so hard to accomplish!"

"And what would you have us do about it?" the Thunderer asked. He gestured to the map. "The Jaguar Tribe is made up of devoted traditionalists, they wouldn't take kindly to us killing even a purported member of the old ruling Clan." The Thunderer raised a hand as Hector made to interrupt, silencing the Tiger tribesman. "There are other traditionalist Tribes that we would lose support amongst if we were to act too rashly. The Ancestral Harts, the Lions, and the Ravens-of-the-Hail-Hall will all want to see this boy, and if he were to die under mysterious circumstances before then, we would lose them for sure. Even the Heart-Stabbing Hawks and Rock Mane Bisons would look at such actions unkindly."

"So you mean for us to do nothing about this?" Hector spat. "Leave this cancer to grow untreated?"

"I will not have us run off with claws still half-retracted," the Thunderer growled, his tone lowering so much that it seemed to rumble from the depths of the earth itself, and for a moment, he allowed his tenth-tier aura to leak out, causing even the ninth-tier Hector to get a bit weak in the knees. "We have to discuss our strategy for dealing with this boy, we will not leave the Jaguars to do as they please without response. But I long ago forbade violence against our own, and I stand by that decree. So calm down."

Hector took a few deep breaths, and though he still didn't agree with the Thunderer, he at least didn't press the issue further for the time being.

"Now," the Thunderer said as he turned back to Linda, "where were we?"

"Our support among the Jaguars is low," Linda explained. "Very few of the Tribe's constituent Clans are amenable to our cause. They've always been territorial and solitary, the most recalcitrant of the Tribes. They won't give up their tribal identity for any reason, and now that they found a 'Prince of the blood', as they've quietly claimed to other Tribes, they will entrench themselves even further in the old traditions."

"Fools," Hector snarled. "So busy living in the past that they've neglected to prepare for the future. The Thunderbirds are long dead, and even if the boy they've found is who they say he is, so fucking what? It's been eighty-thousand years since the Thunderbirds ruled over us, they don't get to just come back like nothing's changed."

"Indeed," the Thunderer whispered, though his tone was quiet and pensive.

Hector waited a long moment, but when the Thunderer didn't give voice to his thoughts, he asked, "Is that it? We're going to just let this boy build up support and do nothing?"

"No one's said that," Linda rebuked. "We but—"

"I will go and meet him," the Thunderer said, stunning them both into silence. "This boy could be useful for our purposes, and greatly detrimental if left to his own devices. So I will visit the Jaguars and assess the one they would elevate to a throne that has laid vacant for eighty-thousand years."

"The Jaguars would sooner kill you than work with you," Hector said through clenched teeth. He instinctively went to rub his left arm but didn't want to seem weak by drawing attention to an old humiliation, so he covered up the motion by crossing his arms.

"The Jaguars did great damage to the Empires at Argos," the Thunderer countered. "They care deeply about our people. We can work with that."

"Still a shit idea," Hector said. "I will go with you, the Jaguars won't miss this opportunity to strike against us."

"No. They will not touch me, and you would only enflame tensions where I mean to cool them. You will stay here."

Hector stared at the Thunderer in disbelief as Linda said, "I will have some reports on the few Jaguar Clans that might prove amenable to our cause written up."

"Thank you," the Thunderer said. "I'll head over there in a couple weeks. Now, we need to get some appropriations taken care of to ensure our hold on the Sword remains secure..."

The lands of the Jaguar Tribe were the rural ideal in Leon's eyes. Expansive plains in the southwest of Kataigida filled with golden wheat and gently rolling hills. Rivers from the southern mountains running north ensured a ready supply of water without the need for much magical infrastructure. Filling these plains and along these rivers were many small villages, quite rustic in appearance though magically advanced if what Leon could sense from them was any indication. Large herds of livestock roamed the plains between farms, orchards, and vineyards, completing the look of the agrarian paradise.

"This is a beautiful land," Leon said to his traveling companions. "Not quite enough forest for me, but beautiful nonetheless."

"It's not perfect without trees to get lost in, isn't that right?" Valeria whispered to him as she leaned against his shoulder and peered around him. They were riding in a horseless carriage, along with Maia and Yun. It was spacious enough for them within, but everyone else was riding in other carriages despite this extra room. The window next to Leon was open, letting in the warm sunlight and fresh air into the carriage.

Leon smiled as he propped his arm up on the window and rested his chin in his hand.

“We have rainforests further south,” Yun explained with the enthusiastic glee of a child showing off his toys. “They lie on the slopes and in the valleys of the mountains, and many of my tribesmen call those arboreal expanses home. Our Tribe is based down here in the plains, though, and in Raikos just ahead.”

Leon nodded. The golden wheat fields gave way to less cultivated fields of deep green grass miles ahead of them. It was in the center of one of these great green fields that the city of Raikos had been built—though, in truth, calling the place a ‘city’ was rather misleading, for it would barely classify itself as a village, let alone a full-blown city. Not many people lived there permanently, as far as Leon knew; the village only saw larger populations on occasion when the Jaguar Tribe’s Clan elders assembled in Raikos to discuss tribal business. Those meetings could take weeks or months, and the Clan delegations would live in sprawling estates in the village during those meetings.

As they approached, though, Leon could see quite a few people running around, with the largest concentration being a large group of relatively powerful mages in the courtyard surrounding the Tribal Totem in front of their gathering hall. In contrast to the Screaming Eagles with their three ninth-tier mages, the Jaguars had five including the Jaguar of the West himself. The Jaguar appeared to be the youngest of the five, but he stood in front of the entire assembly patiently waiting for Leon’s arrival.

But that assembly wasn’t all that awaited Leon’s group, for lining the main street leading up to the gathering hall were hundreds more Jaguar tribesmen cheering, laughing, and applauding the small caravan as they moved through.

Leon, embarrassed at the attention, nearly shut his window, but he caught himself before he could do something so foolish. Instead, he put on a small, dignified smile, and calmly waved at all those lining the roads. This acted like fuel for the spectators, and the cheering doubled in intensity.

Fortunately, he didn’t need to perform for long before the caravan arrived at the central courtyard and the gathering hall. Once there, Yun exited the caravan first, followed by Valeria, then Maia. Leon was last, exiting the caravan with as much dignity as he could muster. He stood tall and his aura, not quite spilling forth, was still vigorously billowing out from his body like a storm cloud. He was tempted to reach up into the sky and fill the air with clouds, rain, and lightning, but decided against it. He felt he was making impact enough as it was.

As he stood there, the rest of his retainers exiting their carriages, and with Maia and Valeria taking his arms, the assembled Jaguars all, to a man, took a knee. Even the Jaguar himself, dressed in rich yellow covered in black spots, knelt, and he called out, “Hail, Leon Raime! Rightful Lord of the Ten Tribes, Chief of the Thunderbird Clan, and rightful Storm King of the Nexus!”

The eldest-looking of the ninth-tier Jaguar elders then said, “We offer our hospitality and our fealty to our rightful liege! We, the Jaguar Tribe, are your claws and your fangs! With our bloody fangs, your enemies will tremble!”

Repeating the elder, the entire assembly then roared so loudly that their voices alone practically shook the ground, “YOUR ENEMIES SHALL TREMBLE!”

Leon controlled his expression carefully, ensuring that not a single emotion other than pleasant appreciation could be seen on his face anywhere. Recognizing the traditional words of the Jaguars, he spoke the words they were waiting to hear in return.

"I accept your fealty. By the winged grace, we will all succeed in our endeavors!"

The assembly practically erupted in cheers and raucous celebration, the veritable explosion rippling out from the courtyard until all of Raikos was roaring in delight. In not even a minute, Leon could see from the hill the village already breaking out the instruments and alcohol while many people were dancing in the street.

'It seems I underestimated how enthusiastic the Jaguars were going to be,' he thought to himself. 'Let's see if that enthusiasm holds after they get to know me.'

"Please rise," Leon said, backing his voice up with his power so that it could be heard over the roaring village, and the tribal elders, still on a knee, rose to their feet. With the initial formality thusly dealt with, Leon walked over to the Jaguar, his people at his back and with Maia and Valeria still on at his side, and clasped wrists with the older ninth-tier mage. "Well met, Jaguar," he said.

"And you, Raptor," the Jaguar responded with a cheeky smile. "I heard there was some excitement in Raimondas."

"Just a bit," Leon replied with a grin of his own.

"Let us head inside then and discuss matters," the Jaguar said. "We must swear our oaths to you, as well."

"This ceremony wasn't enough?"

"There is a process. This was but our Tribe's oath, now our elders have to make their own declarations of support."

Leon suppressed a scowl. "Very well. Lead on, then, and let's get this done as quickly as we can."

The Jaguar smiled and nodded and turned to head into the gathering hall. Few of the elders immediately followed him, however, most kept apace with Leon and his party. Leon didn't head into the gathering hall either, choosing instead to walk at a slightly more leisurely pace and paused at the base of the Tribe's totem pole. He took a moment to make a bit of a show laying his hand against the image of the Blood Thunder Jaguar itself, then casting his gaze up at the image of the Thunderbird and quietly nodding to her.

Only then did he venture into the gathering hall. The hall was largely identical to the Screaming Eagle's hall, if a bit bigger and with much of the décor evoking the Blood Thunder Jaguar rather than the Screaming Eagle. The elders streamed in after him, and with many other powerful mages of the Jaguar Tribe filing in after them to line the walls and the more distant benches from the dais at the hall's far end.

Leon and his party stood upon the dais with the Jaguar. The Jaguar himself then called the Tribe to order, though such a call was hardly needed since there was little conversation, all eyes largely turned in Leon's direction.

"Before we begin," the Jaguar initiated, "if any of us have our doubts about the course we are about to embark upon, let them be aired now."

From what Leon knew, this was a formality; if there were many important doubts, then they would've been aired in private and taken care of before the ceremony began. And so, he was somewhat surprised when one of the ninth-tier elders stepped forward and said, "I do not protest the swearing of our Tribe to the last descendent of the Thunderbird and our rightful King, but I do have concerns to bring up with my fellow elders. I will not swear my own oath of allegiance until certain issues have been resolved."

Leon fought a grimace, just barely maintaining his quiet, confident composure. 'This is going to be a long day,' he thought.

Chapter 857 - Loyalty of the Jaguar II

"... I will not swear my own oath of allegiance until certain issues have been resolved."

Leon fought a grimace, just barely maintaining his quiet, confident composure. 'This is going to be a long day,' he thought. A moment after this thought flit through his mind, however, a chorus of boos and other noises of discontent resounded through the gathering hall.

"What concerns?!" another eighth-tier elder shouted. "Our King has come! The blood of Royalty has returned to us! You shame us all in not immediately recognizing and acclaiming him!"

"Are we blind sheep?" the elder shouted. "Do we question nothing? Are we so keen on giving up our independence? Is this not why we resist the machinations of the Thunderer and his Bears?"

"The Thunderer seizes power that is not his!" a third elder shouted in vitriolic reply. "The throne ruling over the Ten Tribes has always and will always belong to the Thunderbird! It is through the Thunderbird that all of our Clans were originally made, long before we united into Tribes! And when the Thunderbirds were gone, we were infinitely reduced!"

The gathered elders stamped their feet and shouted in agreement.

As they continued to make their arguments, Leon quietly asked the Jaguar standing just a pace or two away, "Who is this elder who's voicing his concerns?"

"Theophilos," the Jaguar whispered. "A good man. Principled and stubborn. He would never obstruct this ceremony without cause."

Leon nodded in acknowledgment. "Let's see if we can allay some of those concerns, then."

Leon stepped off the dais to join Theophilos in the center of the hall, and all arguments went silent. The hall, despite having been cacophonously loud just a moment before, became dead silent as he approached the eighth-tier elder.

"You have concerns," he said to Theophilos, who stood opposite him, looking hardly intimidated at all. He nodded in response to Leon. "I don't blame you," Leon said with a quiet chuckle. "Honestly, I was feeling somewhat disturbed at how quickly and enthusiastically all of you have been to accept me. In my experience, people are slow to do that, especially where I'm concerned. So finding someone willing to push back puts my mind at ease, like the storm I've seen building on the horizon has finally broken."

"I but watch out for my people," Theophilos said.

"I commend you for that, at least," Leon responded. "Now, your concerns?"

Theophilos closed his eyes and lowered his head slightly. "This Tribe, though few are willing to admit it, isn't as strong as it once was. We've suffered several humiliations in the past millennium that we never would've in the preceding ten millennia. But we're still strong and proud, and we're not willing to let go of our traditions. So, the most important question I put to you is this: what are your intentions for my people? I cannot give my support to anyone who would seek to strip my people of their ancestral rights."

Leon grinned and nodded as he began to pace around Theophilos, though he turned his eyes outward, addressing the other elders more than he was Theophilos.

"I do not seek to make any real changes to how your people govern themselves. If you accept me as your King, then I would, of course, expect you to follow my orders and provide me with troops and taxes, but you are your own Tribe. You govern yourselves, and so long as you remain loyal and true, then I would never seek to change that fact. As my retainers know, I'm a pretty laidback person; perform what few duties I will expect, and I will make no undue demands in return." Leon nodded to his people still on the dais, and most of them nodded back, though Red seemed to be deliberately not paying attention.

"Is that enough for you, Theophilos?" Leon asked the elder.

Theophilos frowned slightly, but bowed slightly. "The details can be addressed by those wiser and more knowledgeable than I, but this promise of yours allays some of my fears."

"Only 'some'?"

Angry muttering began picking up among the rest of the elders, Leon noticed.

"Yes," Theophilos confirmed. "If we are to be your claws, then we need posts to scratch and keep our claws sharp. A jaguar cannot chase prey, hunt its enemies, or patrol its territory without proper sustenance, either. So what would we get in return for our support?"

"You overstep yourself!" one of the ninth-tier elders roared, seemingly at his wits end. "To demand such reward from—"

Leon held up a hand and turned to smile at the aged ninth-tier elder. "It's a natural question," he said. "The best relationships are two-way, after all, and I would never ask you to fight and die for me, or to give me any other kind of support, without providing something in return. So, I will promise all of you this: I plan on returning to the Nexus and reclaiming my Clan's position within the universe. And I plan on bringing all of you with me, ensuring that many of the benefits that I gain will be shared with all of you..."

Leon paused for dramatic effect as he glanced around at the room, making eye contact with every single elder if only for a fraction of a second. When his gaze finally landed on the Jaguar of the West, deliberately left for the last, he said, "Jaguar, could you come here, if you please?"

The Jaguar cocked his head slightly but complied, stepping off the dais to the surprise and curiosity of the rest of the hall.

"A couple decades ago, I fought a powerful enemy named 'Jormun'. Does this name mean anything to you?"

The Jaguar gave it a moment of thought, then said, “No, it does not.”

“He was a pirate,” Leon explained. “A powerful one, and ambitious beyond measure. I’ll spare all of you the details—for now, at least, feel free to ask me later—but I managed to triumph over the pirate with the aid of my friends and allies. Among the man’s personal affects, I found something quite interesting... Jaguar, hold out your hands, if you would.”

The Jaguar, looking more and more curious with every word, did as bid and held out his hands as if to receive something. Leon then reached into his soul realm and located the massive hammer that Jormun had wielded during their battles—at least, those they’d had in human form. After laying his hands upon the hammer, along with a diary of a long-dead Thunderbird Clan vassal and the onyx bracelet that he’d given to Anna, Nestor had told him that the hammer had belonged to none other than the Blood-Thunder Jaguar.

“I took possession of a certain hammer, one that I was led to believe once belonged to your Honored Ancestor himself, the Blood-Thunder Jaguar...”

As Leon spoke, recognition spread throughout the elders present. He heard some gasp in surprise, while others hitched their breath. A handful of elders were so shocked that they stood up without regard for proper decorum. Leon savored these reactions for only a moment before pulling the hammer from his soul realm and dropping it into the Jaguar’s hands.

The Jaguar stared at the weapon in abject shock, unmoving, his eyes as wide as dinner plates.

“This...” the Jaguar whispered, apparently unable to form any more words. Instead, his fingers tightened around the weapon’s haft and he fell to his knees. The other elders began doing likewise in no organized way; they simply stood up from their seats, then bowed where they were.

Leon fought to keep his smile dignified at the sight. He was beyond delighted, but he didn’t want to seem arrogant or like he was reveling in their reactions. Instead, he turned his eyes to Theophilos, and the stubborn elder stared back, his eyes nearly watering, his lips quivering. After a moment, he, too, fell to his knees.

“Leon Raime,” he quietly said, though in the complete silence of the gathering hall his voice still carried. “This weapon was a prize beyond all value to my Tribe, but was stolen from us several decades ago. To return it is a blessing beyond any we could have asked for. You are my King. I will be your claws, I will be your fangs. I will stalk your enemies and guard the den of your Clan. Now and forever more, I am your man.”

His words were echoed throughout the hall, every elder speaking them, though none were synchronized and most of their words blended together into simple noise. The Jaguar, as it turned out, was the last to speak, though when he did, he spoke the same words as Theophilos. Once he was done, every elder in the room had sworn their personal loyalty to Leon.

And he accepted all of them. The Jaguar Tribe was now his.

“So,” Leon said, “have your people given any thought to the offer I made when you left Occulara?”

He stared at the Jaguar and awaited the response. They were sitting in a garden around the man's surprisingly small and rustic home in Raikos, surrounded by bright flowers and tall hedges enchanted to keep outside noise out and inside noise in. Joining them were the other four ninth-tier elders of the Tribe along with Leon's ladies. All the other elders, after making their oaths to Leon, had either departed for their respective Clans or had taken up residence in the city for as long as Leon remained within. For now, Leon was to discuss their further plans among the strongest and oldest of their number in an informal setting. Whatever they agreed was the best course of action would then be debated by the full tribal council later.

It hadn't been more than a few hours since the swearing of oaths, and in that time, the Jaguar had taken Leon to the small palace where he'd be staying for the time being. It was more than befitting of Leon's position, small as it was compared to his villa back in Occulara, and most of Leon's retinue had taken to resting within. Only Valeria and Maia had accompanied him to the Jaguar's home, and they sat next to Leon, Valeria sitting upright and attentive while Maia lounged against Leon and seemed barely able to keep her eyes open.

"I assume you speak of the transformation enchantment?" asked the seemingly oldest of the ninth-tier elders, his face weathered and rather gaunt, his skin loose and leathery. "The one you used to such great effect in Raimondas?"

"Yes," Leon confirmed. "To channel the power contained in your blood and take the form of your Ancestor is no small gift to turn away; I, myself, gained quite a bit of power and combat potential thanks to this enchantment. What say all of you?"

"It's... a strange prospect," said another of the ninth-tier elders, a frown spreading across her face. "Transformation is an enticing prospect, and only a fool would turn down their King's offer to make them stronger... But we are all humans, fundamentally, and embracing the more animalistic sides of ourselves is one that needs serious consideration."

"I'm all for using that enchantment," said a third of the elders. "If our King is using it to no ill effects, then let us see what such an enchantment might do for us! The Jaguar Tribe's power has slightly waned in the past millennia, Theophilos was not exaggerating when he said that. It hasn't waned all that much, but any boost to our power that might stymie that waning in power ought to be taken! If we are made stronger, then we can more effectively resist the actions of the Thunderer! If we are made stronger, then all the Ten Tribes are made stronger in turn!"

"Would the other Tribes see it that way?" the fourth elder wondered aloud. "If we become jaguars in truth, gaining power in return, how would our fellow Tribes take it? It might upset the balance of power, at least in the short term."

"They ought to embrace our traditions, then, and bow to our King," the third elder said almost dismissively. "Should we assume, Your Majesty, that this offer will be made to the other Tribes as well?"

"Yes," Leon responded without hesitation. "But please, drop the 'Your Majesty' style. I don't much like it, so while we're in private, please drop it."

The third elder bowed slightly in acknowledgment.

"There are other Tribes that I think would take you up on that offer," the Jaguar quietly observed. He conjured a map of Kataigida onto the table between all of them with every Tribe's territory clearly marked. "Unfortunately, all of them are likely in the Thunderer's camp. The Booming Brown Bears, the Tigers, and the Ji Spiders would, I'm sure, all jump at the chance to use anything that would increase their power..."

As he spoke, the Jaguar indicated the far eastern forest, the eastern plains, and a large portion of the northeastern mountains in turn as he listed the Tribes.

"The Ancestral Harts, the Lions, and the Rock Mane Bisons," he continued, indicating the largest portion of the northern forest and then the central plains for the latter two, "will be interested, I'm sure, but would be a little more reticent. The Heart-Stabbing Hawks, Ravens-of-the-Hail-Hall, and Screaming Eagles... I can't say. They may agree, they may not." As he listed the final three Tribes, he indicated the mountains first south of the Jaguar Tribe's territory, then the mountains at the northern end of the island, and then the western coast.

"Is it just a coincidence that those last three are all descendants of birds?" Leon asked with a wry smile.

"In a sense," the Jaguar stated. "Those three Tribes have all formed... not a bloc, but they tend to stick together more than any of the other Tribes. I daresay that you'd find many of your first supporters amongst these three Tribes, as well."

"Then we can focus on these three Tribes first," Leon said. "Or at least the Screaming Eagles and the Heart-Stabbing Hawks since they border the Jaguars."

"We'll need to send out messages to all the Tribes bringing news of your presence on our island," the third elder enthusiastically said. "They must all bow to you as soon as possible, that the Ten Tribes might be united under a good a proper King once more!"

"Let's not be too hasty," the second elder said more cautiously. "We don't yet know how the other Tribes will react to Leon's arrival. Better to continue feeling out the other Tribes' attitudes and plan accordingly."

The fourth elder then methodically explained, "We already know how a few of the Tribes will react: quite poorly. The Bears support the Thunderer—he's one of their own, after all. The Tigers and Ji Spiders have thrown their lot in with the Thunderer as well, with outsized portions of the Thunderer's military forces coming from the Tigers, and most of his Inquisitors coming from the Spiders. I would expect that few among these Tribes will support Leon over the man they've thrown their lot in with already."

"Then it seems it's the Lions, Harts, and Bison that are going to be the wilder cards?" Leon wondered.

The fourth elder responded, "Honestly, the Ravens are distant, and though they've formed close ties with the Hawks and the Eagles, they can't be quite counted on as much as the other two Tribes. The Lions, on the other hand, have always been friendly with us, so I can say with some certainty that the Lions would at least hear us out. So it's the Ravens, the Harts, and the Bison that will be most challenging, I'd say."

The first elder, largely silent so far, hummed in displeasure, quieting the other elders and seizing their attention, to Leon's surprise. With just a bit of noise, the man had seized control of the conversation

entirely, even if he took another couple of seconds to look at the other elders with something akin to disappointment before finally speaking.

"It is imperative that we avoid civil war at all costs. This is not something we can afford when war with the usurpers on the mainland continues."

"I especially don't want to start my reign by killing a bunch of the people I'm ostensibly here to rule," Leon added. "Ideally, we will do this without bloodshed."

"A noble wish," the first elder said. "One I hope we can live up to."

"As it is," the Jaguar softly interjected, "The Lions, Hawks, and the Bison will be of somewhat more limited aid. Their Tribal armies have been mustered and deployed to the Sword. Their territories haven't been left completely undefended, but most of their soldiers are busy with occupation duties across the western seas."

"If three Tribal armies are gone, then what is the military potential remaining on Kataigida?" Leon asked. In response to a quick questioning look from the first elder, he hurriedly added, "Not looking for trouble, this is just something that ought to be clarified in case trouble comes looking for us."

With a reluctant nod, the first elder silently conceded his point.

"The Tigers, Spiders, and Bears all have their forces still on Kataigida," the Jaguar explained. "The Tigers keep an eye on the eastern shores, though given how little action the Strait of Keraunos sees, their armies aren't much needed there."

Leon smiled a bit at the name of the strait. Jason Keraunos was gone, but not forgotten amongst the Thunderbird Clan's former vassals, for better or for worse.

"The Thunderer also has the central army he's built in his time in office," the Jaguar continued. "Even if we were to get the Hawks, Eagles, and Harts on our side, our combined armies would still be smaller than those in the Thunderer's pocket. And the Harts are the smallest of the Ten Tribes anyway. Militarily, though he only has three Tribes guaranteed to back him, the Thunderer still dominates the island's current military potential."

"Even more reason to keep things peaceful," Leon said. "With that in mind, let's start on the Hawks and Eagles first. I made quite the impression upon the Screaming Eagles when I came to this island, so let's focus on them first."

"As you wish, Leon," the elders responded.

With that, the meeting adjourned for the time being. They'd need to have many more, and the other elders would want to make their recommendations as well, for now they at least had their next couple of steps.

Chapter 858 - Settling Insecurity

For a week Leon and his party 'rested' in Raikos. In truth, though, no one got very much rest, for while the Jaguar Tribe was generous with their accommodations, Leon and his people still had to field audience requests from various elders and Clan Chiefs who'd come to pay their respects and swear oaths of loyalty to Leon.

For all this, Leon was rather bemused. While he was grateful for the show of loyalty from the Jaguars, seemingly to a man, pledging themselves to him, he found it almost too easy and spent more than a few hours wondering when the shoe was going to drop.

He vented much of the resulting stress with calls to Elise and Cassandra, made with his comm lotus. Fortunately, nothing of much note had taken place back in Occulara, putting Leon's mind at ease. He also helped his people call their loved ones as well, if they so wished, something which Alcander never hesitated to make use of. In all, Leon was rather content with the progress made.

On the more official side, the Jaguars had sent out missives to the Screaming Eagles and the Heart-Stabbing Hawks requesting their presence in Raikos to meet with Leon. Leon hadn't been too keen on summoning them like that, but he was persuaded that it was Kingly behavior to summon his rightful subordinates. If they refused to show up, or even to respond at all, then he would know where their loyalties lay.

However, Leon feared that being so heavy-handed as soon as he arrived wouldn't win him any friends, and though he eventually bowed to the Jaguar Tribe's elders' knowledge of the Hawks and Eagles, he still quietly assumed that winning them to his side was not going to be so easy. He was ready to head back to Raimondas and the Hawks' capital at the drop of a hat.

At the same time, messages were sent out across Kataigida, though only to Chiefs and elders, informing them all of Leon's arrival. Leon was, again, not optimistic about the expected results, but given it was simply informing everything that he was now here, he required less convincing to assent to.

At the end of the week, as he was finishing up dealing with all of the elders and Chiefs of the constituent Clans that made up the Jaguar Tribe, an invitation was presented to him by the Jaguar himself, bidding him join one of the ninth-tier elders at the summit of a small mountain close to Raikos. The only reason Leon had to hesitate was that the specific mountain was called the Rock of Blood. Still, Leon accepted the invitation, and soon after found himself and his retinue at the top of the mountain in question, having had to walk most of the way through thick forest and up the steep slopes with how many wards had been set around it.

The top of the mountain was fairly flat, occupied by a fairly sizable altar. The Jaguar assured him that, despite how it looked, it wasn't for sacrifice or any real ceremony, but was designed to be a place for the elders to come and silently commune with the Blood Thunder Jaguar.

To put it simply, Leon found the place rather off-putting. The not-altar was dominated by a huge statue of who Leon could only assume was the Blood Thunder Jaguar itself, looking like it was prowling around the edge of the platform and coldly regarding whoever stood upon it. Its eyes were made of glittering rubies and its black claws were wet with red blood-like liquid, forming small pools beneath the statue.

Waiting for them at the top of the mountain was the aged Jaguar elder himself, his pale face lined with wrinkles, sitting in the center of the stone platform. Nikolaos, Leon had been told his name was.

"Leon," he whispered upon their arrival. "My King," he added as he rose, then bowed deeply at the waist, showing a sprightly vigor belied by his aged appearance. "Thank you for accepting my invitation today."

Leon politely nodded, but as he'd asked her to do, Alix quickly interjected and asked, "What'cha doin'? What is this place?"

The elder took her informal demeanor entirely in stride, responding, "The home of our Honored Ancestor. As much as he needs a home, anyway."

"Is that blood down there?" Alix bluntly asked, pointing to the red liquid constantly wetting the statue's claws.

"I... do not believe so," the elder said. "Not real blood, though perhaps its appearance has been invoked as a threat or statement of power? Alas, no records of the statue's creation have been left, leaving us to only guess as to the intent behind my ancestors' creation."

"I think it's blood," Alix said.

Throughout the exchange, Leon kept a close eye on the Jaguar and the elder, though neither seemed at all aggrieved and, his curiosity sated, when Alix turned back to the group, he whispered directly into her mind, [That's enough, thank you.]

She shot him a subtle smile and joined the rest of his retinue.

"Your assumption is understandable," the Jaguar said. "I always believed it to be blood, myself."

"That seems like it would be quite the pain to clean," Marcus observed.

"Just lick it all up," Red growled. "Waste of good blood to let dry on a rock!"

As if she were going to do just that, she took a few steps forward, only to be stopped by Anzu. "Blood is tasty enough, but not when it's been left out in the sun for too long. Or with a human tongue."

Red frowned, then backed away with a quiet shrug.

"I hope no one's going to be taste-testing this 'blood'," Valeria said to the retinue, though keeping her eye on Red.

The wyvern studiously avoided her gaze, but said, "It probably tastes terrible, anyway."

"Apologies for my retinue," Leon said to the Jaguar and Nikolaos. "Obviously, we're not going to do something so uncouth as to lick your Ancestor's statue."

"I would hope not," the elder said, though his words were spoken in relatively good cheer. The Jaguar was a little more subdued but nodded along.

"So," Leon said, "I appreciate your invitation, but I have to admit to having some curiosity about why it was extended, and to come here of all places. Seems an important place for your people, I wouldn't have expected you to allow someone outside of your Tribe to see it."

"You are our King," the elder said, the Jaguar notably taking a step back and deferring to the elder despite being of the same tier as him. "Nothing in our Tribe is off-limits to the blood of the Thunderbird."

Leon's smile grew wider, though it had taken on a more self-deprecating quality.

"I've heard," he slowly began, "that it's best not to look a gift horse in the mouth. But... at this point, my curiosity just won't go away..."

As he spoke, Valeria quietly stepped forward and gently took his arm, drawing his attention. He glanced at her, registering a look of warning in her sapphire gaze. However, Maia then stepped forward, took Leon's other arm, and gave Valeria a look of reproach. Undaunted, Valeria stared back, not backing down from her concerned warning.

"Is... this a sensitive topic?" the elder diplomatically asked.

"No, it's fine," Leon said more to Valeria than to the elder.

Valeria sighed, then shrugged, let go of Leon's arm, and stepped back, followed by Maia a moment later.

"So, as I was saying," Leon said after giving his ladies another conciliatory smile, "I have to ask, even if it's rude of me to draw attention to it, why you're supporting me so readily? Is it just your traditions, or is there something more? If it's something more, then that's fine, I just want to know."

Nikolaos chuckled. "It pains me to imagine what kind of life you've lived to be unable to imagine anyone aiding you without ulterior motives... though I suppose it's warranted after the disrespect shown to you by my fellow elder..."

Leon smiled at the thought of Theophilos. The man had met his expectations, at least. Putting that aside for the moment, he explained, "I am the last of the Thunderbird Clan. My blood is valuable. I have never been in such a blessed position to forget that fact, and most of my current alliances are based entirely on what I'm able to provide in return for safety, security, and autonomy. I've had to sell much that many would consider mine to secure myself and my family against those who wouldn't hesitate to exploit what my blood could give them."

"A truly terrible state of affairs," Nikolaos whispered. "Allow me to put your fears to rest once and for all. We in the Jaguar Tribe have always prided ourselves on our honor and loyalty. The jaguar is a solitary beast, and we take after it to some degree, but we hold nothing higher than loyalty to our kin and kith. Related to that is our love of our traditions, for it is in our traditions that we show our love and devotion to our own. Our traditions were established to ensure peace and harmony within our Tribe—the Chiefs to rule each Clan, and the elders to seek wisdom and guide them. To respect our Ancestors and honor them as we do our living heroes."

"It is these things that the Thunderer demands we leave behind," the Jaguar growled. "To set aside our tribal councils, our Chiefs, our ways of life. He demands that we forget our Ancestors and tell ourselves that we are all one people."

"But we are not," the aged elder continued. "Our blood is different, our power is different. We live differently, we die differently. We are a confederation of Tribes, we do not bow to those who demand that we forsake all that we hold dear in the name of 'unity'."

"Are not some of these reforms beneficial?" Leon asked. "Wouldn't the Ten Tribes greatly benefit from a single unified tax structure, a single military, a single centralized ruling body?"

"Perhaps," the Jaguar conceded through clenched teeth. "What would we give up if we were to accept this, though? How much is definition-less 'prosperity' worth next to our very identities? I am of the Old Jaguar, and that will never be forgotten."

"From where I stand," Leon said, "some of these reforms sound useful enough that would e tempted to insist upon them were I to become your King in truth."

"You are already our King in truth," Nikolaos replied. "Were it your decree, I would hope only that it not be done with the intent of destroying who we are as a people. Though some of us would decry the whole thing as an illegal and immoral power grab..." the elder gave the Jaguar a cheeky glare, "... there are ways I can see a centralized military work. The Thunderer is giving no thought to making it work. He demands that our units integrate, that we forsake all that makes us unique in exchange for homogenous units. He's gone on record saying that he believes that which gives us our strength, our Tribes, are obsolete."

"If he finds our ways too appalling, he ought to give up the power that he inherited from his Ancestor," the Jaguar spat. "Drain himself of all the blood he so despises. He mauls all who came before and demands we change to fit his vision of who we should be. I will not dance to his tune just because he demands it."

"Is there no way, then, to force a Thunderer to step down?" Leon asked. "How have those who occupied the office in the past given up power?"

"Death," Nikolaos said. "Thunderers are rarely declared when not at war, and more often than not, those appointed by the Elder Council in Stormhollow will die in the prosecution of a war they were called to fight—almost always against the usurpers across the sea. On those rare occasions where they don't die in battle, they'll usually give up power upon the conclusion of the war. On those even rarer occasions when they weren't called up to fight, they will leave after a matter of a few years."

"And the current Thunderer has been in office for decades," the Jaguar added.

"That long?" Marcus whispered from behind Leon. "What was he even called up to do?!"

"To strengthen us," the Jaguar explained. "I was there when he was acclaimed. He only needed a simple majority, and barely managed to get the votes promising to reform our 'stagnant' ways and 'rebuild' us anew."

"I assume the Tigers, Bears, and Spiders all voted in favor?" Leon asked, to which the Jaguar nodded.

"Many Hart and Lion elders, as well. A smattering of Eagles and Ravens, but none of the Hawks or Jaguars."

"That bodes well for matters with the Hawks," Alcander observed.

"Not necessarily," Gaius countered. "If they didn't vote for the Thunderer, then that could just mean that they don't want anyone telling them what to do, not even a King."

"Maybe even especially not a King," Marcus added.

Leon gave Nikolaos and the Jaguar an expectant look, hoping for some additional context.

His look was answered when Nikolaos said, "They will hear you out, at least."

Leon frowned slightly, but he supposed that was enough for now.

"Will you still support me, then, if I don't repeal all of the Thunderer's reforms?" he asked.

"That would depend," Nikolaos said after sharing a look with the Jaguar. "We support you because you are our rightful King. Your power once ruled over all of us, and more. It is a proven power, one that we can all follow. If the Ten Tribes are to be united, then it will be within your shadow, not that of the Thunderer."

"There may be those who don't want to stick to my shadow," Leon said, leaving his question unspoken, though giving the Jaguar and the elder meaningful looks.

"They may not have a choice in that regard," the Jaguar responded.

"No," Nikolaos rebuked, and the Jaguar jumped slightly. "We ought not to prepare to kill our partners."

"Indeed," Leon agreed. "A Kingdom that destroys itself through civil war isn't one I want to lead."

"That attitude, at least, we can support unconditionally," the elder said with a smile.

Silence settled about them for a moment before Leon finally said, "I suppose that sates my curiosity enough. I will try and accept your people's support without waiting for demands or betrayals."

"We hope to prove ourselves worthy of that trust," Nikolaos responded.

"I hope so, too. Now, you didn't invite me all the way here to discuss my own insecurities, though I can talk about those for a long time. What did you need of me?"

The elder sighed and said, "For the same reason there are no others here with us. I would, if my King is willing, partake in the offered transformation enchantment."

Leon blinked in surprise. "I thought you were too attached to your human forms for that."

"The prospect still terrifies me," Nikolaos admitted. "What if I get stuck in some other form? What if it maims me in some way? What if I lose my sense of identity and my will becomes not my own? Would I die, and my body continues without me? The thought... these thoughts have occupied me for days. And yet, I can't seem to shake myself of the temptation. None of my fellow elders would join me in this, and neither would I want them to. Test the enchantment upon me, and use the results to either convince my people to use it for themselves, or use it to convince yourself not to offer it again."

"Just curiosity?" Leon asked. "Is there no other reason?"

"I am old," Nikolaos answered. "More than a thousand years I've walked this plane. I will die in the next couple of decades, should I not manage to reach the tenth-tier. Even if I do, it will only delay my death by a century at most. Better to let me die in service of my people rather than at home like an invalid."

Leon took a long moment to think over the possibility, and was quite surprised when Xaphan spoke up from within.

[Are you hesitating, boy? He's asked for it, let the old bastard have it. Could be fun seeing how much he fucks it up. Maybe he'll explode or turn inside out?]

[Are you actually trying to convince me to give him the enchantment or not? These are reasons not to do so.]

[Ah, yes, you're a human boy who dislikes things like 'blood' and 'death' and 'irreparable maiming'. You're to be a proper King, and proper Kings don't hesitate like this. You have the opportunity to strengthen a strong potential devotee, don't waste it.]

[That's the most sense you've made yet,] Leon responded.

Aloud, he said, "Very well. I'll give you the enchantment and explain how it's to be built. This will take a while, it's a complex thing not confined to only two dimensions..."

"I think you'll find me a good student," Nikolaos responded.

Leon then began to explain to Nikolaos how and where the enchantment was to be established: in his soul realm and using a massive cylindrical pit. He gave the elder proper measured dimensions for how much space he'd need, and only once all of that was done did he start bringing out the diagrams. Given the sheer size of the enchantment, however, he didn't expect the elder to actually try it for a long time.

Before they'd even really started getting the first diagrams into place, one of Nikolaos' servants came running up to the top of the mountain. He was a youngish fourth-tier who looked completely wiped by the ascent, and he gasped, "Your Majesty! My elders! The Thunderer is on his way! He'll be here in a matter of hours!"

Chapter 859 - Meeting the Thunderer

The Thunderer was an imposing man. Tall and built like the bear that his Tribe had been named for, with short red hair and devilishly handsome looks. He wore an easy smile, his dark eyes narrowed in what seemed like amusement. Leon took note of his aura: on par with that of the Lord Protector and the Grand Druid.

The rest of the Jaguar gathering hall was decidedly less amused. Standing at the Thunderer's side was a stern ninth-tier woman with a serious expression that could've been carved from stone. Half a dozen others, all of the eighth-tier, accompanied the two. Leon also took note that none of them were obviously armed or armored, and all were dressed in similar black and gold uniforms devoid of any ostentatious embellishments.

Filling the Jaguar gathering hall were all of their elders and Clan Chiefs, save for the Jaguar himself and the ninth-tier Nikolaos, who'd entered the gathering hall with Leon. More than three hundred mages of the seventh-tier or stronger now filled the hall, and the tension in the air was thick enough to cut with a knife.

As Leon entered, the Jaguar and Nikolaos at his side and his retainers back out in the forecourt, the entire hall looked in his direction, and though Leon's attention was largely taken up by the Thunderer and his followers, he spared a few glances for the rest of the Jaguars.

In the latter, he found nothing but support, grins, and nods of solidarity, even from Theophilos, despite the elder's mild confrontation days ago.

But in the Thunderer's people, he found no such warmth. The six behind the Thunderer himself and the ninth-tier woman fixed him in their gazes and stared him down with the intensity of predators stalking their prey. The ninth-tier woman regarded him coolly, but Leon couldn't sense any killing intent from her.

The Thunderer, on the other hand, smiled even wider as Leon entered the hall, though he did with the demeanor of a man seeing an old friend he hadn't seen in a while walking into the room.

"And here he is!" the Thunderer boomed, the quiet murmuring in the hall immediately silenced. "The man all of Kataigida's been talking about! The supposed last descendent of the Most Venerable Thunderbird itself, our most venerated sovereign!"

Leon grinned with more confidence than he felt as he advanced unflinchingly toward the dais, buoyed by the looks of support given to him from the Jaguars, as well as Nikolaos and the Jaguar of the West beside him providing no small amount of support as well.

"And you are the Thunderer," Leon loudly responded. "I've heard much about you in the short time I've spent on this fair island."

"All good things, I hope?" the Thunderer lightly asked.

"Certainly some things," Leon replied as he stepped up onto the dais and stood opposite the Thunderer and his entourage. He noted a little unhappily that the Thunderer was quite a bit taller than he was, standing almost a full foot above him.

"Then let's take this as an opportunity to clear up any—" the Thunderer began before he was interrupted by the Jaguar.

"You have come here unannounced, Lord Thunder!" the Jaguar shouted, dozens of elders and Chiefs of the Jaguars adding their voices to his. "What business have you in Jaguar lands?"

"Coming here is a violation of our rights!" Nikolaos angrily added. "No one of elder rank or above may enter our lands without proper notice and approval!"

"Please forgive me," the Thunderer said with what looked to Leon rather like condescension.

"Considering the matters we have to discuss today, I'd not wanted to wait too long for permission. I instead ask for your forgiveness and hope that we can move past this minor legal technicality."

"This is no mere technicality!" Nikolaos declared, his voice reinforced by the shouts and foot-stomping of those on the benches. "Remove yourselves from Raikos and our lands immediately!"

"I have come all this way," the Thunderer began, but he was cut off by an insistent shout from the Jaguar.

"You will leave or you will be escorted—"

“Please,” Leon interjected, and the Jaguar immediately halted mid-threat. “He’s come a long way, and we ought to respect guests, should we not? What’s the harm in hearing what he has to say, then providing him proper escort back to Stormhollow?”

The Jaguar looked like there was nothing he wanted to do more than to drag the Thunderer out of Jaguar Tribe land with meat hooks, but he acquiesced. Nikolaos, too, bowed to Leon after a moment, and with the two of them went the rest of the hall, all of the Chiefs and elders going quiet in compliance with Leon’s request.

“You have my gratitude, Leon Raime,” the Thunderer said as the hall went silent. “I have always hoped we could work out our differences like men, not like beasts, but that is hard when there is no dialogue between disagreeing parties.”

“That lack of dialogue is hardly aided by violation of territorial rights,” Leon pointed out.

“Violation of territorial rights is made necessary when all requests for meetings go unanswered,” the Thunderer riposted.

Leon cocked an eyebrow, then snuck a sly glance at Nikolaos, who scowled.

“Well,” he said, “you’re here now. Should I assume that you’re here because of me? Or would that make me arrogant?”

“It might,” the Thunderer said, though he grinned at Leon and added a moment later, “But you’d be right in your assumption, too. I have come to address the matter of your arrival, and your intentions regarding the Ten Tribes. The balance of power within our island has always been precarious, and I will not allow any disruptions to disturb the peace.”

“The only disruption to the peace is you!” one of the stronger eighth-tier elders belted out, and a number of other elders stomped their feet in agreement.

Leon held up his hand to quiet them down, his confidence growing as the elders complied.

“What do you fear from me?” Leon asked.

“Is there anything about you that I need to fear?” the Thunderer shot back.

“You tell me, you’re the one who showed up claiming I’m a problem.”

“Very well, then I’ll just say it. We don’t need a King.”

The Thunderer’s statement was met with a chorus of angry Jaguars, and it took a long moment to get them settled down again.

Once he was able to speak again, the Thunderer continued, though now he was addressing the crowd rather than only Leon, “We have lived for many years without the ‘guidance’ of the Thunderbird. But we have been divided for too long! Our inter-Tribal disagreements have left us weak and open to attack from the barbarians across the sea! I mean to unite us! If we are united, then this plane is ours! If we are united, then we will no longer be under any threat from the outside world! We must unite!”

“And, of course, you would have us unite behind you?!” another elder roared. “Who are you to say what we must do?”

“I am the lawfully-appointed Thunderer!”

“We did not appoint you!” shouted one of the ninth-tier elders.

As much as he was amused by these exchanges—which was to say, only a little bit—Leon held up his hand again, asking for silence. Again, the elders seemed to comply, at least until Nikolaos began to speak before Leon could.

“You see there, Iron-Striker,” Nikolaos said to the Thunderer, causing a dark look to pass over the Thunderer’s face, “that is who will unite us. Our new King! A man who bears the power of our Kings of old! The same bloodline that led us to greatness for generations beyond counting!”

“And the same bloodline that was nearly extinguished upon this plane, stranding us all amongst ungrateful barbarians,” the female ninth-tier mage said. Her voice was little more than a whisper, but with her power, it carried effortlessly to the ears of everyone in the room.

She looked like she was going to continue, but the Thunderer waved her quiet, the easy smile still playing at his lips.

“Let us not become mired in heated words,” he said. “It seems like what we want is the same thing. To unite our Tribes.”

“The oppo—” Nikolaos began until Leon stepped forward and reasserted himself.

“What are you getting at?” he asked.

The Thunderer turned back to him and said, “I desire many things. I desire peace and prosperity for my people. I want the Ten Tribes to cease their pointless squabbling and become who they were meant to be. One people, under one administration, and with unified purpose.”

“Are they unified under you?” Leon pointedly asked.

“Would they be that under you instead?” the Thunderer retorted, though without heat. “It seems,” he continued, addressing Nikolaos and the rest of the hall again, “that our desires are aligned. It’s only in the details that are snagging our feet. I believe that I’m the right man for the job, to bring us all together and forge us anew, into a people stronger and more unified than we’ve ever been!” He paused and glanced at Leon before adding, “And I do not believe that handing ourselves off to the first man who comes along with the Thunderbird’s lightning will do anything to achieve that!”

Leon chuckled before any of the Jaguar’s elders could speak, drawing the attention of all in the hall.

“Indeed, we want similar things,” Leon said. “I respect you for that vision—if that is what you intend. But I’ve heard much of you even in my short time spent here. And while what you profess is altruistic and admirable, whether or not that’s what you actually want, whether or not you have ulterior motives, remains to be seen.”

The Jaguar added, “You are not the most trustworthy man. No man has himself declared Thunderer without self-serving reasons.”

The ninth-tier woman spat, "You speak of trustworthiness? I've heard enough of you from Hector to know that the well-being of the Ten Tribes is not what you want, either!"

The Jaguar glared at the woman, practically grinding his teeth. Leon could sense his aura fluctuating with barely-contained fury, the man's potent killing intent rippling just under the surface.

The ninth-tier woman and the other six members of the Thunderer's entourage seemed just as willing to throw down as the Jaguar was, and Leon began to feel the tone of the room shift as other Jaguar elders and Chiefs began preparing themselves for a fight.

So, Leon loudly said, "No one's fighting here today!"

"Agreed!" the Thunderer cried. "Violence will solve nothing!"

Leon didn't quite agree, but he didn't think they were at the stage where violence was necessary.

Turning back to the Thunderer, he said, "You have not unified the Ten Tribes. Many don't follow you."

"We just need time," the Thunderer said neutrally. "When people see that my way is right, they will come around. No matter how stubborn, results speak for themselves. And we've already been getting them. Argos sacked, the Shield broken, and the Sword seized. You are unproven."

"Victories won by the Tribes are not yours," the Jaguar growled, but Leon silenced him with a glare.

"Let us be honest, then," Leon continued. "If you remain as the Thunderer, then the Ten Tribes will resort to civil war."

"Know so much about us, do you?" the Thunderer asked patronizingly. "Not even two weeks you've spent on Kataigida and you already know what will and will not happen?"

"I'll admit that I don't know as much as I would like about the Ten Tribes, but I already believe that they will not unite behind you."

"And you think they will unite behind you, instead?" the Thunderer asked. "You have the loyalty of one Tribe already regarded as recalcitrant and uncooperative. You need more than one Tribe to rule over Kataigida."

As if on cue, the gathering hall doors burst open, revealing a relatively young sixth-tier mage.

"Visitors have been spotted nearing Raikos!" he shouted for the whole hall to hear. "They bear the colors of the Screaming Eagles!"

That news set off a storm of muted whispers amongst the Jaguars, and many eyes turned back toward the Jaguar in glee.

The Thunderer, apparently sensing that he'd overstayed his welcome, simply smiled and said, "So be it. Leon, I do not wish to bring death to my people. I want them to enjoy all that life has to offer. If we are at an impasse, then let us at least do what we can to resolve our differences without spilling blood."

'Is that a trick?' Leon found himself wondering. 'So he can rally his forces while we dither about, thinking we're at peace? His new army is here on Kataigida while a few Tribal armies are busy occupying the Sword...'

Of course, he knew he couldn't say something like that aloud. He'd have little to gain from doing so, so he nodded and said, "I agree that peace should reign on Kataigida. And I will work to ensure that it does."

The Jaguars cried out and stomped their support for him, though Leon barely heard it, reserving his attention for the Thunderer, who smiled and politely bowed slightly. "So long as we remain of a piece on that matter, then I can at least relax," he said.

"Then relax you can," Leon said.

The Thunderer smiled again. "That's good to hear. I was, I'll admit, a little worried that you were a warmonger."

"Was that so worrying?" Leon asked. "You started a war, didn't you? You could've stayed on Kataigida defending the Ten Tribe's own land, yet you took the fight to the Imperials."

"A needed strike to move the battlelines from our shores to those of our enemy. Just because we were staying on our island didn't mean the barbarians were leaving us be."

For the first time, the words of the Thunderer drew some agreeing stomps from the Jaguar elders, so Leon let the matter drop.

"Now, then," the Thunderer said, "I have spoken my piece, so I will leave you with one final warning, Leon Raime. You and your bloodline are not the way forward for our people. Leave us to our own devices."

The Jaguar elders made a racket in protest, but the Thunderer didn't seem to care as he stepped off the dais and began walking toward the door, his seven followers at his back. He paused for just a moment at the door, glancing over his shoulder at Leon, and gave him one last smile, though Leon was unsure how to interpret it. And then he was gone, taking flight with his own power rather than relying on any magical devices, as any tenth-tier mage ought to as far as Leon was concerned.

"Pompous, arrogant tyrant," the Jaguar muttered, his words echoed in some form or fashion throughout the hall.

"We ought to have taken his head!" one Chief shouted.

"He's tenth-tier!" another countered.

"We could've taken him," the first retorted. "We have enough ninth-tier mages, and we have our King! We could not have lost!"

"No!" Leon thundered, silencing the hall. "I will not instigate civil war! I have said this before and I'll say it as many times as needed: I will not be the cause for the Ten Tribes to fight amongst themselves! And I would much rather defeat the Thunderer in a test of words than a test of arms! I will not back down from any challenge, but I will not define any reign of mine with violence!"

"Unfortunately," the Jaguar coldly stated, "war needs at least two players, and they don't have to agree on the rules."

Leon scowled. "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

"Your Majesty," one of the ninth-tier Jaguars said, "it would be prudent to prepare for war, even if it isn't needed."

"We would not want to be caught with claws retracted," another added.

Leon's scowl deepened slightly, and he looked to the Jaguar and Nikolaos.

"Many of our more capable warriors are in our fleets," the Jaguar stated. "At the very least, we can recall some of them. Not enough to be an instigation, but enough to improve our position on the island, at least."

"A prudent decision," Nikolaos agreed.

Leon grunted and waved in acquiescence. "Now, the Screaming Eagles are almost here..."

"... we're really just leaving like that?" Linda asked as they took leave of Raikos. "The Screaming Eagles are only a hundred miles away, we can head them off and make them see reason!"

"They will see reason one way or another," the Thunderer said. "And to intercept them could be interpreted as hostile, or at least insulting. I will visit them in a few days, but for now, let us return to Stormhollow."

"The Tribes are not going to remain docile," Linda growled, her Lion heritage coming through in her demeanor. "There will be war if he does not leave, or if we do not get rid of him before any more damage can be done."

The Thunderer didn't respond, his face remaining impassive.

"Hector isn't going to like this, either," Linda pointed out.

"Hector will do as instructed," the Thunderer said. "He's loyal and believes in the cause."

"Will he forsake the Thunderbird's own, though?" Linda asked.

"Hector's with us," the Thunderer insisted. "He would never side with the Jaguar of the West."

Linda hummed, the sound barely audible even to the tenth-tier Thunderer over the sound of rushing wind as they rocketed above plains, farms, and small Jaguar villages. "Do you really not want to do anything?" she asked again.

"I'm not going to war," the Thunderer said. "But that doesn't mean we're doing nothing. Call upon some of our allied elders on the Elder Council. There are things we can do to limit the spread of this... monarchism."

The rest of the flight proceeded quietly, the Thunderer and Linda retreating into their thoughts. Whatever would come, they'd have to be prepared, and plans were already forming in their minds...

Chapter 860 - The Eagle's Choice

"Now, the Screaming Eagles are almost here," Leon said as he wiped the scowl off his face, the meeting with the Thunderer having just concluded, "but before we get to them, I have some questions."

"I believe we have a few minutes," Nikolaos said as the hall quietly murmured amongst itself, the elders and Chiefs discussing the Thunderer's visit. "The Eagles won't be here for a short while, and we can keep them waiting for a little while without insulting them."

"Hopefully this won't take insultingly long," Leon replied. He turned to the Jaguar and asked, "What was that ninth-tier woman talking about when she said she'd heard things about you from 'Hector'?"

The Jaguar frowned and took a moment to respond. Hesitatingly, he asked, "Do you... remember who Hector is? I... spoke of him briefly once."

Leon recalled all that he'd heard of Kataigida from the Jaguar. They'd met multiple times while the man was in Occulara, and they'd spoken at length of the political and social situation of the Ten Tribes. Leon did vaguely recall the name 'Hector' coming up a few times.

"He is... a member of the Tiger Tribe, isn't that right? Currently working under the Thunderer in some capacity?"

"Yes," the Jaguar confirmed.

"The Tigers," Nikolaos began as the Jaguar went momentarily quiet, apparently lost in thought, "are ruled differently than we are. Their Tribe is more rigidly segmented—they still have a Tribal council, but they serve mostly as a council of advisors. The true power of the Tribe rests in the hands of the Chief of the Raging Tiger Clan, acting as Hegemon of the Tribe."

"The current Hegemon of the Tigers and Chief of the Raging Tigers is Hector's twin brother, Solomon," the Jaguar interjected. With a sigh, he added, "At one time, he was my brother-in-law."

Leon, intrigued, raised an eyebrow.

"My sister," the Jaguar continued, "fell in love with him, and our father arranged a marriage. The marriage, as far as I've ever been aware, was happy, but childless. Solomon took other wives and had children with them, but his bloodline is awakened, as was my sister's, rendering children between them effectively impossible."

"What happened to your sister?" Leon asked, picking up on the Jaguar's use of past tense.

The Jaguar went quiet again, and when he spoke again, his eyes were unfocused and distant. "She is with our Ancestors, now. Age got to her before she could advance beyond the sixth-tier."

"My condolences," Leon softly stated.

"Thank you."

Leon let that sit for a moment before asking, "How does all of that relate to Hector? I'd have thought that with the two of you becoming family, your relationship wouldn't have been the sort that would've had that woman thinking negatively of you."

"Hector... was my best friend," the Jaguar stated so quietly that even Leon had to strain his ears to hear his voice over the low din of the hall. "To put it simply, both he and Solomon were in contention to succeed their father. It came down to a duel where both Hector and Solomon could call upon their allies."

“Hector called upon you?” Leon softly inquired.

The Jaguar nodded.

“You didn’t fight with him?”

Again, and with his face becoming momentarily lined with sadness and regret, the Jaguar nodded. “I couldn’t,” he stated, shame coloring his voice. “He was like a brother to me, but my sister had married Solomon. To fight against Solomon would be to fight against my kin.”

The Jaguar went quiet again, his golden cheeks now red from shame, and what Leon felt was quite possibly anger, embarrassment, sadness, and a host of related emotions at having to not only relive these events, but in such a public place—even if, by his estimation, the other elders and Chiefs were not paying much attention, either absorbed in their conversations or politely making small talk with those sitting next to them instead of concentrating on Leon, the Jaguar or Nikolaos.

When the Jaguar spoke again, he simply said, “I chose my family that day, and I lost my best friend. Hector lost his bid to become the Tiger’s Hegemon and has never forgiven me.”

Leon took a moment to absorb all of that information and then said, “I apologize for bringing all of this up here. Thank you for telling me this anyway.”

“As my King commands,” the Jaguar said, and he went quiet again, but this time, Leon didn’t pull him back from whatever memory he seemed to get lost in.

So, turning to Nikolaos, he said, “I’m changing the subject if you’ll forgive my abruptness.”

“By your will, Your Majesty,” Nikolaos said with a mirthful smile.

“You called the Thunderer something while he was here,” Leon said. “‘Iron-Striker’. What did you mean by that?”

“I sit upon the Elder Council in Stormhollow,” Nikolaos said. “The Thunderer did too, before he was named Thunderer. We know each other from that time, though not particularly well. ‘Iron-Striker’ was the name I knew him by. The Booming Brown Bears have strange naming conventions, having separate names for their kin, kith, and everyone else. ‘Iron-Striker’ is the Thunderer’s public name. Or was his name, until he became the Thunderer.”

“He didn’t seem too thrilled that you used it.”

“He likely took it as an insult, which is good for that is how it was intended. The Bears place great importance on names. The Thunderer would prefer to be known as ‘the Thunderer’, despite having been known as ‘Iron-Striker’ for centuries. To the Bears, this change in how others refer to someone is just a matter of course, and they typically take great offense if others don’t respect such matters.”

“I see,” Leon replied. He closed his eyes and took a moment to think. When he opened them again, he stared at Nikolaos and said, “There’s no need for such disrespect. If he wishes to be known as ‘the Thunderer’, then so be it. It is his current rank, after all, unless there’s some legal contention that it isn’t?”

Nikolaos' easy smile faltered a little bit and he admitted, "No, his rank is legitimate, no one is arguing that point. We'd just rather he didn't hold it."

"We needn't tarnish our cause with disrespect," Leon said. "Refer to him, at least in public, as 'the Thunderer'. I'll not have us losing allies over such insults, minor as they may be to us."

Nikolaos smiled bitterly and bowed to Leon, silently accepting his order.

After that, they stood upon the dais for a few more silent minutes, Leon only speaking to postpone the council's attempts to discuss the Thunderer's words until after the Screaming Eagles had been received. The Eagle's delegation had arrived over Raikos, after all, and he didn't want to get too into the weeds with that discussion and delay their reception, potentially insulting them enough to cost him their support, especially since their Lawspeaker, Exallos Aetos, had come personally, encumbered with more than two dozen other eighth-tier elders and a couple hundred others of varying power in their delegation.

"That's a large flock," Leon observed.

"A good sign," Nikolaos said as they were shown into the Jaguars' gathering hall. "If they were here to refuse to pay you obeisance, they would've sent a considerably smaller delegation."

Leon smiled and hummed noncommittally.

As Aetos led his Eagles in, the waiting Jaguar Chiefs and elders murmured and stomped in welcome, a couple elders even calling out some of the Eagle elders by name. It wasn't hard for Leon to see that both Tribes were close given the attitudes expressed on both sides.

"Welcome, Exallos!" Nikolaos shouted as he stepped off the dais and went to welcome his counterpart. "It's been too long since you came out this way! Why is it that we've had to wait for such a momentous occasion as this for you to return to Raikos?"

"Probably because your people so rarely stay long in Raikos," Exallos Aetos drily replied. "Venturing a couple thousand miles outside of my Tribe's domain is not done lightly, you know, so visiting much further east than this is out of the question without adequate planning. You could more easily come to Raimondas, but for the sake of your ego, I'll refrain from asking why you have never visited."

Nikolaos laughed in good cheer as he escorted Aetos to the dais. While he then stepped back onto the dais, Aetos respectfully remained standing just past the lip, the rest of the Eagle elders at his back.

"It is good to see you again, Leon Raime, Heir of the Thunderbird," Aetos formally stated. "I was worried when I saw the Thunderer himself leaving Raikos not long ago and hurried these last few steps to the city."

"Fortunately, he was only here to exchange words," Leon explained. "He declared that he would not support my rule over the Ten Tribes."

"Hmm. Expected," Aetos intoned. "Though, it does raise a question: if you don't have the support you want, what are you going to do?"

There were a few discontent murmurs from among the Jaguars, but Leon smiled and answered the question, knowing that it was more than fair.

"I will accept the fealty of all amongst your people who choose to give it. I have little interest in compelling fealty through violence, though I hope you understand that weak vassals and bannermen are not in my interest, so I'll be sharing certain powers with those who do swear to me." He paused and his smile thinned. "And only to those who swear to me."

Aetos nodded. "So those Tribes who do not choose to follow you will not be attacked?"

"I do not seek war," Leon clarified. "I seek only the restoration of that which once belonged to my Clan. I understand that war may be inevitable to achieve that goal, but I will not seek it out. If I enter into hostilities with any of the Ten Tribes, it will only be because they attacked me first. If any Tribe rejects me, then I will proceed without them."

"And they would have no choice but to continue without the support of any Tribes that declare for you?" Aetos inquired.

"My Clan was not simply the rulers of this plane, and I would have all that we once were restored. That means my goals lie elsewhere in the universe. Within the Nexus and other planar clusters. I will not stay on this plane, spilling blood and exchanging sharp words over petty Empires. Those Tribes that swear to me will, of course, come with me in that endeavor, and have all that they may have lost in the universe restored. With interest."

Aetos took a deep breath, a deep smile spreading across his face. "Then let it be known," he loudly began, "that the Screaming Eagle shall fulfill its age-old obligation to the Thunderbird!"

He dropped to a knee, along with all those elders at his back.

"Let our talons be your swords!" he shouted, his words echoed by the others he'd brought with him. "Our feathers, your armor! By the winged grace, we swear to fight your enemies and guard your house! Our King! Leon Raime! The Thunderbird Reborn! The Thunderbird Reborn! The Thunderbird Reborn!"

His voice grew progressively louder, as did those of the rest of his delegation. By the third 'The Thunderbird Reborn', the Jaguars had picked up the call, repeating it again and again. The Jaguars took to their feet and began stamping their feet and roaring into the air, the combined weight of their voices and wildly spiking auras causing even the heavily fortified gathering hall to violently shake.

But that was nothing compared to how Leon felt. He felt every intonation, every chant deep in his bones. He could feel the Thunderbird herself taking notice deep in his soul realm, and her pride would've filled him to the brim if his pride hadn't already done so.

Leon had rarely ever coveted a throne for its own sake, but in that moment, he truly felt like he understood why kingship was so coveted. It was intoxicating, having so many powerful men and women declaring for him so enthusiastically. Two terrifically powerful Tribes, their elders and Chiefs representing many millions of people, showing him such loyal support, was more than he'd ever thought himself worthy of.

He took a deep breath, then held up his arms, doing his best to accept their acclamation as he thought a King ought to. The chanting of 'The Thunderbird Reborn' continued for at least twenty repetitions until Leon altered his stance a bit, silently calling for silence. It took a few more repetitions, but eventually, the hall quieted down.

“The support and faith that you have all shown in me and my Clan,” he began, wishing he’d planned some kind of acceptance speech, “humbles me beyond my ability to articulate. But know that the Thunderbird considers the Jaguar and the Eagle her dearest friends! Your faith in me will not go unrewarded or unreciprocated! Together, we will reclaim what we have lost, and usher in a new age not just for our Clans and Tribes, but for the entire universe, which will shake with our coming!”

He'd spoken entirely off the cuff, but it seemed that was enough as Jaguar and Eagle alike roared their approval, and as he basked in their show of support, Leon looked around and saw not a single unhappy face. While he'd long professed that he intended to rebuild the Thunderbird Clan, this was the first time he ever truly felt like it was not only possible but that he'd already taken the first real steps on the road to the restoration of his Clan.

‘... and revenge for them, too,’ Leon thought with some satisfaction. While he'd set aside his grudge against Justin Isynos, Justin's boss, ‘Lord Kamran’, was still out there, and Leon would afford him no similar courtesy.

But as good as he felt, there was still a small part of him that was waiting for the other shoe to drop, for the reminder that this was not going to continue to be so easy.

As it turned out, he didn't even have to wait a single day.

With the Eagles having declared their support for him, Leon quickly wrapped up the meeting, allowing the Jaguars to see to arranging suitable accommodations for their guests. Leon then went to his own guest villa with his retainers, intending to celebrate.

It turned out that his idea that the entire city heard the hall's thunderous acclamation was spot on as not only were his retainers practically buzzing when he left the hall, the whole city was practically driven into an uproar, and as he was escorted back to his guest villa by the Jaguar and several dozen ‘honor guards’ from the Jaguars, the citizens of Raimondas cheered whenever he passed them on the street.

He found himself waving and smiling more in that twenty-minute trip than he felt like he had in the past year.

Upon reaching his guest house, he immediately dismissed the rest of his retainers to plan out their own celebrations while he took Valeria and Maia into their private quarters to spend the next hour more intimately—though, separately, at least for the particularly intimate moments. Once that private celebration was out of the way, he found himself, with both his ladies and Anzu, making a call with the comm lotus back home to Occulara, and sharing the news with Cassandra and Elise.

“... wish I could've been there,” Elise sighed. “It sounds like it would've been a magical experience...”

“It was,” Valeria confirmed with a bright smile. “The whole city was chanting it by the end.”

“It was exciting,” Maia added, emphasizing her understated point with a satisfied smile of her own.

“We'll have to have a proper coronation, then,” Cassandra declared. “Impromptu ceremonies like these are nice and all, but it pales in comparison to an actual coronation. We'll need to have all of the Sky Devil leadership there, and then—”

"I think planning that might be a bit premature," Leon interjected, causing Cassandra to pout a bit.

Before she could say anything more, a knock came at the door, and Anzu jumped up to go answer it. He poked his head out of the door, exchanged a few words with whoever was there, then leaned back into the room.

"Brother," he said, "the Hawks have sent a delegation, too."

"Delegation, Anzu," Elise corrected through the lotus.

"Dele-gation," Anzu repeated slowly.

"We won't keep you then, husband," Elise said.

"Yes," Cassandra added. "Go and accept even more vassals. Grow your Empire. I will accept nothing less than complete victory from my husband!"

She smirked provocatively and Leon told himself to remember that when he returned to Occulara.

With just a few more words of goodbye, Leon wrapped up his call and set out for the gathering hall once again, a scant few hours since he'd left it last. Being caught up in the celebratory mood of the city, which was still practically vibrating with the energy of the Eagle's and Jaguar's joint acclamation, Leon soon found himself flying over the city in Thunderbird form, his retainers trailing him not too far behind, and circled the gathering hall's forecourt several times before landing and returning to human form.

"Leon!" Nikolaos called out, drawing Leon's attention. In contrast to the jubilant mood of the rest of the city, Nikolaos and the rest of the dozen or so Jaguar elders who were waiting for Leon's arrival in front of the gathering hall looked significantly more concerned, which in turn dampened Leon's mood.

"I heard the Hawks arrived," Leon said as he walked over, his concern growing with every step he took.

"They have," Nikolaos confirmed. "Their delegation numbers only five."

Leon cocked an eyebrow and said with some disbelief, "Five?"

Nikolaos nodded in confirmation.

Leon took a deep, steadying breath and braced himself for a political sucker punch. "Well. Best not to make assumptions, I suppose. Let's go see what they have to say..."