

Storm King 621

Chapter 621: Visitors

"Hmm, like this?" Valeria asked as she slowly drew runic circle after runic circle on a sheet of cheap spell paper.

"Yes, perfect," Leon intimately whispered into her ear, feeling almost jealous at how quickly she was picking this up. She claimed that she wasn't that great at coming up with enchantments on her own, but her penmanship and the speed with which she could copy an enchantment even after only seeing it once was incredible.

There wasn't much time left until they left for the Central Empires, and they had much to do to prepare to leave, but there was always time for a little bit of enchanting work. Leon and Valeria had been working together in his workshop for months, and while their work occasionally descended into blatant flirting, it was runes that occupied the lion's share of their attention.

During their shared time together, Leon got the impression that she wasn't nearly as interested in the art of enchantment as he was, having only a passing interest at best, but he'd decided to share many of Nestor's lessons with her, which she absorbed like a sponge.

It was almost a shame, in his mind. She wasn't nearly so interested in enchanting as she was in the art of war, and yet she was so damn good at enchanting that if it had been anyone else with such skills, he might've been bitterly envious. As it was, he was just glad he could share in his passion with someone he loved; her talent was a happy bonus.

In their months together, she could already create his best Thunderblast spells as quickly as he could, as well as his white fire spells and all his flare variants. He suspected if he wanted to impart all of the enchanting knowledge he'd accumulated from Xaphan, Nestor, and the Thunderbird over the past five years, he'd be able to do so in only a matter of a few more months.

On this day, though, it seemed he was destined to not be able to spend that much time with her. They'd been working for only about an hour and a half before one of Elise's servants came hurriedly knocking on the workshop door.

Annoyed, Leon turned away from Valeria and answered, only to be immediately told by the breathless and terrified young man that Princess Cristina herself had arrived unannounced at the villa and was demanding to see him. That got Valeria's attention, who looked up from her own work and followed Leon back into the main villa.

Leon hadn't had that much to do with Cristina since he'd helped to escort her and her mother out of the Royal Harem during the opening phase of the civil war. She'd stayed a guest with the Marquis of Ironford during the entire war, and he'd seen her only sporadically since then, with the greetings and congratulations she'd given him at his and Elise's wedding being essentially the only time they'd ever spoken directly to each other.

But as Leon reminisced about the wedding, he did also remember something odd about her aura, a thin undercurrent of killing intent that had been directed his way. Cristina had been the perfect vision of a

Princess, though—beautiful, modest, polite, and witty, so he'd been somewhat confused, but he'd largely put it out of his mind.

Now, however, his eyes narrowed in suspicion as he walked back into his villa.

Elise was with her mother at Emilie's palace, and Maia was busy in the training room quietly meditating while maintaining three flying water dragons that orbited her body. That left Leon and Valeria essentially alone to deal with Cristina.

And Asiya, Dame Maxima, and half a dozen other knightesses, all of whom wore the armor of the Royal Guards.

As Cristina glanced over at him as he walked inside, for the tiniest of moments, her eyes narrowed in displeasure, and Leon detected that tiny hint of killing intent again, but then it vanished, like it had never been there at all. And then Valeria walked in behind him, and suddenly, it seemed like the sun itself had descended into his living room for all the radiance that Cristina suddenly showed. She beamed joy as she walked over to Valeria as quickly as her Royal dignity would allow, waving Valeria's respectful bow aside so quickly that Leon was hardly sure that Valeria had started to bow at all, and pulling the silver-haired woman into a tight hug.

Leon was left there just past the door, completely ignored. He cast a quick glance back at Cristina's entourage, but most of the knightesses were about as expressive as stone. Only Asiya cracked enough to let a sympathetic a slightly embarrassed smile grace her bronze features.

Out of respect for the Princess and Valeria, Leon gave them some time and didn't listen in when it became obvious that they weren't going to separate anytime soon, with Cristina pushing herself up onto her toes so that she could whisper into Valeria's ear, who hurriedly whispered back, throwing Leon the occasional look of confusion. So, Leon just walked further into his living room and got everyone as settled as they were willing to be.

Five entire minutes passed as Valeria and Cristina whispered to each other, and those minutes felt like hours. But the two finally parted, and came to join Leon, Asiya, and Maxima on the sofas—the two knightesses being the only ones of Cristina's entourage to take Leon up on his offer of refreshments and seats.

Cristina sat across from Leon with both of the other knightesses on her left, leaving her right open in what Leon interpreted as a clear invitation to Valeria. When Valeria instead rather pointedly sat next to Leon, he felt that same flash of relatively weak killing intent from the Princess, and he felt like he was starting to piece together her apparent antipathy towards him.

When she spoke, though, she made the reason for her antipathy clear enough.

"I hear you're trying to take away one of my sworn protectors, Sir Leon," she said politely, though after his time around Trajan, August, and the others in the Royal Family, Leon was able to pick up on enough subtext to know that if she could spit those words with the kind of venom that was considered unseemly for her Royal person, she would've.

Instead of directly responding, Leon glanced at Valeria, who gave him an apologetic look and said in his stead, "No he's not. As I told you, I *want* to go with him. I am his sword blade now, and I became his

retainer because I wanted to. He did not force me into anything, he hasn't 'taken' anything; I'm here *willingly*."

Cristina's eyes narrowed, never leaving Leon during Valeria's entire spiel. Once Valeria was done, though, she demanded of Leon, "I asked Valeria to come back to my guard detail. She refused because of you. I want you to release her from your service before this journey you're obviously planning separates us forever."

Again, Leon looked to Valeria. It seemed to him that this was something he was better off staying out of, and Valeria seemed to agree, because she didn't even wait for him to respond before she retorted, "Your Highness! Please, you're my friend and I love you as I would a sister! Under any other circumstances, I would join you in a heartbeat, but I... can't stay here!"

Finally, Cristina's eyes turned back in Valeria's direction.

"I love *Leon*," Valeria declared, placing a curious emphasis on Leon's name that had his eyebrows slightly rising. There was subtext there, and he was quite sure it was something that was none of his business. Valeria continued, "I also have desires of my own that are pulling me away from the Kingdom and along the same path as Leon. I'm sorry, Your Highness, but I simply can't stay, not even if Leon were to release me from his service."

The young Princess stared alternately at Leon and Valeria, her eyes narrow, her expression set in disapproval and anger.

But then her expression began to slide into acceptance, and Leon momentarily thought that whatever this was had ended.

Cristina immediately crushed that thought when she defiantly declared, "Then I'm going with you!"

Leon reeled like he'd been physically struck, and while Valeria's reaction was a little tamer, she didn't immediately respond, leaving Cristina to continue without interruption.

"Dame Asiya, I apologize for doubting you. You said that my request would be denied, but I thought I could convince them. I should've believed you."

"There's no need for that, Your Highness," Asiya replied with a bright smile and a wave of her hand.

"These two have been obviously pining away for each other for years; neither friendship nor Royalty was going to come between them." She winked at Leon and Valeria, then went silent.

Leon finally coughed out a response to Cristina's declaration of intent.

"You... want to come with... us?"

"Yes!" Cristina almost shouted. "You're going to the Central Empires—everyone in the capital knows that. The Imperial lands sound wonderful, and I greatly desire to see them. Heading south with Heaven's Eye and one of the Kingdom's finest former knights is the best time to go."

"I can't imagine the King would agree with that—" Valeria began before she was cut off by Dame Maxima, who Leon knew had been Valeria's mentor knight she squired for following their time in the Knight Academy.

"The King adores his youngest daughter," the knightess said. "There are no laws or regulations preventing Princess Cristina from leaving, either. So long as she stays in contact with His Majesty—perhaps even acting as an official ambassador to the Ilian Empire—then she has every right to venture south, and His Majesty will not force her to stay regardless of his personal reluctance to see her leave."

Leon laughed nervously, unsure if he ought to refuse or not. Generally speaking, he didn't want people just inviting themselves along, especially people like Cristina who he didn't know well. However, since it seemed Cristina was far more interested in Valeria, he decided to just shut his mouth and watch Valeria's reactions.

Not for the first time he rued that he didn't have the mental communication power that Xaphan had finally started to teach him. He was making some progress in it, but not enough to be useful, yet.

Valeria seemed just as conflicted and surprised as he was, and after a few more exchanges of her trying to talk Cristina out of joining them, she and Leon walked back to the enchanting workshop to talk in private.

"So, what do you think?" Leon asked.

"I think that we can't exactly stop the Princess," Valeria said. "After finally being freed from the Royal Harem, she now has a chance to travel the world. That has been her dream for her entire life—to break free from the constraints that have been placed upon her due to her station and go on the kinds of adventures that she read about in books."

"But..." Leon protested, though he wasn't sure how to articulate his response. He had an instinctual aversion to just letting people tag along and separating himself from those feelings to make more practical arguments for not letting Cristina come with wasn't easy.

"I understand that she's not particularly strong," Valeria said—and it was true, Cristina was still only of the second-tier. Her bloodline hadn't even been awakened, so as far as Leon was aware, she was hardly going to grow quickly, either. "She's still a Princess, and she'll bring many guards with her. Besides, her presence would hardly matter much since we'll be traveling with a Heaven's Eye caravan, which will have more security than I think the Bull King could provide."

Leon scowled, still not wanting that responsibility, but neither did he say no.

"What do you want?" he asked her. "Set aside all other considerations, I don't care much for the practical reasons for allowing or not. Just... what do *you* want to do?"

Valeria was quiet for a long moment. And then, she said, "I think Dame Maxima would come with, as would Asiya. Cristina is my friend, and Asiya is like a sister to me. For a long time, it was just me, her, and Elise in our friend group. And I have to admit that the idea of leaving Asiya and Cristina behind had been weighing on my mind. And Maxima was the knight who mentored me, so I know full well that she's one of the most competent warriors this Kingdom has. It's truly a shame that she's been stuck in the Royal Guards; she could've done a lot of good during the war."

"That sounds like a practical reason," Leon said with a wry smile. "With me, my fiery friend, and Maia, I don't think we need to worry too much about practical concerns so long as we stick to human territories. I don't want to jinx us, but that confidence only grows when I consider that we're going

south with Heaven's Eye. So that just leaves us with what we feel. Do you *want* Cristina, Asiya, and the others to come with us? No one else's opinion matters—not the King, not any of the Princes, not a single other person in the Kingdom. What do *you* want?"

Again, Valeria was quiet for a long moment, but from her expression, Leon guessed that she was just working up the nerve to give voice to her desire. He could already see what it was going to be, so he resigned himself to have to suppress his own misanthropic instincts that were screaming at him to march back into the villa and deny the Princess her demand.

"I... want them to come..." Valeria quietly stated, as if she were scared the words were going to hurt her. "I don't want to leave them behind..."

Leon nodded. "Then we won't leave them behind. I know that Elise doesn't want to leave Asiya behind, either, and having both her and the Princess with us on the journey will make her ecstatic. Maia won't care, so if it came down to a family vote, she'd probably abstain."

"Do you not want to—"

Leon silenced her with a gentle wave and shake of his head.

"Whatever people ask of me, my instinctual answer is to tell them no," he admitted. "However, I actually *like* Asiya—I can see why you and she are such great friends—and I don't dislike Cristina. What's more, bringing them would make you and Elise happy, so if that's what you want, then I would happily oblige."

Valeria smiled, and gave Leon a hug and a kiss on his cheek.

The two went back inside to tell the Princess what they'd decided. It seemed they would have a few more guests on their journey south.

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Cristina wasn't the only visitor that Leon received that day. The Princess had been quietly joyous that she was being allowed to join their journey south, and so had left not long after to prepare herself and to inform everyone at the Royal Palace. Afterward, Leon and Valeria returned to work in the workshop, but their focus had been disturbed, and neither were all that productive.

It was almost with a glad heart that, when the villa servant knocked on the workshop door again to inform Leon of another guest, he left to go and meet them personally. Valeria this time elected to remain within the workshop, muddling her way through some of Leon's older, less efficient, and more needlessly complex spell designs.

When Leon returned to the villa, he found someone that he'd almost written off: Gaius Caecilius Tullius. It had been more than half a year since Jormun's defeat and Leon's departure from the Legion fleets, and he hadn't heard a thing from Gaius since then, aside from the thanks he received for sending Gaius the emeralds that had been set within the eyes of the golden serpent-man colossus.

"Gaius!" Leon exclaimed in surprise.

Gaius had been standing just inside Leon's villa from the entrance hall, staring into space, but when Leon called out his greeting, he turned toward him.

“Leon,” he said with much less enthusiasm, though for all that lack of excitement, Leon could detect not antipathy in his tone or aura.

“What brings you here?” Leon asked as he waved Gaius over into the living room.

Gaius took a deep breath, and didn’t respond for several long seconds, his face wearing a conflicted expression, as if he were wrestling with something in his head.

“It’s... not an easy thing,” he quietly said. Leon thought he knew what Gaius was talking about, but he didn’t interrupt to seek clarification. “I... I quit the Legion two months ago,” Gaius stated. “I did it just about as soon as the task force returned home.”

Gaius paused for a moment, so Leon decided to try to lighten his tension a bit by getting him talking about something else.

“It took them *that* long to come home?!” he said in genuine surprise. “What in the hells took so long? I thought the Legion was almost done in the Isles, and the King said he was going to recall the remnants of Sigebert’s fleet immediately!”

Gaius shrugged. “Returning home is a long and dangerous task, so Sir Sigebert’s remaining Legate convince the King to let us return with the rest of the battle group. We then took a long tour back to Kraterok. Dame Basina wanted to circle every island on the way home, giving everyone a good look at the fleets and the power of the Bull Kingdom. Parading so many ships around like that wasn’t easy, and then we had to wait an additional month in Kraterok so that the tribute they were gathering could be protected on the way back here. Compound all of that with some bad weather that slowed us down even more, and yeah, it took a while.”

Leon nodded in understanding. “I’m glad I left when I did, then...”

Gaius chuckled, visibly relaxing a little bit. “Dame Basina was *not* happy when she learned that you’d left.”

“I know,” Leon replied. “When I reported to the King, he told me she sent a report back to him saying that I’d deserted the fleets.”

Gaius nodded. “I think she was hoping the King would have the power and inclination to ‘hold that arrogant, disrespectful wretch’, as she called you, responsible for angering her.”

Leon just shook his head in disappointment. He was tempted to speak ill of her more, but decided that Basina was just not worth his time.

“Anyway,” Gaius continued. “I’ve spent most of these past two months back home in Lentia. Congratulations on your wedding, by the way.”

Leon nodded in thanks.

“Since my brother defected from Octavius to August, we have a bit more time to prepare, but it’s been made abundantly clear that our landed title will soon be revoked. My family is getting ready, but... it’s still going to be hard for them to adjust. Those emeralds you sent will help—thank you for holding up that promise, by the way—but there will still be a lot of adjustment for everyone. Which is why my decision is so damn hard.”

Gaius looked Leon in the eye, the golden-haired noble looking kind of like he hated himself for what he was about to say.

“Leaving my family during such a time isn’t something that I enjoy doing, but it’s the best for everyone. They don’t need me around, and I’d just get in the way if I were. I have no real future in this Kingdom without the benefits of my name, so I’ve decided to tentatively accept the offer you made me, Leon, assuming it’s still open and the benefits you can offer are good.”

Leon smiled. People that he could trust were rare, and after everything that he and Gaius had been through, he trusted the man about as well as he could anyone else who wasn’t related to him.

“Then let’s talk,” he said.

He and Gaius negotiated for almost an hour, and in the end, Gaius fully accepted Leon’s offer, joining his retinue. He was no longer a knight, but his salary wasn’t going to decrease too much from his time in the Legion—he and Leon settled on fifteen-thousand silvers per month, as well as the same benefits that Anshu was receiving, most notably the rights to renegotiate his terms upon ascension in magical tier and to break their contract for any reason if he wanted to.

Once their negotiations were over, Gaius didn’t stick around. Leon had informe

Chapter 622: Starting the Move

A little more than five months after returning to the Bull Kingdom, it was time to leave. The investigators sent by Heaven’s Eye had finished their work and sent back their recommendation that Emilie not be punished, and then began making plans to return to Occulara. Emilie herself was a part of those plans, and given the size of her household—notably, her huge harem of husbands and concubines—she had quite a bit of organization to handle, let alone her personal servants that would be accompanying her south. They also had to make some accommodations for Justin Isynos, who wasn’t going to be left behind, despite a not insignificant temptation within Leon to do so.

Leon counted himself fortunate that he only had a handful of people to see to, because even that was enough to almost give him conniptions. He and Elise had to organize and pack all of their possessions, turn over their villa for Heaven’s Eye to sell, and ensure that all of Leon’s retinue had made their own preparations. Leon also had to undo most of the defensive wards he’d applied to the villa.

It was a lot of work, and a lot of coordination with Heaven’s Eye, but finally, the day came. It was bittersweet, moreso even than when Leon departed the Royal Capital for the last time. He was leaving behind the Bull Kingdom, his home for half a decade. That he was bringing along most of the people that he’d made friends with and liked helped, but it was still leaving the familiar in favor of the unfamiliar, and it left him sad and scared, though not nearly enough of either to make him stop.

He was ready to leave, but from the way that everyone else acted, he guessed that his feelings weren’t entirely shared. Most of his retinue still had family within the Kingdom, so he knew that things weren’t easy for them, but in the final week before they were set to leave, the atmosphere in his villa during training had become so tense that he’d just told all of them not to bother coming for training anymore and to spend their remaining days in the Kingdom relaxing.

For almost everyone, these last few days of relaxation came as a relief. Anshu was the only exception, and it was easy for Leon to see why: he had no real emotional or familial connection to the Bull Kingdom, making him not only the most relaxed of any of them, but also the most eager to leave.

On their last full day in their home, Leon and Elise spent a lot of time in each other's company, just enjoying their last moments in their first home. Maia and Valeria were with them, too, but it was a little different, for neither of them had nearly as much connection to the villa as Leon and Elise did.

The married couple had picked it out and customized it heavily. Though they'd only lived in it for a few years, Elise had grown quite fond of her garden, and Leon his enchanting workshop. They'd made the place into their home, not simply a place where they lived, and now they were leaving it behind in the hope that the place they were going to now would lead to a better life.

Fortunately, Heaven's Eye made the actual act of moving such a long distance fairly easy. As Leon learned in several meetings with Emilie and several members of the Bull Kingdom's Diplomatic Corps that he was unfamiliar with, if the journey was peaceful, then their huge caravan would reach Occulara in about six months.

That was a large amount of time in Leon's mind—more than three times how long it took the Heaven's Eye investigators to arrive. But Emilie had to remind him that with all of her family, servants, and belongings, as well as the necessary entourage that would accompany Princess Cristina, they were bringing a small army of just over a thousand people. It was a large undertaking, and to ensure they were moving safely, they'd have to move slowly.

Leon understood, but he still couldn't help his shock. At the very least, he was happy that with their route, they'd be heading through Ariminium again. He was rather fond of the city, and he was hoping that the friends that he'd made in the Knight Academy were still there. He hadn't been able to see Charles, Henry, or Alain in years, and while he knew he could probably just ask the Legion for their whereabouts, he was so reluctant to do so for so personal a matter that he'd just run out of time.

When the time came to finally leave, it wound up being surprisingly easy. There were no going-away parties—despite many offers from various influential people in the capital to throw one—they were just leaving without any fanfare. Leon had said his goodbyes to those he wanted to, and he didn't want to make this any harder than it already was.

Most of his family and retinue's possessions were pulled into Leon's soul realm. There were still many pieces of furniture that would just be sold instead of brought all the way south, but everything of sentimental value, as well as everything within Leon's workshop and all of the seeds and plant samples that Elise wanted to keep, he stored within his soul realm. Most of everyone's clothes and the like they packed more conventionally, so they wouldn't have to rely upon him every time they needed to change into something else.

Then, they met Emilie and Princess Cristina at the docks, where a huge Heaven's Eye yacht awaited them, with just about everything they could ever ask for. Many of them got their own rooms, such as the Princess and Emilie herself, as well as Justin, who still had to have some Heaven's Eye healers nearby despite his improved condition. Leon shared with Elise, Maia, and Valeria, but their cabin was large enough that no one felt like they were intruding or that they didn't have enough privacy. Leon's retinue got their own rooms, too, but their rooms were much smaller. There was even a large cell for Anzu, with

two resident beastmasters. Just about everyone else, though, had to share relatively cramped, though still comfortable and luxurious, quarters down below the main deck.

With the Princess aboard, the yacht would be escorted by a couple of Legion ships, which floated nearby, waiting for everyone to get aboard and to leave.

And so, the huge Heaven's Eye yacht carrying Emilie and her family, Leon and his family and retinue, the Princess and her retinue, and the Heaven's Eye investigators, left the capital of the Bull Kingdom. There were no great crowds lining the Naga River waving them off, there were no throngs of great men and women to see off the Princess, a former Tower Lord, and the eighth-tier mage that had risen through the ranks of the Royal Legions so quickly.

Everyone just got settled into the yacht, and then it got going, just another ship among many that plied the waters of the Naga, notable essentially only for its large size.

With their Legion escort, they reached the southern coast of the Bull Kingdom within a mere four days, and then turned east toward Ariminium. Throughout the journey, Leon couldn't help but be reminded of several years prior, when, as part of the Royal Legions, he was assigned to the Bull's Horns, the great twin fortresses that guarded the only eastern land route into the Kingdom, as well as Ariminium itself, the Kingdom's third largest city, behind only the capital and Teira. It had also been the seat of Trajan when the Prince had been the Consul of the East, and a place that Leon had spilled quite a bit of blood to protect, from dealing with smugglers and rebels to fighting off the Talfar invasion.

Leon was looking forward to seeing the city again, though there were also a lot of memories he had of the place that made him more than a little depressed looking back. Minerva was in command of the Bull's Horns now, having been promoted to Consul of the East, and he wasn't going there as a Legion knight. Things would be just a little too different for him to really feel comfortable in the city, despite his fond memories and desire to see it again.

Elise, Maia, and Valeria were quite effective at getting his mind off of the anxieties he felt as the yacht grew inexorably closer to the great city, and they did so in ways other than sex. Leon and Elise took great pleasure in talking about nearly everything, from planning their future to discussing the current state of the Bull Kingdom that they'd both spent so much time in. Maia was more concerned with talking with Leon about the things she delighted in reading, or in sharing with him her insights into water magic and having Leon in turn share the Thunderbird's knowledge of the element with her. Valeria and Leon, meanwhile, didn't speak much. They spent the majority of their time rather silent, simply enjoying each other's company as they sparred or studied enchantments together.

Things picked up a bit when they arrived in Ariminium. They were all given accommodations either in the local Heaven's Eye branches, or in Cristina's case, the rooms the Diplomatic Corps had set aside for visiting dignitaries. Leon had a reunion with Aquillius, the de facto leader of the Diplomatic Corps and Leon's former superior, as well as with Minerva herself.

It was simultaneously a happy and a depressing reunion. Happy, for Leon was reminded of better days spent under Trajan's wing, but depressing, for it made it crystal-clear that those days were over. They were going to stay in the city for a while—at least two or three weeks—so Leon didn't linger during the reunion. Minerva and Aquillius had a Princess to see to, of course, and there would be other events and parties that they would hold with her in the city that he would likely be invited to, so he didn't want to

impose when their attention was better spent elsewhere. However, before he left, he did make sure to ask after his Knight Academy friends, hoping that they were still around.

Fortunately, it seemed their Legion was not only still in the city, but also hadn't been deployed during the civil war. Charles, Henry, and Alain had apparently stayed at the Bull's Horns defending the Bull Kingdom's eastern border throughout the entire war.

Leon was relieved, and had a message sent to them inviting them over to his guest villa near the local Heaven's Eye branch. Then, he finally left the Horns to spend the rest of the day resting with his lovers.

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"This place is awwwful!" Asiya complained as she leaned back in her seat.

During the entirety of the first day following their arrival, Asiya had stayed with her Princess, ostensibly to protect her, but really—in Asiya's words, at least—just to follow her around and afford her more authority by virtue of having followers.

Since Cristina was spending most of the second day locked in meetings with Aquillius, Minerva, and other high-ranking Legion officials and had almost three dozen other knightesses who could follow her around, Asiya was given the day off. Consequently, she immediately went over to where Elise and Valeria were staying with Leon and dragged all three of them out with her to hit the town. Only Maia stayed behind, who wanted to sleep in and get in some training.

Leon knew that she'd drop everything and come to them if the need for her power arose, but he didn't think she'd be needed in that way; Asiya only dragged them all to some local chariot races. After a couple hours spent watching the local teams race through the increasingly complex tracks, though, it was clear that she was thoroughly unimpressed by the spectacle.

"There's a reason that there's no large stadiums here," Valeria pointed out in response to Asiya's complaints. "This city is hardly known for its strong sports offerings."

"You'd still think a city with *millions* of people would have better racers..." the bronze-skinned Samarid replied as she laid her head down in dejection on the railing of their private box, not even bothering to watch the racers as they went about the track.

Leon wasn't much of a chariot aficionado, but he'd been to a few races, and with his limited experience with the races back in the capital, he thought these showings were honestly not as bad as Asiya were making them out to be, but not anything special, either. That didn't stop the crowds from going wild when their teams took the lead, though.

"Most of the good racers get poached by the teams in the capital or Teira," Elise pointed out. "Ariminium doesn't have many powerful teams thanks to all their players being pulled out from under them."

Asiya sighed. "I *know* that, but I was hoping they'd at least be enough to kill my boredom! Though, I have to say, even this pitiful showing is better than staying cooped up in some damn conference room all day!"

"How *is* Princess Cristina, by the way?" Valeria asked with a cheeky smile.

“Probably getting close to resorting to murder,” Asiya sarcastically replied, smiling back at Valeria. “His Majesty made it clear that if she was to go south under the banner of the Bull Kingdom, as she would have to if she wanted to go at all, then she’d have to endure acting as his representative. And that means meetings. Lots and lots of meetings. I don’t envy her.”

“It’s not all that bad,” Elise said. “When you’re the most powerful one in the room, it can be pretty fun making people dance the way you want them to.”

Leon almost wondered aloud if Cristina *was* the most powerful one in those rooms, with both Aquillius and Minerva present. Ostensibly, she was, but in practical terms, he had his doubts. He was wise enough not to ask that question aloud, though.

“Do you think I could convince her to ditch her duties and see the gladiator matches tomorrow?” Asiya asked.

“Are you asking just because *you* want to see the gladiator matches?” Elise inquired.

“Of course,” Asiya shamelessly admitted. “But that doesn’t mean I don’t want her to see them, too. I mean, even in this place, even if they don’t have gladiators that can perform impressive feats of magic, then they at least have to be good-looking! A couple of hot guys hitting each other in a sandpit, getting all sweaty and dirty...”

Asiya trailed off, but given how her expression changed, Leon thought that was probably for the best.

“By the way,” Asiya said, “my parents are here.”

“They are?” Valeria and Elise asked in unison. Leon found himself more than a little curious, too, because he didn’t know that much about Asiya’s family. He knew they came from the Samar Kingdom, but much more than that, he was woefully uninformed.

“They are,” Asiya confirmed. “They’re supposedly trying to meet with some nobles across the gulf. They tried playing coy, but I got them to tell me what they were planning during my going-away party a few weeks ago.”

Leon glanced southward, his magic senses briefly projecting in that direction. Ariminium occupied the north side of this eastern-most corner of the Gulf of Discord, but it was an enormous city, one with a great deal of strategic potential. With it in complete control of the Tyrrhenian River delta, it also controlled essentially all trade from further south that came out into the Gulf of Discord, which was how nearly everything imported into the Samar Kingdom got to their cities, which were mostly located along the coasts on the gulf’s south side further west. The Samar Kingdom had built a city of their own near Ariminium to the south, but it was a few miles down the coast from the river delta, and only boasted a population of twenty or twenty-five thousand. It was a city that mostly served to ensure their interests were seen to in the gulf rather than to compete directly with Ariminium and was largely inhabited by wealthy Samarid merchants and those in their employ.

“Is there something going on we should know about?” Elise suddenly asked, sounding deadly serious, and Leon gave her a questioning look, though she didn’t seem to notice it.

“Not really,” Asiya replied with a dismissive hand wave. “With their chances of becoming landed nobility here in this Kingdom now essentially nil, they’re just refocusing on getting their exile revoked. So, they’re mostly just meeting with some of our extended family and others close to the Sultan.”

“That sounds kind of... dangerous,” Leon whispered, half to himself. Exiles risked quite a bit returning home before their exile was formally and publicly revoked.

Asiya shrugged. “Her Highness offered them some help, so we might be heading over there with my family to have a short meeting, using my parents as mediators. Shore up relations with our southern neighbors on our way through, and all that. Should help my family’s case. My parents will be making first contact, though, and I’ll be the only going with them for that first meeting.”

“Why are they exiled, if you don’t mind me asking?” Leon asked.

Asiya’s face momentarily fell, but then cheered right back up a moment later. “I don’t mind it, but my parents might. They were close to the previous Sultan, and when he died, he chose one of his sons to succeed him, but many of the more powerful nobles in our Kingdom supported another. Should sound pretty familiar, right?”

Leon nodded with a bitter smile. The Bull Kingdom just got through a rough civil war regarding a similar question of succession, and he also knew that part of the reason why Prince Owain of the Talfar Kingdom had launched his own invasion of the Bull Kingdom a few years ago was because he wanted to dispute his sister’s succession to Talfar’s throne.

“The peaceful transfer of power is damned difficult,” he muttered.

“It wasn’t that bad for the Samar Kingdom,” Asiya explained in a cheery tone. “The current Sultan is the one chosen by the nobles. My family supported the previous Sultan’s choice of his son—the current Sultan was the previous Sultan’s... cousin, I think? Regardless, he rose to power quickly when nearly the entire Kingdom save of the city of Samar itself declaring for him. The previous Sultan’s son surrendered instead of resisting, and I think he was executed. Most of his supporters were executed, too, but my family was fairly powerful, and many nobles were either their friends, or owed them favors. The current Sultan decided to just exile them instead of taking their heads so that he could keep those nobles happy. So, they came here, to the Bull Kingdom, where they could keep an eye on the situation back in Samar while also trying to build a new home here.”

“You sound remarkably chipper about the whole thing,” Leon said with a smile.

“Does she ever not?” Valeria quipped. She then gave Asiya a sarcastic smile and added, “Honestly, Asiya, it wouldn’t kill you to be a little grumpier, you know!”

“It might, why take the chance?” Asiya said, her statement punctuated by the roar of the crowd as one of the chariot teams won a race. When the furor died down, she added, “Besides, I think it would kill *you* to be a little happier, Grumpy Guts!”

Valeria’s smile grew wider, and she pulled Asiya into a soft headlock, and the two young women began to play fight in their booth.

Leon found it a far more entertaining show to watch than the chariot races, and Elise even mockingly started trying to get him to bet on either Asiya or Valeria to win.

Leon didn't name any names, but he and everyone else had a good time, anyway. Even if the chariot races were going to be boring, they could still make their own fun.

Chapter 623: Sharing the Sky

The first day after their arrival in Ariminium, Leon and his family met up with his old friends from the Knight Academy after parting with Asiya after the disappointing chariot races. It had been more than a year since they'd met up, and right from the beginning, Leon could tell that things were different. He'd ascended twice in that time, while Charles, Henry, and Alain were still in the third-tier. Worse, it seemed that his reputation had started to affect them—their meeting was awkward, with the three of them not quite knowing how to talk to him. Not even Elise could get them to open up.

Leon supposed he understood. As an eighth-tier mage, he was now head-and-shoulders above just about everyone in the entire Bull Kingdom, power-wise. He wasn't their stronger and more experienced friend, anymore; he was now essentially something that was untouchable, something beyond what they could consider a friend.

After a couple hours of polite, if awkward conversation, Leon's old friends left. Leon had toyed with the idea of inviting them south with him, but Charles had met a girl in Ariminium that he clearly didn't want to leave, Alain was still married to his three wives, and Henry seemed... happy enough, he supposed. He couldn't follow through, and he knew that as he watched his old friends walk away from the Heaven's Eye guest house that he'd almost assuredly never see them again.

It left him feeling quite melancholic. On a practical level, it didn't change his life at all since he saw them so infrequently, but it reinforced more than anything else had that he was leaving this part of his life behind.

It took him a couple of days to get out of his mental funk, and what finally pulled him out of it was work. He'd long promised Elise and Maia to make them flight suits of their own, and he'd decided to follow through on that promise—a promise that now included Valeria, given their dynamically different relationship compared to when he made his first flight suit.

So, he put his all into the design of the new suits. They were far more compact than his previous design, being mostly confined to a pair of gauntlets and boots, along with an enchanted belt to keep them stable while in the air. Much more stylish while also being significantly more powerful than his previous design.

However, since these were for those he loved rather than himself, he tested them much more rigorously than he had his previous suit. A week after their arrival in Ariminium, his lovers were ready to try them on for the first time.

And they didn't do so without an audience.

"Woow!" Asiya crowed in amazement as Valeria hovered about three feet off the ground on a cushion of air.

The silver-haired woman was effortlessly held aloft by the suit's enchantments, and judging by the abject smile of joy on her face, she was having a blast. Not too far away, Maia and Elise were similarly

flying around, though neither looked particularly comfortable with how they were operated. Still, they were all ecstatic with the new suits.

"Leon!" Asiya called out, drawing his attention away from monitoring how the suits were operating. "How much for one of these?"

Leon shrugged noncommittally.

Right next to the dark-skinned knightess stood Princess Cristina, a look of amazement and contemplation on her face.

"This is..." she muttered as she unconsciously grabbed Asiya's arm.

"... incredible!" Asiya enthusiastically finished.

"It really is!" Valeria added as she started swooping around.

"Ah, be careful!" Leon pleaded, not wanting to see anyone face-plant even though they were testing the suits in a courtyard with plenty of grass to cushion the fall, and they weren't going too fast or too high. However, it became clear enough that he didn't need to worry that much. Following Valeria's lead, Elise and Maia started to get a bit bolder in testing the limits of the flight suits, flying around above the handful of spectators as they reveled in their liberation from the ground.

And it seemed that either all three were natural fliers, or his new stabilization enchantments were doing their job admirably, for they took to his flight suits like they were born for them. Leon couldn't help but smile as he pushed his anxiety down, seeing them move about so naturally in the air.

"That *is* seriously amazing," Emilie whispered as she sidled up to Leon, and when he glanced around, he could see similar sentiments in the expressions of everyone else who had turned up to watch the test, from a pale Justin Isynos to the glittering eyes of the knightesses in Cristina's retinue. There weren't any representatives from the Legion present, though there were two people that Leon had only been recently introduced to: an older man and woman who shared Asiya's skin tone, dressed in the style of the Bull Kingdom—tunics and trousers—but with the white and yellow colors of the Samar Kingdom.

Asiya's parents.

"Do you think so?" Leon bashfully asked. He'd gotten used to the idea of flight by now, and its novelty had worn off a bit.

"It is," Emilie said. "Few people outside of the Central Empires can fly without the aid of a flying war beast. If you were to make more of these suits down south, you'd make quite a lot of money."

"Good to know," Leon said, his smile growing wider.

"But you *have* to make me one first!" Asiya cried out with great enthusiasm, only for that exuberance to be immediately quashed.

"Asiya," her father said, his voice deep and rumbling, "you're not bothering your friend, are you?"

It almost sounded like a threat, but the wide smile on the handsome Samarid's face betrayed his good humor. Still, Asiya shrank down a bit as if she'd just been caught with her hand in the proverbial cookie

jar, then turned to her father, gave him a glowing smile, and said, “No, Daddy!” Her voice had gone up almost a whole octave, and she also sent her father’s way an exaggerated wave.

But Leon noticed that not once did Cristina let go of her knightess’ arm. The Princess was still staring at Valeria slowly swooping around and doing little pirouettes in the air, seeming to have the time of her life flying about.

He turned his attention back to the Samarids and said, “It’s not a bother, really. If it was, I’d just tell her a flat ‘no’.”

The elder Samarid just smiled as Asiya posed triumphantly, smirking as she glanced back at Leon.

“So, does that mean I can get one of those suits?” she asked impishly.

“No,” Leon immediately replied, smirking in a perfect mirror to her.

She acted like Leon had just inflicted a mortal wound upon her, gasping and reeling back until her mother sternly said, “Asiya! You’re acting undignified! And before Her Highness, too!”

Asiya immediately straightened up, while Cristina let go of her arm and fixed Lady Samarid in her warm brown gaze. “I don’t mind. It’s quite refreshing, actually, to have one of my knights be so unrestrained.”

With the Princess having spoken, Lady Samarid couldn’t say anything more, and her husband chuckled good-naturedly. “You’ve found some good friends, kiddo, to tolerate your antics so.”

Leon decided he liked hearing the man talk. He spoke in a slow drawl that by its tenor alone seemed to relax everything around him.

Asiya and Cristina went over to Valeria and Elise, who’d started flying together in the courtyard, leaving Leon alone with all of the rest of the onlookers. The Princess’ knights were watching her like a cast of hawks, Emilie never once let Elise out of her sight, but with Asiya not participating, her parents seemed to feel comfortable sidling up close to Leon.

“Leon Raime,” Asiya’s father said, “is it all right if I call you that?”

“Just ‘Leon’ would be fine,” Leon replied as he turned to speak with him.

“Ah, in that case, you may call me Khayu.”

Asiya’s mother added, “And me, Iset.”

Leon nodded in gratitude. They were nobles—and if Asiya hadn’t been exaggerating when speaking of them, they’d been *quite* important with the Samar Kingdom before their exile—but there wasn’t so much as a trace of arrogance in their demeanor. Though, Leon supposed that a few decades in the Bull Kingdom could excise arrogance from any foreigner.

“I was hoping to speak with you for a bit, while the ladies are busy,” Khayu whispered just loudly enough that his voice could be heard over the gleeful whoops and cheers of Leon’s lovers having fun flying around.

Leon gave him a look of mild expectation. “You sound like you have something specific you want to talk about.”

"I would be interested in speaking with you no matter what; we're both foreign to this Kingdom, at least in spirit, after all."

Leon couldn't argue with that. Even if he was of House Raime, he'd still been raised away from the Kingdom and had been thought to be a Valeman until relatively recently.

"Though," Khayu continued, "with the recent decision that my daughter made to accompany her Princess south, I found that I wanted to speak with you even more. It's not easy on a father to lose his daughter like this, even if she is all grown up now."

"There's no need to worry," Leon replied. "I won't let anything happen to her, or anyone else on this journey. But I don't think she *needs* my protection, anyway; we'll be traveling under the banner of Heaven's Eye, and she'll have the backing of a Princess. I can't imagine there're going to many situations she'll find herself in where she'd need my aid."

"You're still an eighth-tier mage," Khayu pressed. "It's no small comfort to both of us just hearing you say those things, though." Iset nodded in agreement.

"Well, I'm married to one of her friends, and involved with another," Leon said. "I'm not with Asiya, but Elise and Valeria treat her like a sister. I wouldn't call us friends, but she's still practically family."

"That's good to hear," Iset murmured with a bright smile on her bronze features.

The three stood there for a few more seconds, watching Elise and Valeria try to catch Asiya as she jumped into their waiting arms, and failing, though with how much everyone laughed, no one was hurt or took offense.

"So," Leon said as the silence started to make him feel awkward, "I hear you two are heading across the Gulf in the next few days?"

"Indeed we are," Iset said, her face lighting up. "We've gotten some—"

"Perhaps it might be best not to get into specifics," Khayu whispered warningly, and when Iset silenced herself, acting as if she'd been just about to say something she shouldn't, Leon found himself suddenly intrigued.

"We're hoping we might be able to return to the land of our birth," Khayu lightly stated.

"It's been a long time since we've been there," Iset added, her demeanor suddenly relaxing, "we're *very* homesick. We still have some friends over there who've been plying the Sultan with their words, and they're confident that we might be able to have our exile lifted. At the very least, we received word that we could visit some of the more remote outposts of the Sultanate without being immediately arrested and executed, which is progress."

"I'd say so," Leon laughed.

"It's good, to be involved in politics again, even if only peripherally," Khayu mused aloud.

"I'm afraid I can't agree with you there," Leon replied.

"It's not for everyone," Khayu conceded. "However, we never really managed to break through into the inner circles of the Bull King here, and so we haven't been able to do much with our skills. Make a living? Sure, easy enough. But to use our skills doing what we love—serving the people we care about? That, we don't think we'll ever see in this Kingdom. It's time to return home, if we can, where we can better answer our calling."

"That, I can understand," Leon agreed. He could empathize easily with someone who thought they didn't belong and knew that there was somewhere else they ought to be. The only thing is that he used to think the place he belonged more than anywhere else was the Forest of Black and White. Now, he could almost hear the south calling to him, beckoning him onward with the promises of shelter until he could carve out a place for himself in the Nexus.

"I suppose you might," Khayu responded.

Iset added, "If anyone could here, you definitely could. We weren't that active back in the capital, but even we heard about the 'savage' who'd been stirring up trouble these past few years. I think you had a lot of admirers, and a lot of people who hated you without ever meeting you back there."

Leon could only shrug. Then, his eyes narrowed. "Maybe I'm paranoid, and I'll be the first to admit that I know nothing about the Samar Kingdom's politics, but do you trust this information that you've gotten? I don't know, it sounds like it might be a trap to me, but I barely know anything about it."

Khayu sighed, and Iset responded, "That's a discussion we've had many times before. We trust those who sent us word that things were progressing back home. I think that we might still have to pay some kind of penance—perhaps some long formal public display of contrition for our transgressions against the Sultan, something like that. But those who told us that we might be able to come back are reliable."

Leon smiled and nodded. The two seemed like good people, and as his eyes flickered over to Asiya now trying to pull Elise and Valeria out of the air in an exaggerated show of playful jealousy, he knew that if anything happened to her parents, then she'd be upset, to say the absolute least. And if Asiya was upset, then Elise and Valeria would likely be upset, too.

"I hope you're right," he said as he glanced back at Iset.

"So do I," Iset stated, a slight crack showing through her otherwise supremely confident exterior.

Despite the hopeful words, her tone just about killed the conversation. Leon was only able to wish them luck in their attempts to return home before they descended back into awkward silence. He would've liked to speak with them a bit more, though; they were of a completely different culture, a different people, and if pressed, he would've admitted to some curiosity. However, before he could work himself up to continuing the conversation in a different direction, Cristina left Asiya's side and marched over to Leon.

"Leon," she said, her tone imperious, though softer than the last time she'd made a demand of him, "how much for one of those suits?"

Leon quietly chuckled. He could feel a few jealous looks from some of the others in the room—no doubt wanting him to grant them the power of flight, too—but he didn't immediately quote the Princess a figure.

"Let's say I *did* make you one of these," Leon said, "would you just turn around and sell it back to the Bull Kingdom? Do you want them to reverse-engineer my work?" He kept his tone light and questioning, but from the way her eyes hardened, he didn't think he gave the impression he was hoping for.

"Is your answer contingent upon mine?" she asked with the utmost seriousness as she folded her arms across her chest.

Leon simply shrugged. "No," he replied. "But it's something that I still want to know. You're not just you, you're also an extension of the Bull King. You *are* his representative, now, even if he's given you a great deal of freedom."

Cristina controlled her expression, but Leon thought he saw the ghost of a scowl playing across her face.

"I honestly don't mind if you do," Leon said. "As I said, I just want to know, first. Are you hoping to buy something just for yourself? Or are you trying to increase the power of the Bull Kingdom?"

"Is there a reason I can't do both?" Cristina impishly asked as her lips turned upward in a devious smile.

Leon shrugged again.

After a moment of the two staring at each other, Leon took to seriously considering the prospect. He'd made his second-generation flight suits in only a matter of days, but he'd been considering how to improve his original design for years. His recent work to actually create the suits had gone by so quickly because he'd already puzzled out ninety percent of the work before he'd even started putting pen to spell paper.

The materials he'd used for these second-generation suits were also quite cheap, something he'd already had lying around to test with. If he ever wanted to sell flight gear, then he knew he'd have to upgrade their style, at least. And making them out of better materials would also have design implications, affecting how his enchantments would function...

He was sorely tempted to agree to the Princess' request, but he wasn't sure if he could reasonably give her something so cheap. He was only comfortable with letting his lovers use the suits he'd already made because he wanted to share in the gift of flight with them and just couldn't wait long enough to make something more suitable.

So, putting together all of that in his head, he puzzled together that it would take him at least a week to put together a design suitable for a Princess, plus another day for the suit's actual creation. It would also be relatively expensive, perhaps as much as...

'Hmmm, twenty thousand silver?' Leon wondered. *'That's how much the materials would cost, but how much should I value my labor? She can have it at cost, but would that start a bad precedent for the value of my work?'*

"Wait just a moment," he asked the Princess, then walked away before she could even answer. She seemed surprised, but not too aggrieved, waiting with a light smile of contentment on her face as Leon strolled over to Emilie and whispered his thoughts to his mother-in-law.

Emilie glanced over at Cristina, then back to Leon, and whispered back. The two quietly spoke for several seconds, and then Leon walked back over.

"I'll agree to your request, though there's a couple things I'd have to insist on, first," he said.

Cristina nodded her head.

"For a member of Royalty, I'll give you a discount: two hundred and fifty thousand silvers for something of this quality. Double that for something fancier."

"Define 'fancy'."

Leon let a half-smile crawl up his right cheek. "You know, something *fancible*. I can make these suits with better materials than scrap leather and steel I have lying around. Something silk, maybe? Or whatever you might prefer? Half a million for a custom job, a quarter for something 'generic'."

Cristina and Leon continued to work out the details, but they eventually agreed. She wanted a custom suit, and she paid the full price for it—the accoutrements would be made by a reputable tailor, and then Leon would enchant them. Leon was quietly surprised; despite his confidence, he was almost sure that she might try to negotiate the price down. He supposed Emilie's advice that he could set the price to whatever he wanted it to be wasn't just arrogance.

He had a lot to learn about being an enchanter, but now that he was four hundred thousand silvers richer—after deducting the cost of materials—he felt like he was going to enjoy the learning process even more than he already was.

Chapter 624: Royal Flight

"Look at him go," Valeria marveled as Leon scrambled about their guest house, putting himself together as quickly as he was able. He'd spent most of the previous night having his endurance as an eighth-tier mage put to the test by Maia and Elise, both of whom seemed utterly insatiable after spending the fifth day in a row flying around. However, as much as he would've loved to spend as much of the morning as he could in bed with his two lovers, Valeria had walked in bearing word that the tailor Princess Cristina had commissioned to make the physical suit that Leon would inscribe his flight enchantments upon had finished.

Consequently, Leon had bolted up and started rushing about to try and get to the Heaven's Eye workspace he'd been borrowing for his enchanting practice, where the suit was waiting for him. He wanted to get to work as soon as he was able, and he wasn't going to get distracted as he'd been the night before, when his alluring wife and captivating mate pulled him to bed with only a few words and a couple articles of discarded clothing.

"You should've spent enough time around by now to have seen it," Elise murmured, half asleep, still naked beneath the bedsheets but not at all shy at having Valeria there to see her as she started to rise. "When he gets something in his head, it's nearly impossible to get him to focus on anything else..."

[You always seem to have a way of bringing him back around, though,] Maia whispered into their minds as she stirred, then rolled over until she was resting her head on Elise's thigh as the red-head sat up in bed, showing about as much shame in her lack of attire as Elise did.

Elise could only smile and shrug in response as all three ladies drank in the sight of the naked Leon scrambling about in complete disarray, looking for where in the hells his clothes had landed after being almost literally torn from his body.

Valeria had been somewhat bashful when she'd first entered the room and found the three knocked out, sprawled across the bed, their limbs practically tied together, but she'd quickly overcome that embarrassment. The first couple of times she'd walked in on Leon sleeping with either of the other two, she'd apologized and left. However, over the past several months, she'd gotten somewhat used to it, especially since Maia and Elise didn't much care for restraint when at home or in private, and now that Valeria was in a relationship with Leon, they didn't restrain themselves around her, either.

Leon still scrambled about, but when the words the others were saying finally registered, he stopped for a moment to actually think about the situation, and realized just how flustered and in a rush he'd been—he could've just immediately dressed himself in clothes from his soul realm. So, he did just that, and then began striding toward Valeria by the door before Elise loudly cleared her throat.

He froze and turned around just in time for the glorious view of Elise getting out of bed with a flirtatious smile, reveling in the way his eyes roamed her spectacular body. She subtly grabbed something off a nearby writing desk as she sashayed toward Leon, but he was so distracted with staring at her that he didn't see what she'd picked up.

"Here, *husband*," she whispered, reveling in using that word as she pushed a pen and several rolls of paper into his hand. She then kissed him on the cheek, brushed a hand against his well-built chest, and then gave him a smoldering wink that put all kinds of ideas into his head. "Take your time," she breathed as she pushed herself up onto her toes and leaned in to whisper into his ear. "We'll still be here when you get back, so focus on your work, for now."

Leon smiled as Elise pulled back until her face was just an inch or two away from his, their eyes locked onto the other's, the two communicating their desire for the other without needing words. But Leon decided to use some words, anyway.

"Thank you, *wife*," he softly said as he pressed his forehead against hers, relishing her title just as much as she did with his. They locked lips again, and then Elise pulled back. Leon, with a look of both pride and embarrassment on his face, turned around to head back outside with Valeria.

They were fairly quiet as they walked through the marble halls of the relatively small—but still objectively quite large—guest house, but as they exited the building into the front courtyard, Valeria whispered, "I'm not sure I'm ever going to get used to that..."

"Walking in like that?" Leon asked as he tried to avoid his embarrassment with the conversation by shuffling through the papers in his hand that Elise had stopped him from leaving behind. He'd been refining his flight suit design to work on the Princess' much more elegant and expensive clothing, and he'd taken his work home with him intending to put in another couple of hours after dinner. Maia and Elise's desires had altered his plans, though.

"Yeah," Valeria replied.

Leon shrugged as he did his best to just bury his embarrassment and speak openly about this topic. It wasn't like he was ashamed or anything, and he and Valeria were in a similar, if slightly less physically intimate relationship, now, too.

"It's a good thing to see how comfortable they are having you around," he said.

"I'm sure you think so," Valeria cheekily responded.

"It also shows how comfortable you are with them," Leon pointed out with a cheeky smile of his own. "Maybe one day you'll find yourself in the same bed with them..."

"Don't count on it," Valeria shot back with a playful shove. "They're beautiful and sexy and *gorgeous*, but I'm not into them like that."

Leon shrugged again. "To each their own. But it's still good to see everyone getting more adjusted to what we have."

"It is," Valeria honestly agreed.

The two went quiet for a few seconds. Eventually, they began to speak about the flight enchantment that Leon was going to make, and which Valeria was going to assist him with. If they wanted to do this properly and without destroying the expensive materials that the Princess had picked out, then they had to do this right. Plus, this was their first commissioned work, and it was for a *Princess*, so Leon and Valeria were feeling the pressure, even if they didn't show it.

The process of applying the enchantment within the workshop went fairly straightforward, though. The boots, gloves, and belt that Cristina had commissioned were works of art unto themselves, with the boots made of the finest and sturdiest leather that had been trimmed with stark white fox fur; the gloves were woven from dark green silkgrass; and the belt was a cord of silk, primarily green but accented with thin strips of what seemed like actual threads of gold.

Leon had managed to suitably alter his enchantment scheme enough to fit on the proportions of these garments without Nestor's help, which he was quite proud of. And with Valeria's help, the work of inscribing these items with the flight enchantment was completed earlier than expected, clocking in at only about six hours of focused work.

At first, though, it seemed like it was going to take much longer than that, as both were extremely nervous when starting out, neither quite *wanting* to be the one to start applying the runes and potentially do irreparable damage. But after Leon bit the arrow and got underway, their tensions quickly evaporated. They had studied enchantments together for months, now, and they just fell into the same routine, each simultaneously hyper-focused on the task at hand, while being extremely aware of the other. Working like this might've been too distracting for many other pairs to make work, but for them, it allowed them to work in sync with each other. Valeria would fetch materials exactly when Leon needed them and hold an article of clothing steady as Leon applied flowing lines of runes along the seams of the boot's leather, so that when the final enchantment was activated, they would faintly glow, giving the boot an appearance of having been trimmed in silver. Then, when Leon started to slow in his work, his focus slipping in his mental fatigue, Valeria took over, with each continuing to swap out the roles of inscriber and assistant as needed, breaking up their work into chunks that each could easily manage.

When everything was done, the flight suit was, in a word, perfect. Leon knew such a thing as perfection was fleeting, dependent on the perspective of the viewer, and ultimately impossible to truly achieve, but for the skills he and Valeria possessed, combined with the obvious skill of the tailor who'd made the

pieces to begin with, he knew when examining them that they were as close to perfect as they could reasonably attain.

A quick battery of tests proved the flight suit to be safe and functional, and so they sent word to the Princess that her flight suit was ready and returned to the Heaven's Eye guest house to await its pick-up. Neither were entirely expecting the Princess herself to show up, practically breathless, less than half an hour later with about as manic a gleam in her eye as her Royal dignity would allow, her entire guard detail in tow. Notably absent was Asiya, though Leon then remembered that she and her parents had headed over to the Samar side of the Gulf a couple of days ago.

They met Cristina in the front courtyard, and the Princess rushed over to Valeria, practically throwing herself into the silver-haired woman's arms in greeting, while almost ignoring Leon entirely, doing no more than saying his name to acknowledge his presence.

Leon returned that with a quick nod of his head, and then silently directed her attention to a nearby table where the flight suit was waiting.

Cristina walked over, her eyes wide, her lips turning upward in a bright, cheery smile. At first, she delicately reached out a hand to touch the gloves, almost seeming like she was afraid they'd shock her. After a moment, though, she was pulling the gloves onto her hands, and Dame Maxima, the head of her guard detail was rushing forward.

"Your Highness, perhaps it would be better to have these things tested a lit—"

"No," Cristina replied, not speaking loudly, but punctuating her command by freezing in place and turning her eyes back upon her knightess. Her deep brown eyes, normally so warm and friendly, were ice cold, and though Cristina was only second-tier, and Maxima was sixth, it was the knightess who shrank back.

Leon watched in awe as Cristina put the flight suit on. She was the descendent of the Bull Kings, cut from the same cloth as Trajan, and she'd more than showed that off over the past couple of months. The same young, eminently curious young woman that Leon had helped escape from the Royal Harem more than a year ago was still there, but now she had found some steel to reinforce her will with, commanding attention and loyalty among her followers just as Trajan had done.

But it was her curiosity, not her steel will, that seemed to be propelling her into putting on the flight suit without waiting around for anything else, though Valeria did step in to reassure the Princess' guard detail that the suit had been tested and was safe enough to use. That calmed them down a bit, but then the Princess activated the flight suit as soon as she'd put it on.

Immediately, she was catapulted several dozen feet into the air, terrifying her bodyguards who began to shout in alarm, while Leon and Valeria were practically pushed aside as the knightesses swarmed the ground beneath the Princess, ready to catch her if she were to fall.

But Cristina didn't seem at all like she wanted the help. Instead, she cried out in joy as she pushed more of her power into the suit, causing her to rise even higher upon a jet of air that sent the dust and dirt below scattering about the courtyard, loose clothes flapping, and the Princess herself rocketing into the air.

'Shit,' Leon thought, knowing that even if his enchantments were powerful and efficient, they wouldn't make up for Cristina only having a second-tier level of power. With how high and how quickly she was rising, she was going to run out of power before she knew it and would come crashing back to the ground from a height more than great enough to inflict serious harm, if not outright death.

The Royal Guardswomen lost their minds in concern and horror as their charge left them behind, flying further away from the guest house and over the city, with Maxima in particular shouting and begging for the Princess to come back down. The knightess then turned her attention toward Leon and Valeria, hoping they could do something.

But Leon and Valeria were already moving completely in sync. Valeria had her flight suit donned and she was taking off to follow the Princess, while Leon's body was growing, twisting, and changing before everyone's eyes. So drastic was his transformation, and so shocking was the sound of the tearing of his clothes, that it silenced the guardswomen long enough for Maxima to get control back and to start shouting orders.

Neither Valeria nor Leon stuck around to hear them. Valeria had already taken off in pursuit of the gleefully reckless Princess, while with a mighty beat of his enormous wings that knocked over several of the weaker members of Cristina's guard detail, Leon took off after her.

He was an eighth-tier mage, and in his Thunderbird form, his command over wind magic was more than considerable enough to hurl him higher and faster than either of the other ladies. And it seemed that was a good thing, because the reality of her situation hit Cristina as soon as she looked straight down, causing her joyous laughter to catch in her throat as, in her panic, she cut off her flow of magic power to her flight suit and began to fall.

With the roar of the wind in his ears, the screams of terror from the knightesses below, and the frantic screaming of Valeria as she tried to catch up to the Princess, Leon accelerated, pushing his power over the air as much as he could to catch up.

It only took a few seconds, but those few seconds felt like half a lifetime. Leon thundered past Valeria, almost knocking her out of the sky in his bid to reach the Princess. He didn't worry too much about his silver-haired lover, for at the fifth-tier, it was hardly more than an inconvenience to her. He then braked hard as he approached Cristina, who'd flown surprisingly high up and far away from the guest house in her short flight. It was almost nothing to him to turn in the air and start falling with Cristina right next to him, matching her speed and angling himself closer.

He didn't pull out of the fall until he could feel the Princess grabbing onto his feathers and holding on for dear life. Then, he adjusted his position so that Cristina was right between his shoulders, leveled off, then spread his wings.

He and the Princess came to a gentle landing in a small grassy park within the Heaven's Eye enclave, and with hardly a chirp, he bent low and let Cristina easily slide off his back.

Only then did he realize that he was in pain—he dimly remembered a white-hot flash of pain during the landing like someone had stabbed him with a needle, but now it was just a dull, annoying throb. And turning around, he immediately saw the cause: Cristina fell to her knees in the grass, the widest smile on

her face as she stared up at the sky, while clutched in her fingers was a massive brown feather the size of her entire arm, her fingers locked around it so tightly that her knuckles were completely white.

‘Ow...’ Leon bitterly thought as Valeria landed right next to them and the knightesses led by Dame Maxima sprinted over to secure their Princess. There were a few other onlookers, too—all Heaven’s Eye personnel who were in the middle of walking through the park as they went about their day in the guild’s complex. They stared in wonder and confusion at the sight before them, at a Princess who’d fallen out of the sky on the back of a gigantic raptor.

Valeria, seeing that Cristina was seen to by the knightesses of her guard detail, took a moment to conjure an opaque wall of ice to cover Leon as he shifted back into his human form and dressed himself. He considered himself fortunate that he hadn’t been wearing clothes he particularly cared about when he did transform, and he vowed to look into some possible solutions to the problem of destroying all of his clothing every time he wanted to change into his Thunderbird form.

When he was dressed, Valeria shattered the ice wall into snow to melt in the relative heat of the Ariminium afternoon, and she and Leon walked over to the Princess.

“Are you OK?” Valeria called out as they approached.

Cristina, instead of responding verbally, disentangled herself from the throng of guards and threw herself into Valeria’s stunned arms, laughing the whole while. She seemed energetic and upbeat, but Leon could see a few traces of fatigue in the corners of her eyes—she was filled with joy, and that gave her physical energy, but she’d likely used a significant amount of magic power during that flight.

“I’m better than OK!” Cristina shouted. “This is *amazing*! We HAVE to go on a flight together, sometime!”

As she shouted her last statement, she leaned back while still in Valeria’s arms, and gave the silver-haired woman a glowing look of expectation, locking their gazes together.

Valeria clearly didn’t know what to say, and after an awkward moment, carefully extricated herself from Cristina’s embrace.

“I think... we might be able to manage something,” she said. “You can’t do anything like that again! You could’ve died if you’d flown too high to safely get back down!”

Valeria continued to reprimand the Princess, and in stark contrast to how Dame Maxima had done so only a moment ago, Cristina actually shrank back, looking rather chastened by it. But when Valeria gave her a more concrete acceptance of going out flying together later, the Princess’ face lit up like the dawn. But then Valeria leaned in to whisper something into the Princess’ ear, and Cristina stiffened as she slowly turned her head to look at Leon.

Then, she relaxed and sauntered over to Leon. “Thank you for your assistance, Leon,” she said with the perfect poise and demeanor that would be expected of a Princess, acting as if Leon had merely passed her a stack of papers or something else of no consequence rather than saving her from potentially serious injury or death.

Not that Leon cared about the apparent snub.

“Don’t worry about it,” Leon replied with a dismissive wave of his hand. “Just, uh, don’t go expecting another ride like that. I’m not a horse...” He gestured to the huge feather Cristina was still clutching onto which hadn’t disappeared or changed at all with his return to human form, and the Princess suddenly went beet-red.

“Ah, I apologize for that, pulling this didn’t hurt, did it?” she said with genuine embarrassment as she held out the feather for him to take.

Leon seriously considered taking it back, but he could see as the Princess’ eyes darted back and forth between his face and the feather, she didn’t *want* to give it up. To an extent, he could understand why: it was a beautiful shade of healthy brown, and the tiny flecks of gold interspersed throughout it had it sparkling in the sun. It even still carried a hint of his magic within it—not enough to pose much of a threat to anyone or really be useful in any way, but enough, he estimated, to keep the feather looking healthy and freshly-plucked for many years.

He extended his hand, but instead of reaching out for the feather, he just pushed the Princess’ hand back to her.

“You can keep it,” he said. “Consider it a reminder and trophy for having survived a dangerous endeavor.”

The Princess smiled and clutched the feather

Chapter 625: Leon’s Response

After the Legion messengers arrived to inform the Princess of Asiya and her family’s arrest by the Samar Kingdom, Cristina was in quite the state. But after a few minutes, and with a few exchanged words with Valeria, she pulled herself together, reasserted her Royal dignity, and departed the Heaven’s Eye compound to return to the Bull’s Horns.

Despite initially being completely distraught, when she left, Leon could see steel in her eyes, and her aura radiated with an undercurrent of killing intent. The Princess was *furious*, moreso than he’d ever seen before.

Valeria wasn’t much more composed, and as they watched the Princess and her guards depart, she seethed beside Leon, barely able to stand still.

“You want to go with?” Leon quietly asked despite already knowing the answer.

And Valeria knew that he knew the answer, and so didn’t verbally respond. Instead, she began to emit an ice-cold aura with far more blatant killing intent than the Princess had just shown.

“Go with them,” Leon said. “I’ll get Elise and Maia, and we’ll meet you at the Horns.”

Without wasting another moment, Valeria took off running after the Princess, and Leon hurriedly returned to the guest house. The entire way, he wondered just how he’d break the news, but no matter what the response might be from anyone—whether that be from Minerva, Aquillius, or anyone else—he was going to go after Asiya. He liked her—maybe not enough to call her a friend, but she was fun to have around, and he knew that Valeria and Elise practically thought of her as a sister.

There was no doubt in his mind that he was going to go after her, whatever the cost may be.

—

“We’ve received word already from the Sultan,” the diplomat Aquillius said to the gathered knights and Legion higher-ups. This included Leon, Valeria, Elise, and Maia, all of whom Princess Cristina, who was also in attendance, had insisted join the meeting.

It almost felt like old times, being there in the war room of the southern Horn. It was the same room where Leon had first met Prince Trajan, where he’d loomed menacingly despite sitting cross-legged on a raised dais while all of his commanders sat in proper seats.

This time, though, it was Cristina who sat upon the dais, while Minerva and Maxima stood off to the side. Aquillius sat just to the right of the dais, giving his report to the two rows of sixth-tier Legates and their adjutants standing behind them.

Aquillius continued, “They’re claiming that Dame Asiya and her family were conspiring against the Sultan, meeting with seditious members of their nobility with the purpose of forming a coalition to rebel against the Sultan and replace him with one of the previous Sultan’s younger sons.”

“When did this happen?” Minerva asked.

“Two days ago,” Aquillius answered.

“Why did they only send word now?” Cristina asked, the same steel that Leon had seen in her eyes now reflected in her tone.

“For two possible reasons,” Aquillius answered. “Either they wanted some time to prepare for our response, given that they arrested a knight in the service of one of our Princesses, or they simply didn’t realize they’d done so until now. I’d say the first possibility is more likely—they’re thinking we’re going to send someone after Dame Asiya to rescue her, and they might think that because she was with those arrested, the Bull Kingdom might be sponsoring rebellion in their Kingdom.”

“Or,” a high-ranking diplomat that Leon didn’t recognize sitting next to Aquillius suggested, “these are just trumped-up charges that they know are false, but are using to capture exiled dissidents, and they don’t want us coming after our knight, which might expose their duplicity and weaken their credibility.”

“No matter the case, they don’t want us going after Dame Asiya,” Aquillius replied.

“To the hells with that,” Cristina practically growled. “They took *my* knight. I want her back, and I want blood paid in recompense.” Aquillius shot her a shocked look, and she rolled her eyes and added, “I’d settle for just getting my knight back.”

“There has to be an official response,” Minerva stated, her tone cold and even, though Leon knew her well enough to see that she was just as furious at the Samar Kingdom as Cristina was. “We can’t just let them seize our knights with impunity.”

“Sending Legion soldiers across the Gulf will only incite another war,” Aquillius pointed out.

“They’ve always been weaker than us,” Minerva dismissively replied. “Their armies don’t stand a chance against us here in the Horns, and their navy is too small to cross the Gulf in threatening numbers. A good strike force can recover our knight and chastise them against making such rash moves again.”

Leon like the sound of that plan, but he understood why Aquillius just sighed and looked like he was trying to push a boulder uphill. He knew that Trajan had always believed the Samar Kingdom to be too weak to present a direct threat to the Bull Kingdom, but their southern neighbor had been at peace for more than a decade. They might see that the Bull Kingdom had just come down from an invasion by Talfar, ravaged by a civil war, and then mauled by the Serpentine Islanders, and thought that they might try to push against Bull dominance within the Gulf of Discord.

"That would require authorization by His Majesty, Dame Minerva," Aquillius tiredly replied. "And I would caution against starting another war while we're still recovering from the last one."

"*They* are starting a war, Sir Aquillius!" Cristina insisted. "They took my knight! I won't stand for it!"

"And we can't let them trample over our sovereignty!" Minerva added.

"And we won't!" Aquillius assured them, though it seemed his assurances were lost on Cristina and Minerva. However, with a glance around the room, he could see that they were resonating with many of the other Legion knights in the room—Minerva and Cristina may be willing to fight for Asiya, but there weren't many others in the room who shared that willingness.

Aquillius continued, "There are diplomatic solutions. We'll send a delegation to demand the return of our knight. We'll get her back."

"In how long??" Cristina demanded to know. "Before or after she's been sold to some noble who wants a new concubine? Before or after she's been executed for treason? Before or after she's spent a year or more languishing in a tiny, filthy prison cell, being subjected to who knows what?!"

"Dame Asiya is strong, Your Highness," Aquillius insisted, his tone calm and soothing even in the face of Cristina's rising anger. "We'll get her back long before any of that happens. No matter if she and her family are from the south, they're still under the protection of the Bull King, and that means that they'll be treated well."

Cristina looked unconvinced, and Leon was, too. It had been more than two days since they'd gotten word of Asiya's arrest—she could be just about anywhere within the Samar Kingdom by now. They could've put her on a ship and sailed her down the coast to one of their bigger and more well-defended cities, or they could've taken her to some black site in the middle of the unpopulated desert that made up the majority of the Samar Kingdom's territory.

What Leon *did* know, though, was that every moment wasted on debate lowered their chances of finding Asiya. Already, he and Maia had both bathed as much of the Gulf in their powerful magic senses as they could, but hadn't been able to find her or her parents.

He and his family were in the back, not quite participating in the meeting since they weren't members of the Legion or any other Bull Kingdom government post, so he didn't feel at all awkward about leaning into Elise's ear and whispering, "I'll meet you back at the guest house; I can't stand listening to this any longer. I'm going scouting."

Elise turned toward Leon, a look of reproach and anger on her face until a moment later when what he was saying clicked in her head.

"If anyone asks, we just decided to leave until they make a decision," he said, and he nodded his head at Maia, who nodded back.

Elise lightly frowned in thought, then gave the two a nod of her own, giving them her tacit permission to leave. Valeria heard the quiet exchange, and she nodded as well, leaving them with no other obligations to anyone in the room. Together, they slipped out of the meeting, ignoring the few looks of surprise they drew as they left.

Once outside, Leon whispered into Maia's mind, [Can you shadow me from the coast?]

[Yes,] Maia replied.

[They might've taken them west by ship, or south into the desert. Would the latter matter to you?]

[I would find it uncomfortable, but the sand is nothing more than irritating. I'll be fine and my powers won't be affected too much.]

Leon smiled.

[What if they've kept Asiya and her family in the city?]

[A possibility,] Leon admitted as they exited the Bull's Horns and returned to Ariminium, [but not one I think likely. There aren't many defenses down there—certainly not enough to repel even a single Legion, let alone us. The only reason I can think of to keep Asiya and her parents there would be as a provocation.]

[Maybe that's what it is, then?]

Leon cocked his head in thought. [Again, *maybe*, but I don't think so. *Maybe* there are war hawks in Samar who want war with the Bull Kingdom while they think it weak, and they're trying to start something by arresting a Bull knight. But I think this is more of an internal issue that Asiya just found herself caught up in.]

Leon remembered the talk he had with Asiya's parents the week before. They had told him that they were simply trying to return home and end their exile, not install a new Sultan. He couldn't say if they were lying or not, but he was inclined to believe not—otherwise, they wouldn't have allowed their daughter to come with them, in his mind. He figured this was just a ploy being used by the Sultan or someone close to him to get rid of potential threats outside of their borders. If Asiya's family were taken out of the picture, then those in the Samar Kingdom wouldn't have to worry about them soliciting Bull intervention in their politics.

A reasonable worry, he supposed, and if his guess was right, it was a tactic he might have to remember when he started to properly build his own state.

Leon and Maia made their way through the winding streets of the city until they arrived at the Heaven's Eye compound. From there, they had access to the Gulf through nearby canals that allowed Heaven's Eye merchant ships to directly enter and exit the enclave.

Operating almost with one mind, the two separated, with Maia making her way to the canal to melt into the water, while Leon returned to their guest house, where he undressed in their private courtyard and transformed into his avian form.

However, there was one last problem he wanted to try and take care of: his avian body was large and eye-catching—there weren't many birds flying around that were twice the height of a full-grown man, after all. To that end, he wondered if his ring of invisibility would work on him in that form. He was much larger, and he had no finger upon which the ring could be anchored, but he felt it was worth a try.

He was in a hurry, so he only allowed himself a few minutes to experiment. Unfortunately, those few minutes were fruitless, as no matter how much he tried, he couldn't get the ring on his talon, nor could he get it to activate and shield him from view.

With a sigh, he pulled the ring back into his soul realm and filed the idea away for later. Being able to transform was one thing, but if he could figure out how to both transform and be invisible... His beak wasn't capable of salivating, but he still felt the sensation of his mouth watering at the thought.

Without further ado, with a burst of wind magic and a mighty flap of his enormous wings, Leon took off from the courtyard and shot into the air more than a hundred feet above the city of Ariminium. That far up, he was hardly inconspicuous, but the vast majority of people only looked in front of them, not above, and the buildings in the city were generally more than two stories tall, further preventing people from staring. However, just in case, with a few more flaps of his wings, Leon vanished into the light cloud cover in the sky. There weren't enough clouds to completely shield him from unwanted gazes as he flew southward, but he flew more than high enough that when he wasn't covered by a cloud, from the perspective of someone on the ground without anything else to compare him to in the bright blue sky, he wasn't notable at all.

Down below, he could sense Maia following his lead as he quickly left the Bull Kingdom's waters and followed the coast first south across the Tyrrhenian River delta, and then quickly westward. The Samar port city wasn't far, only a few miles away, so he arrived above it in minutes.

It was a starkly different city compared to Ariminium. Despite it being on the coast and having essentially the same building resources and general environment around it as Ariminium did, it was still clearly of a different architectural tradition.

Most of the buildings were only a single story, featuring high arches on those that were larger; dozens of tall, thin towers scattered throughout the city that were warding against magic senses; and on a hill about a mile inland lay what were obviously the palaces and offices of those who ruled the city. Most of the buildings in the city were made of either plain gray stone or local wood, but these palaces and important buildings were made of glossy black glass that glistened in the light of the afternoon sun. Much like the palace of Asiya's parents back in the Bull Kingdom's capital, Leon could detect a number of enchantments within the walls that altered how light interacted with the glass—most of it seemed to be absorbed, reflecting little; however, Leon knew that at least *some* light would pass through the glass walls, dying the interior in various shades according to the tastes of the inhabitants.

It was a spectacular style of construction, and one made even moreso by the grand scale some of these palaces were built in. The largest of the palaces was where he initially focused his attention—it had one large building sitting at the center of its complex, built with a square footprint of more than five hundred per side, with a large domed roof with a diameter of at least two hundred feet at its base sitting in the center of the building over what Leon assumed to be its main hall. Unlike the rest of the building, which largely retained its black color aside from a few brightly-hued highlights, the dome, while still made of

the same glassy material, was entirely gold. In front of this main building was a large courtyard flanked by a many-columned peristyle, which covered paths and walkways to other, smaller buildings in the palace complex.

He could see dozens of people walking through and within the smaller buildings and courtyard, and from their appearances, he judged this building to be the central administration building for the city. Unfortunately, the main palace building was warded against magic senses, so he couldn't see much more than that.

[Can you sense Asiya or her parents?] Leon asked to Maia, who was sitting just outside of the city's relatively small port.

[No,] Maia replied.

Leon's avian face couldn't scowl, but he tried to, anyway. There were many buildings here that could house her, and there were no good ways for him to check. Unless... He was an eighth-tier mage, and one that lacked any affiliations that he might have to reasonably consider upon whom consequences might fall.

[Maia,] he whispered to his river nymph lover, [I'm thinking of making a scene to try and draw out someone important. Be ready for anything.]

[I'm with you, my mate,] Maia replied.

That was all Leon needed to hear. With a terrific clap of thunder that he guessed could be heard all the way back in the Bull's Horns, he descended in a deadly dive upon the courtyard of this palace building.

In the center of the courtyard stood a large fountain, the center of which had been decorated with a tall flat-topped pillar that had been covered in geometric patterns. The pillar was big enough that he alighted upon it with little trouble, to the shock and panic of the nearby lower-tiered bureaucrats, who scrambled away from him as quickly as they could. He helped them in their flight by beating his wings a few times, filling the courtyard with great gusts of wind that picked many of the bureaucrats up and hurled them into the peristyle.

Almost immediately, a high-pitched alarm went off in the palace, and over the next half-minute, a complement of a hundred heavily-armed guards swarmed out into the courtyard, most brandishing spears about eight feet long. These guards were fairly strong, all things considered, being mostly third-tier or above, but Leon hardly felt threatened when they were led by only a single sixth-tier mage.

"Be careful!" the sixth-tier mage shouted in the common language, his accent pleasantly lilting and trilling in a way that Asiya and her parents hadn't. "This thing is powerful! Defend the people and don't provoke it!"

If Leon could smile, he would've. It was a good and honorable order, and one that endeared him to the guard captain. However, for his purposes, he couldn't let that show in his behavior.

He fixed the guard captain in a steely gaze, his avian eyes locking upon the man as the full weight of his killing intent crashed down upon him.

To his credit, the guard captain remained standing, but his eyes went wide, his long, curved saber began to shake in his grip, and his knees grew noticeably weak.

Leon flapped his wings again, and accompanied by a deafening clap of thunder, sent a great gust of wind through the courtyard, throwing all of the guards back and sending many of their weapons scattering.

It was then that the great double doors of the main palace complex swung open, and an additional two hundred guards came streaming out. These guards were more heavily armed and armored, and were generally of higher tier, but none were strong enough for Leon to feel even a twinge of fear or anxiety.

Leading them was a striking man, dressed in red silk embroidered with gold; weaponless, but with a strong sixth-tier aura that gave Leon the impression he was a fire mage. He was handsome, had long, curled black hair, an impressive beard, and the air command about him.

“What is the meaning of this?!” the man roared at Leon, and Leon was unsure if he thought the great bird in front of him would respond, or if he was just expressing his anger and shock at what was happening. Turning his attention to the guards that were surrounding the central fountain and brandishing their weapons at Leon, he shouted, “We defend this city! By the order of the Sultan! All who threaten its people and its interests will fall by my hand!”

This man showed no fear at how obviously outclassed he was in terms of raw power, but any feelings of endearment in Leon fell away as the man conjured and hurled a great fireball at him. However, with only a single beat of his wings, the fireball burst upon a wall of air and was blown back in the man’s face.

It was hardly going to be a damaging blow, but it stunned the man long enough for Leon to make his move. He got the impression that this was a man important enough to know the goings-on in the city, so he erupted from the pillar with another wingbeat forceful enough to send the guards behind him soaring through the courtyard, and himself soaring above the rest of the guards.

The important man he targeted was fortunately not thrown back into the main palace by the backblast of his attack, leaving him open for Leon’s outstretched talons, which wrapped around him so quickly he barely had enough time to recover from the shock of his attack being reflected before he was being carried off into the sky.

At about a hundred feet up, Leon felt the man start to try to burn his way out of Leon’s talons, but to no effect. Leon’s fire magic was much more powerful than his, and the man succeeded in doing nothing more than slightly singeing the scales covering Leon’s legs.

The rest of the people in the courtyard could only watch as Leon carried the man off into the sky, soon disappearing into the clouds and vanishing into the distance.

Chapter 626: Requesting an Audience

Leon dropped his captured Samarid sixth-tier warrior on a hill several miles out from the Samar side of Ariminium, close to the Gulf. The man, disoriented from the rapid capture and subsequent flight, hit the ground and almost rolled all the way down the hill. In those few seconds before he managed to stop himself, two things happened: first, Leon alighted at the top of the hill, transformed back into his human form, and dressed himself; second, a water dragon erupted from the Gulf and bolted up the grassy hill.

The man was able to struggle back to his feet just in time to fire off one small burst of fire from his hands at the oncoming water dragon, only for his fire to splash harmlessly across its aqueous form. The water dragon then crashed into him, consuming him entirely and carrying him back to Leon at the top of the hill.

From the side of the water dragon, Maia emerged, a smug smile on her face, which quickly vanished after joining Leon and the two slipped into business mode. Once they were ready, their prisoner was shifted through the interior of the water dragon—he was still ineffectually trying to burn his way out, but he simply didn't have the power to compete against Maia—until his head poked out of the dragon's side.

Immediately, he began to shout and curse in his native language, which neither Leon nor Maia could speak. After a moment of futile struggling, though, he seemed to force himself to calm down and asked in the common tongue, "What is this?"

His accent was rough; he was clearly not used to making the sounds of Aeterna's common language. However, he was perfectly understandable.

"We're looking for someone," Leon explained, deliberately keeping his tone and accent as light and neutral as he could manage.

However, the Samarid then spat on the ground at Leon's feet and growled, "You sound like a northern cow."

Leon smiled magnanimously, walked up to the Samarid, and then backhanded him across the face so hard that as Leon took a couple steps back, the Samarid spat out some blood and a couple teeth. This wasn't how Leon wanted to conduct an interrogation, but he still needed to establish who was in charge if they were to get anywhere.

"Let's not let things get too unpleasant," Leon said. "Treat me with respect, and with respect shall I treat you. I have no quarrel with you—at least, I hope I don't. And if you tell me what I want to know, then you will be let go without further violence. Does that sound amenable to you?"

The Samarid glared at Leon, his deep brown eyes filled with hatred, but as he took more time to take in Leon and Maia's auras, and more time to examine the situation he found himself in, he eventually relented.

Leon questioned him thoroughly, and an hour later, once he had all the information he felt he needed, he let the Samarid go, though not before leaving him with a threat of a return if he found the information unreliable...

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"It's about as we thought," Leon explained to Elise and Valeria back in Ariminium. "Asiya and her parents have been taken west to Samar. Seems to be by ship, and a fast one at that since neither I nor Maia could detect it after these couple of days."

Elise bit her fingernail in frustration as her eyes stared unfocused in a westerly direction. Valeria was a little more directed, and she stared at a map of the coast of the Samar Kingdom.

Leon and his family were alone in the guest house, though only in the next room awaited Leon's retinue. About as Leon had expected, Aquilius had eventually won out against Minerva and Cristina, and no direct military response was going to be forthcoming. Instead, he was going to send a large diplomatic delegation to Samar to discuss the issue and work on freeing Asiya while Minerva coordinated with the Consul of the Gulf to step up the Bull Kingdom's patrols in the Gulf of Discord.

Still, Asiya was to remain in Samarid hands, and that was something that Leon couldn't abide. She was like a sister to Elise and Valeria, and though he held no direct relation to the Samarid woman, he wasn't going to let her go just like that; firstly because his lovers would never forgive him for not using the power at his command to rescue their friend; and secondly because he knew that if he were ever to become a King in his own right, to take up the mantle lost by his Clan eighty thousand years ago, he couldn't just leave someone even tangentially related to him behind.

To that end, he'd called up his retinue and had them prepare for a fight. In these months since the campaign against the Serpentine Islanders, everyone had made suitable progress, but none had ascended in magical tier. However, Leon thought them ready for this—even if they weren't, though, he *needed* them to see him free Asiya. He *needed* them to know that if he were willing to go so far for someone with only tangential connections to him, then he would be willing to go much farther for each one of them.

This would be as much a test of him as it would be for them. First, though, they had to physically locate Asiya.

"They could be anywhere along the coast," Valeria said as she gestured at the map. "They could've stopped somewhere for supplies, maybe?"

"They didn't stop at all," Leon growled as he took a look at the map for himself. "They waited two days before sending official word back to Ariminium of Asiya's capture. With the fastest ship I'd think they could reasonably have, that's just enough time to reach Samar." As he spoke, Leon traced the coast with his finger all the way to the Samar Kingdom's capital city, located on the coast of the Gulf of Discord. "She's probably there already..."

"How are we to get there, then?" Elise wondered aloud.

"Maia and I can get there tonight if we have to," Leon said, though his tone indicated he didn't think it the wisest course of action. "Anzu *might* be able to carry two people that far and that fast, but it would exhaust him. We *could* rampage throughout Samar looking for her, but..."

"Hardly our best option," Valeria finished for him, and Leon nodded.

"Eighth-tier or not, numbers will eventually bring us down, and they have just as many seventh-tier mages as the Bull Kingdom does. Indiscriminate violence is still an answer, but let's just call that Plan Z, for now." Other than that, Leon was wary of attracting the ire of an entire Kingdom. Such an act could hurt him in more ways than one—for instance, other Kingdoms, and even the Empires themselves, might not take too kindly to him acting without restraint. It would likely also imperil his ability to join Heaven's Eye, who were bound to remain politically neutral.

So, no, he didn't want to just start indiscriminately killing his way through the Samar Kingdom. If possible, he'd prefer it if they'd just give Asiya back. If they didn't, then he'd be willing to slaughter his way through the desert Kingdom, but...

He grimaced at the thought.

"There's hardly much other choice, is there?" Valeria whispered in dejection. "Everything else will take too long. It's already been *days*, and we don't even know if she's still alive..."

Valeria's words brought the already fairly depressed mood in the room down even further. Leon had no words to give in comfort, but he reached out and squeezed Valeria and Elise's hands.

"There's nothing that Heaven's Eye can do?" Leon inquired of Elise, despite knowing her answer already. She confirmed it when she shook her head in the negative. Leon nodded in acknowledgment, and then asked only one more question. "How easy would it be to rent or buy a fast boat?"

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Leon's retinue pushed out of Ariminium in a small, but fast ship big enough for a permanent crew of about fifteen. It was about as cramped as Leon could expect, but it was sleek and had a shallow draft, allowing it to slide across the top of the Gulf with ease and great speed. Even better, it had both a mast for wind propulsion and magic engines that used water magic to augment its speed.

After inspecting it, Anshu had reported to Leon that not only would his retinue be more than enough to get it moving, but it would also be quick enough to reach Samar in about two and a half days, assuming they stopped to rest. They might be able to get there in less than two if they pushed through the night and didn't care what that rush might do to the ship.

Leon was pleased, and since he didn't much care for the ship, he ordered his retinue to make all possible haste, regardless of the long-term damage the ship sustained. He let Anshu take over the ship, gave everyone orders to meet up in a small inlet about twenty miles away from the outskirts of Samar, and then he and Maia flew and swam ahead.

They reached the capital of the Samar Kingdom a little after noon the following day, and Leon had to slow down and marvel at the city that sprawled out before him. It wasn't nearly as large as the Bull Kingdom's capital, but that much was to be expected—a Kingdom consisting of largely desert, even with the aid of magic, couldn't sustain a large population. Still, Samar had to have at least a quarter million residents, and the roads leading to it were crowded with merchants, as was the city's port.

Most of the city, in contrast to the Samarid sister city to Ariminium, was made of tan sandstone cut into huge blocks that practically glowed in the light of the sun. The lion's share of the buildings themselves were built in boxy shapes, though there were a few poorer-looking districts where the perfect symmetry that could be seen in other parts of the city broke down and the sandstone was far more weathered and aged.

Many of the buildings were painted, and after flying above the city for a while and inspecting it with his magic senses on his way in, Leon was able to determine a pattern: it seemed that private businesses were painted in various hues of red, residential apartments and townhouses were painted in all kinds of greens, and government buildings were either light sky-blue or pristine white, depending on size. He

guessed there were probably more nuances to the system, but he could neither read the Samar language, nor understand most of what was being said within the city.

The upper-class districts, meanwhile, were made of the same black glass that he'd now associated with the Samar people and their architecture, with the more unwieldy glossy material leading to more natural and curving shapes to the buildings than what was seen in other parts of the city.

The city's layout as a whole was largely built in a half-circle emanating from the coast, with an enormous palace complex sitting in the center, from which flowed no less than four good-sized rivers in the four cardinal directions. These were clearly created with powerful water magic since the city's surroundings, while fairly green from a distance, were still relatively dry. The greenery that could be seen was mostly from various palm trees and other desert plants that never grew particularly tall. So, these four rivers flowing from the palace seemed to be the city's only water source.

The rivers flowing in great curving canals that, from the air, looked to be perfectly circular, and Leon found himself admiring how they not only ensured that every person, no matter where they were in the city, was no more than a few blocks away from one of these canals, but that the wide channels also acted as moats, separating the city into more easily-defensible districts. The canals were wide enough to allow small boats to enter and traverse the city, facilitating trade and travel, while numerous bridges connected each city segment to the others—each of these bridges were, in turn, secured by walls, imposing gatehouses, and towers at both ends.

The core of the city was surrounded on all sides by curved walls a dozen stories tall and dotted with watchtowers, though unlike the towers along the bridges, the walls were sparsely garrisoned, save for the massive gatehouse on the eastern side, where it seemed the palace guards were barracked, and where the palace's main entrance was located.

The land to the west of the city seemed entirely devoted to agriculture, as fields stretched for miles along the thin strip of the western coast where the growth of food was possible, shielded mostly from view from the Gulf by a thick screen of natural vegetation.

If Leon could've smiled in his avian form, he would've. *'Seems they don't want the Bull Kingdom spying on them from the north...'* he thought with amusement. The plane of Aeterna was flat, so a Legion spy could stand on the southern shores of the Bull Kingdom, and if they were strong enough to see so far with any clarity, the natural screens and walls of the city would prevent them from seeing much of the Samar Kingdom's heartland.

The Bull Kingdom didn't have that problem; the southern coast was much rockier and swampier, making settled cities a little harder to come by. Aside from the six merchant cities on the southern coast, there wasn't much of interest that was directly adjacent to the Gulf—Ariminium aside, of course.

[Maia,] Leon whispered, [do you see her?]

After his initial evaluation of Samar, he started scanning the city with his magic senses as inconspicuously as he could. Those with any power within the city would probably still be able to sense his probes if they were paying attention, but he didn't want to make himself too obvious by bathing the city in his magic power. Whether it was because of that, or because Asiya was somewhere his power couldn't reach, he couldn't find his wife and lover's bubbly friend.

[No,] his river nymph lover quickly replied.

He couldn't scowl, but he tried to, anyway. The rest of his retinue was still several hours from their rendezvous point, and he didn't want to do anything too rash before they got into place. Even if he found Asiya, he balked at carrying her all the way back to Ariminium on his back, especially after losing one feather catching Princess Cristina when she fell.

[Think the direct approach would be best?] Leon wondered.

[I'd certainly appreciate it...] Maia whispered.

Again, he tried to scowl and only succeeded only in furthering his frustration.

[Stay out in the bay,] Leon replied. [I can see into some parts of the palace, but not all of them. I can't say for certain what kind of wards they may have. Better to have a contingency.]

[What are you doing?]

[I'm going to go knock,] Leon replied, and he started to dive. It was only polite to ask, after all, and maybe they would just let him have Asiya back if he showed them a bit of courtesy. He was an eighth-tier mage, and they might just cave into his demands if he made his desires known.

He could feel Maia's acceptance, but also some frustration of her own. She wanted to be here with him; he could feel that, but he'd rather she hung back a bit and keep her presence and power secret. He may be taking the direct path, but he still wanted more than just a few semi-powerful retainers who were still several hours away up his sleeve if push came to shove.

He'd been flying extremely high above the city—more than a mile, in fact. Some of his senses were duller in his avian form—such as his sense of smell—but his eyesight had been greatly strengthened, even by his eighth-tier standards. Nothing escaped his notice from so high in the air, not even when the occasional cloud drifted by between him and the ground.

There weren't that many clouds in the sky. They were close to the Gulf, so it wasn't like the sky was completely clear, but the heat and general dryness of the Samar Kingdom didn't lend itself well to much precipitation. It was an almost depressingly sunny place, one that Leon found quite beautiful, but also somewhat sterile and uncomfortable. He didn't think he could ever get comfortable in a place that didn't often rain.

Speaking of, as he rapidly descended, he allowed his aura to spill forth. After gaining the ability to transform, the Thunderbird had been teaching him how to manipulate the weather around him, to seize control of the ambient magic and make use of it rather than relying entirely on his own stores of magic power. He was still learning the basics, but he'd picked up on a few flashy, if not particularly powerful tricks.

He didn't need wind magic to sustain his dive, so he switched to water magic as he plummeted, letting it spill from his body in great torrents as he descended and joining with the water magic already in the air and aiding him in seizing control of it. He'd been flying so high that he hadn't been that conspicuous, but now he was actively drawing attention, for behind him grew a great storm cloud. It wasn't that big by any means, but it was far more than just about any mage outside of the Four Empires might be able to create—and it only grew bigger as he descended upon the Samar Kingdom's Royal Palace.

By the time he reached less than five hundred feet from the ground, he switched back to wind magic, using it to break his dive and to send many Samar guardsmen down below scattering. They'd noticed his blatant announcement of arrival and had started scrambling to assemble, but the gale-force winds that his wings created practically cleared the courtyard just inside the main gate of the Sultan's palace of all living souls. People screamed in shock and fear, and he justified their reactions by letting his killing intent spike and radiate throughout the palace as his talons touched the smooth white marble of the courtyard, his back to the main gate, ignoring the slam of its massive doors of enchanted oak slammed shut behind him.

Then, to complete the picture, he conjured a powerful cyclone around him, kicking up so much dust that he was completely obscured from non-magical view, which let him transform back into his human body and dress himself in just a moment. In his human form, his wind magic lost much of its potency and the storm cloud above started to dissipate, but he used one last pulse of magic to cause a bolt of golden lightning to gather in the cloud, then strike the top of the courtyard's main gatehouse that guarded the only bridge to the Royal Palace from the city. It was much louder than it was dangerous, having about as much damage potential within it as a lightning bolt he might've thrown when he was in the fifth-tier, but it was quite eye-catching, and that's what he wanted right now.

Leon smiled as the cyclone around him dissipated and the dust began to settle. He kicked up quite the ruckus, but he was confident that no one had been even moderately injured, though the gatehouse had taken some damage from his lightning bolt.

Still, the Royal Palace's guardsmen didn't seem to appreciate his restraint, as hundreds of them then spilled out into the courtyard, all heavily armed and armored. Most wielded spears, and all had gilded sabers attached at their waists. Their armor was beautiful golden scaled plate over a suit of mail that even covered their faces, while their heads were protected by heavily decorated and gilded conical helmets.

Then three warriors appeared; the first, appearing in a blaze of fire as he landed in the courtyard directly in front of Leon, having jumped over from somewhere else in the palace; the second leaped over the walls behind him using the water from the canal-moat separating the palace from the city, landing on Leon's right and glaring at Leon with dispassionate warning in her eyes; the third appeared from a great pillar of stone that erupted from the ground to Leon's left, her skin mottled and gray from having hardened into stone. All three were warriors of the

Chapter 627: The Sultan's Court

"I'd like to request an audience with your Sultan, if possible," Leon said, smiling at the three seventh-tier Samar warriors that had him surrounded, a thousand Samar guardsmen at their backs.

"What *are* you?" the female water mage responded, her tone questioning, *wondering*, rather than accusatory, and her accent lilting and trilling in a way that Leon found incredibly pleasant.

The other two seventh-tier warriors didn't add their thoughts, but Leon felt quite a bit of killing intent from both. The water mage didn't seem particularly offended, but the other two were clearly only one wrong move on his part away from attacking. He got the impression that if it weren't for his obvious power then they already would have.

"I'm something that's looking to speak with your Sultan," Leon replied, grinning at the water mage.

She smirked back, her eyes narrowing as her lips turned upward.

"You'll go nowhere!" the male fire mage ahead of him shouted. "Not until you identify yourself and state your *true* purpose in coming here!"

Leon turned his gaze back toward the fire mage and let his killing intent spill from his body like a tidal wave. The seventh-tier mages didn't react much, showcasing just how strong and experienced they were, but most of the other thousand guardsmen in the courtyard began to visibly lose their nerve.

"You may call me Aetos," Leon replied, his mind turning immediately to the name his Clan had used for their base unit for measuring magic power when he tried to think of something fake. "Someone I care about was taken captive by agents of your Kingdom, and I wish for her to be released. I thought that my coming here to speak about the issue would be far better than taking the easier option of attacking like a mindless animal. Was I mistaken, or are you humans even more enslaved by your emotions than me?"

He guessed from their reactions that his entrance might've strongly implied him to be an Ascended Beast instead than human, and he had no problem at all leaning into their assumption. If any animal achieved his level of power, they'd almost invariably gain the power to transform into humans, so it wasn't even that unlikely of a story. It might also help to deflect blame for his actions away from the Bull Kingdom.

The fire mage didn't seem convinced, though. But before he could shout back, the doors to a balcony overlooking the courtyard from the main palace building opened, and a sixth-tier mage walked out. He was an old man, with a long white beard, a large yellow turban wrapped around his head with a pair of decorative cloth wings extending out from the front as far as his shoulders.

"Commander Mansur!" the man shouted from the balcony, his voice echoing with authority and wisdom despite his relatively weak aura. Notably—Leon assumed for his benefit—the man spoke to his people in the common tongue. "The Sultan has granted an audience with our guest!"

The fire mage relaxed, as did the other two seventh-tier mages and the rest of the guardsmen, though none of them lowered their weapons completely, nor did they take their eyes off of Leon.

Despite this, Leon strode forward with what he hoped looked like the utmost confidence that betrayed none of his inner anxiety.

The two female mages flanked him as he walked, while Commander Mansur, the male fire mage, fell in behind him, though not without a glare of disapproval as Leon passed him. The guardsmen parted, creating an obvious path toward the palace's front doors, and Leon was escorted inside.

He met the elder sixth-tier mage just inside the doors, who'd hurried down to the entrance hall to welcome him in.

"Lord Aetos," the man greeted with a respectful tone and a welcoming smile, though his eyes were hard and suspicious.

Leon smiled at him and said, "Please, just 'Aetos'. You seem to have me at a disadvantage...?"

“Forgive my rudeness from before,” the man replied, “my focus was on preventing any violence from breaking out. You must understand that your unannounced arrival has many feeling ill at-ease.”

“And for that, I apologize,” Leon responded. “Were I not in a bit of a hurry, I wouldn’t have made so dramatic an entrance. May I have the honor of knowing your name?”

“I am honored to be known as Ashar,” he said. “I am the Sultan’s Vizier, and welcoming visiting dignitaries is one of my duties.”

“Well met, Ashar,” Leon said. Much like Ashar, Leon kept his tone respectful, but not subordinate. He didn’t answer to anyone in the Samar Kingdom, and he had no intention of making it seem like he was their junior in any way. That being said, he didn’t want to make any unnecessary enemies, either.

He was curious about the title of ‘Vizier’, though. From what he could gather of how he ordered around seventh-tier mages, and how everyone’s eyes seemed to track him in the entrance hall, he supposed it was somewhat analogous to the Bull Kingdom’s Chancellor—the chief of the King’s court advisors and his metaphorical right hand. However, the Bull Kingdom’s Chancellor didn’t have much to do with foreign affairs, so he supposed it wasn’t a perfect comparison...

He could sense the guardsmen back in the courtyard being dismissed, but he knew that they’d be on standby as long as he was here, just in case. The three seventh-tier mages, on the other hand, shadowed him and Ashar as they exchanged meaningless pleasantries for about a quarter hour—Leon assumed so that suitable meeting chambers could be prepared. Then, only about twenty minutes after Leon touched down in the courtyard, the palace’s seneschal approached the Vizier, whispered into his ear, and Ashar said, “The Sultan will greet you, now.”

From there, to Leon’s subdued surprise, Leon was shown into the Samar Kingdom’s throne room. He’d assumed they’d take him somewhere more private, but he mentally shrugged and rolled with the surprise. It wasn’t like this was to be his first time in a throne room, after all.

The throne room was as magnificent a room as it ought to have been—quite large, more than enough to comfortably hold a court of at least a thousand. The right and left walls were open to the air, though, broken only by many columns supporting great archways, with beautiful gardens lying just beyond the throne room’s marble floors, giving it a delightfully open feel and plenty of natural air flowing in and out. The ceiling was high and domed, with the black glass causing the bright yellow-orange light of the sun to dye the entire interior surface of the dome a deep blood red. The marble floors, meanwhile, almost glowed with the brilliant blue of a perfectly-clear lake.

The throne itself wasn’t too impressive, being barely more than a wooden stool draped with golden silk and raised on a dais only a couple of steps above the floor. More impressive, however, was the mural decorating the wall behind it—much like the rest of the art Leon had seen in the Samar Kingdom, it didn’t depict any human figures, but instead was a gorgeous display of fractal geometric designs rendered in gold on the glass background, dyed a vivid purple by the blue of the floor and red of the ceiling.

Leon only spent a few seconds admiring the architecture as he was escorted inside—the court had been assembled, with hundreds of dark-skinned Samarids watching him enter and whispering amongst themselves. Nearly all were wearing loose flowing robes, though unlike the pristine whites and yellows

that he'd seen Asiya's family wear around, nearly everyone wore some bright flashy color. Many even wore garments that had been gilded in gold and silver.

Interestingly, Leon noticed that despite his somewhat threatening arrival, the only people who were armored in the room were a handful of guards scattered around the room's edge, and the three seventh-tier warriors following him, and he didn't see anything that he would've called a uniform. It seemed to him that the Samar Kingdom's military had much less of a presence within their Kingdom than it did in the Bull Kingdom.

Finally, though, his eyes turned to the man himself, the Sultan of the Samar Kingdom: Faizan ibn Ali Al Samar. He was a tall man, excessively well-built and dressed in tighter robes that, compared to the looser garments worn by his court, almost seemed to emphasize his toned physique. His face was severe, long and thin with cheeks so well-defined that they were only a step or two away from being gaunt and hollow, though that didn't stop him from having a certain handsomeness to him. His face was adorned with a long black beard, oiled into a long, dignified, arrowhead shape and perfectly trimmed, while the top of his head sported a majestic turban of the purest white silk, around which had been fastened a strip of black cloth decorated with a panoply of gemstones.

The Sultan sat up straight, his posture perfect as Leon approached, his face stony and inexpressive, his robust seventh-tier aura not flickering in the slightest, which further gave him an air of stoic distance. His black eyes tracked Leon across the room, never wavering once.

Ashar escorted Leon to the middle of a blue rug just in front of the throne's dais, and then respectfully bowed to the Sultan. Leon did not bow, but he let his smile fall from his lips so that he didn't give the impression of frivolity before a King.

If the Sultan was insulted, he didn't give the slightest sign. Instead, he almost imperceptibly tilted his head to the right, and Ashar hurried forward to lean down on the Sultan's right side. So quietly that no one, not even Leon, in the court could hear, the Sultan whispered into his Vizier's ear. Once he was finished, the Vizier and the Sultan straightened themselves, and Ashar, in a commanding and authoritative tone, inquired of Leon, "Aetos, the Sultan has granted you your requested audience. What matter brings you to his court this day?"

Leon smiled bitterly and hesitated for just a moment. Asiya's parents being arrested was a political issue that he *really* didn't want to touch in this manner, but he wanted to at least try just *asking* for Asiya herself back. Maybe they'd look at his power, evaluate it against the potential threat she posed, and then decide that it was better to get in good with him than do whatever it was they were going to do with her instead.

So, Leon steeled himself and said with both confidence and just a little bit of the anger and frustration he felt at this whole situation, "I'm here for a woman named Asiya. She spent most of her life in the Bull Kingdom as 'Asiya Samarid'."

As soon as he said her name, all of the quiet ambient chatter in the throne room ceased for a moment, and then came back with greater intensity. The Sultan was clearly far too composed and dignified to let such a thing faze him, though, and aside from the slightest sign of tightening in the corners of his eyes, he didn't even twitch.

The Vizier leaned back in, letting his Sultan whisper into his ear once more. A moment later, he straightened back up and, with more iron in his voice, said, “The lady of whom you speak was arrested on charges of treason and sedition, among other crimes. We cannot let her go. This is an internal matter—we can’t let those who conspire against us walk free.”

A thin smile spread across Leon’s face, recognizing the veiled threat. If he pressed too hard for Asiya, they might think, or at least *say*, that he was ‘conspiring against them’, giving them *carte blanche* to act against him.

Taking a moment before responding, Leon sent Maia a quick update, telling her to be ready for violence, because while he still hoped he might reach some kind of compromise, it was looking more and more likely that violence was going to be the name of the game this day.

“Surely there’s *some* compromise we might work out, here?” Leon said, his smile relaxing as he stared at the Sultan. “I promised her I would take her as my concubine, you see, and what kind of man would I be if I just allowed someone else to take her? You say you can’t let her go; I say I can’t let her stay. Might there be some kind of middle ground?”

The middle of the Sultan’s court might not have been the best place to bring this up, but Leon wasn’t too interested in playing the long game. That would give them too much time to outplay him. He’d rather they just come to a decision now.

“We would have to think over any proposal you have,” Ashar relayed from his liege. “Such charges levied against her are serious.”

“Might I at least see her, then?” Leon asked. “I would know that she is all right and unharmed.”

The Sultan didn’t immediately answer. Instead, he stared at Leon, his expression grave and stony. Leon stared back, his smile still on his face, but his eyes starting to narrow in anticipation of violence.

[Xaphan,] he whispered into his soul realm.

[Hmm?] the demon replied, not having been paying much attention.

[You good for a fight?] Leon asked. Now that he wasn’t affiliated with the Bull Kingdom, Leon was more willing to use his demonic partner in battle. It would even the playing field considerably given just how many *people* the Sultan would have at his beck and call.

[Yes,] Xaphan readily replied, and Leon could feel the demon’s power flaring just a bit.

[Good,] he responded. [Stand by.]

After what felt like half an eternity, and long after the courtiers had once more stopped talking, the Sultan turned his head slightly, not letting Leon out of his sight but tacitly signaling the Vizier to lean back in for instructions.

The Sultan didn’t whisper into Ashar’s ear for long, but it was long enough for Leon to be mildly concerned. However, the Vizier soon stood up and addressed Leon once more.

“In his great magnanimity, our noble Sultan has decided to allow your request to see the Lady Asiya before the end of the day, to ascertain that we are treating her well. Furthermore, we will deliberate

about what to do with her later today, and have an answer for you a few hours hence. For now, an invitation is extended to you to stay here, within the Royal Palace, for the day, and to join a feast that will be held tonight.”

“I would be honored to accept your hospitality,” Leon replied, but even then, the tension between him and the Sultan never abated. They had at least accepted his request, but they weren’t letting Asiya go just for him. They either wanted something more, or they were planning against him.

He hoped it was the former, but he readied himself for disappointment.

—

Leon was shown into an opulent guest room within the palace, and then left there, with the Vizier himself informing Leon that he was going to organize a visit from Asiya later, but that it might take some time. Leon acquiesced, and though he maintained an air of unflappability, as soon as he was left alone, he began hurriedly scoping the place out.

As he did so, he sent Maia another update, and asked her to keep an eye on the palace and look out for Ashar—the guest rooms were all insulated with wards against magic senses, preventing Leon from doing this himself.

Then, he began looking around in earnest. It was entirely possible that his ‘hosts’ were now debating how to deal with him instead of how to comply with their agreement, and in what he felt was the likely eventuality of their betrayal, he needed to have a backup plan.

The guest suite had plenty of windows that were openable from his side, which surprised him when he discovered it. They were more than large enough that he wouldn’t even need to squeeze to get out of them. As an experiment, he opened a window—one that faced the front courtyard—and stuck his head outside, then projected his magic senses. To his delight, with his head stuck just outside of the wards, they weren’t scattered. He couldn’t see within the palace, of course, but at least now he wasn’t completely blind.

He left the window open, and then continued to inspect the room. There were all the splendid furnishings that he could expect a Kingdom to provide for a visiting dignitary, but he ignored them all. Instead, he looked for peepholes, rapped on the walls looking for any that sounded strangely hollow, and took some time to kneel at the doors and listen for any sound leaking in from outside.

His search was fruitless, so he was at least able to conclude that if the Samarids were spying on him, then they weren’t being stupid about it. Still, he couldn’t shake the feeling that he wasn’t nearly as alone as they might want him to feel.

After about two hours, Maia informed him that she saw the Vizier walking to one of the more distant buildings in the palace complex, and a few minutes later, exit with Asiya in tow. She was in chains and surrounded by guards, but to Maia’s eyes, she seemed otherwise unharmed.

Leon was able to confirm for himself about fifteen minutes later when the guest room doors were pushed open and Ashar showed Asiya inside. Leon was honestly surprised; he thought they might’ve hurried to have her executed now that he’d shown up, but he guessed that they didn’t want to anger him *just* yet.

Asiya had a look of disdain and rebellion on her face as the door opened, but when her eyes landed upon Leon, she froze in place, her face going blank with shock. She looked like she was about to speak, but Leon cut her off.

“Asiya!” he boomed, both to sell his lie that she was romantically attached to him, and to keep her from saying anything that might contradict him. “I was so worried about you!”

He rushed forward and took her into his arms, the Vizier and the other guards around them watching in silence. One of those guards, Leon noted, was the seventh-tier water mage who’d seemed pretty reasonable during the initial confrontation. None of the other seventh-tier mages were around, but he doubted they were too far away.

With Asiya in his arms, he whispered softly, but loudly enough for everyone else to hear if they were listening, “Your Aetos has come for you. Worry no longer, I’ll take you home.”

Ashar then stepped forward. “We’re still debating your request, Aetos, and any release would come with some conditions.”

Leon waved dismissively and summoned a powerful gust of wind that knocked Ashar right out of the door. The Vizier landed on his feet without a shred of lost dignity, while the guards behind him all drew their weapons and took a step toward the guest rooms. Ashar halted them with a single raised hand, though, as Leon hadn’t made any further hostile movements.

“Close the door, please,” Leon said with a grin as he pulled Asiya further into the guest chambers. “We can talk more later. For now, I would talk with Asiya alone.”

Ashar stared at Leon, his expression unreadable. But then, he nodded to the guards just outside the doors, and they leaned in and closed them, leaving Leon and Asiya in peace. Only then did Leon gently release Asiya from his grip.

“I came here with some back-up to get you out of here,” he whispered, while internally doubling down on his desire to learn Xaphan’s mental communication technique.

Asiya took a deep breath as she stared at the doors, and asked with carefully controlled body language and tone, “Who else?”

“Naiaad’s in the city,” Leon whispered, leaning in closer to the Samarid woman so that he could whisper even quieter. “Val and the rest of my retinue ought to be closing in on our rendezvous point a few miles out from the city along the coast with a ship. No matter what happens, we’ll get you out of here and back to the Princess.”

Asiya partially relaxed, but then she turned to face Leon and asked him one of the hardest questions he’d ever had to field before.

“What about... my parents?”

Chapter 628: Paying a Ransom

“What about... my parents?”

Just four words. Words spoken with a quiet desperation that he understood completely. From her tone, he could tell that Asiya knew her parents weren't long for the world. He didn't know what he might be able to do about it without getting spectacularly violent, and he didn't know how to tell her that.

He had the power to rescue them—or at least, he had enough power to be confident that he could. With Xaphan and Maia, there wasn't much question in his mind that he could extract them and escape.

But the Samar Kingdom might do to them what the Bull Kingdom had done to Jormun. Leon's crew was more powerful than Jormun's was at the time of Octavius' kidnapping, but he couldn't foresee the consequences of angering an entire Kingdom by breaking accused traitors out of prison and denying their King 'justice'. It could disbar him Heaven's Eye. It could mean that he'd have to worry about powerful assassins paid for with Samarid gold coming for him and his family.

It was an awful thing to do, but Asiya was who he was here for. Her parents, though...

"I don't know," Leon honestly whispered to his 'concubine', his eyes flitting to the closed doors of the guest chambers. "I will do what I can. I... can't promise anything. I'm here for you, and you are my priority."

Asiya shuddered and looked to him in horror. "I can't lose them..." she whispered, her warm brown eyes taking on a glassy quality as they filled with tears. "I can't lose them..." she repeated, and then fell to her knees, sobbing.

Leon quietly sighed, then took a knee and laid a friendly hand upon her shoulder. He'd told the Samarids that they were lovers, but outside of their overt attention, he wasn't going to get too physically intimate with Asiya unless he couldn't avoid it. Still, he could tell she needed some comfort, and he'd provide what comfort he could.

"I'll try," he whispered as her weeping continued. "Are they being held in the same place you were?"

He didn't expect an immediate answer. He just hoped that if she had something to focus on, some shred of hope, then she might be able to hold herself together until they were back in friendly territory.

After about a minute, Asiya's tears had dried, and she answered him, "Yes."

Leon nodded, and after conferring with Maia and sticking his head back out of the window so he could project his magic senses, he'd pinned down roughly where Asiya's parents were. During that time, Asiya pulled herself together, taking a seat in the guest chamber's lounge, though she hardly looked comfortable.

"How have they been treating you?" Leon inquired as he strode back over, hoping to project such an air of confidence that some of it would rub off on her. "Have you been getting enough food? Have they touched or abused you?"

His last statement came with an undercurrent of killing intent, and his eyes flitted over to the doors.

"No," Asiya replied, her eyes dull and unfocused. "At least, not yet... There *have* been a few jokes, and some of the people who took me and my family prisoner had... *roaminghands*, but nothing overt... I don't know what's going to happen to me, though..."

“Nothing’s going to happen to you,” Leon said as he went to sit next to her. “I think they’ll let me take you out of here. That much shouldn’t be a problem, especially since I’m not associated with a rival Kingdom.”

“*I am*, though,” Asiya pointed out. “I’m a knight in the service of Princess Cristina.”

“And the Princess is heading south,” Leon replied. “As powerful as the Empires are, down in Imperial lands is not a place where they’ll have to worry about you. The Ilian Empire is a long way away.”

Asiya didn’t respond, but her arms crossed her chest as if she were hugging herself for solace.

Leon once more glanced over at the doors. Maybe he couldn’t do much for her parents, but Asiya was going to come with him back to Ariminium whether the Samar Kingdom wanted her to or not.

—

“We’ve decided we’re amenable to your request,” Ashar said to Leon as they sat in a formal meeting room. After two hours with Asiya, Leon was visited by the Vizier once more, and brought to a place that, while still formal, was decidedly much less so than the court. The Sultan wasn’t present; only Ashar, the seventh-tier water mage, two other elder sixth-tier mages, and about a dozen assistants and secretaries who were making themselves as invisible as was feasible were in the meeting with him.

“I’m sensing it won’t come without a price?” Leon asked as he gave Ashar a mildly derisive look.

“There will be a ransom,” Ashar responded, “and we would require a written declaration from Lady Asiya and yourself that you won’t interfere in our administering of justice against her treasonous parents.”

“*Treasonous*,” Leon growled, channeling his inner Thunderbird to aid him in showing disdain for ‘human’ law.

“Yes,” the Vizier replied, his tone cold and unhumorous. “They came to this Kingdom to foment dissent and rebellion against our Sultan. Such actions *must* have consequences, even if those consequences have consequences of their own. Treason against a sitting monarch cannot go unpunished.”

From within Leon, Leon heard Nestor quietly whisper, [He’s right, you know...]

Xaphan decided to toss in his two silvers and agreed, [Threats must be eliminated, however possible.]

Leon ignored them, though he was of a similar opinion. It wasn’t the morals of the Samar Kingdom’s actions that bothered him; merely *who* those actions were directed against.

“What ransom do you require?” Leon demanded to know, his imperious tone cranking up a notch.

“Three million silver coins,” came the response from the aged Vizier, and for once, Leon thought he saw a smile briefly play out within the man’s thick white beard.

Leon smiled viciously at the man, his disdain showing more obviously now that he more genuinely felt it.

“A hefty sum for so weak a woman,” he spat.

“A woman worthy of being taken by an... ‘eighth-tier mage’ has such value,” Ashar replied, his otherwise emotionless voice taking on just a hint of amusement.

Leon scowled, and he called upon all of his skills in negotiation. Naturally, there weren’t many he could call upon, but he *did* manage to drop the ransom to ‘only’ a million and a half silvers. Still a hefty sum, but not one that would hurt him too much—not with Elise taking charge of his already relatively staggering finances.

Still, it was money he wasn’t thrilled to part with. His mood was further ruined when one of the other sixth-tier mages was revealed to be a representative of Heaven’s Eye who was there to facilitate the transfer—the Samarids weren’t expecting Leon to just drop the ransom on the table.

And Leon, though loath as he was to part with so much coin, dearly wished that he could do that, just to see the looks on their faces. He remembered the awe and respect he felt when, right after her negotiation with Trajan for reparations following the war, Andraste, Queen of the Talfar Kingdom, dropped dozens of gold bars on the table. Leon didn’t necessarily think of that moment often, but now that he was in a similar situation, he understood why she did it. She was a Queen, after all, and maintaining political power was as much about the symbolism as it was about personal power or charisma. And so casually throwing around so much wealth was a powerful symbol that he wished he could replicate.

Fortunately, he had something *almost* as good, and pulled his gold card from his soul realm, presenting it to the Heaven’s Eye representative to facilitate the ransom payment. The rep, the seventh-tier water mage, and Ashar all stared at the card for various periods in shock, and though none lasted longer than a second, Leon still reveled in the surprise. None of them said anything about it, but he could tell they were tensing slightly at this display of relations with Heaven’s Eye.

At the very least, he hoped this would help convince them that he wasn’t affiliated with anyone else, such as the Bull Kingdom. Gold cards were generally reserved for Royalty, not for the servants of Royalty.

Once the ransom was complete and Leon received his card back, he broached the topic of Asiya’s parents with Ashar, but unfortunately, Leon wasn’t able to make much progress. Making matters harder, Leon was also unwilling to push the Samarids too hard to free Asiya’s parents. He felt like pressing too hard for them, especially since the Samarids were so stubborn in their refusal, would come off almost like a weakness on his part.

So, he let the matter rest, and finished the negotiations by merely inquiring after their sentence and when it would be carried out, slowly growing more frustrated with this whole situation. Asiya was his priority, but he still *wanted* Khayu and Iset to leave with him, too.

Ashar, at first, looked like he would refuse Leon’s request, but the final sixth-tier mage in the meeting room, who’d up to that point been silent, shrugged and said that since a public statement had been made, it wasn’t like they could keep it secret.

Asiya’s parents had been sentenced to death, and the sentence was to be carried out at dawn the following morning.

—

"So," the female Samarid water mage said as she escorted Leon back to the guest chambers, "Aetos, where do you come from?"

Leon, having expected to travel through the palace in silence, took a moment to process his mild annoyance before answering. "Many places," he said in a tone that was almost a growl.

"Just asking," the water mage replied with an amused half-smile. "I've never seen an Ascended Beast, before, and I can't help but be curious..."

Leon sighed and asked, "What's your name, again?"

"Kaouter."

"Right, Kaouter. Is there something specific you'd like to ask me?"

She shrugged. "I guess I've always just been kind of fascinated by the concept, you know? Like, if something becomes strong enough, they can transform into a human... It just seems so strange and arbitrary, like why not transform into a dragon? Why don't things transform into something other than a human? And become so clearly taken with their new forms that they form romantic attachments..."

She gave Leon a pointed gaze that he did his best to ignore. He didn't want to know what was on her mind.

"I suppose I'd just like to take the opportunity to pick your brain a little, you know? Get your perspective on things..."

Leon had to bite his tongue to stop himself from snapping back at her to mind her business. He wasn't in much of a talking mood, and the prospect of returning to Asiya to inform her that while he was able to ransom her into his custody, he would have to get more drastic for her parents weighed heavily on his mind.

But this was a seventh-tier mage, a relatively young woman of considerable power who was filling the role of a Paladin within the Samar Kingdom, and she was being fairly polite and cordial. There was no reason to bite her head off for asking some questions, even though they annoyed him.

"I don't think you'd find my perspective particularly flattering," Leon drily stated.

"I don't mind," Kaouter replied, smiling warmly at Leon. "I'm not blind to the flaws of human society. As I said, I'm just curious..."

"Unfortunately, I can't say much," Leon said as they arrived at the guest chambers. "I'm not that interested in human society all that much. Too many rules. Too many *people*. Life would be so much simpler if there were less humans around, wouldn't you agree?"

"I wouldn't," Kaouter responded, though she continued to smile and waited for next statement.

Leon shrugged. "I take what I want, and I don't let your petty disputes get in my way. That's my perspective. No more, no less."

"I'm sure there's more than that," Kaouter replied with a mysterious look in her eyes, "but we've arrived at our destination. Might I ask you and your Lady for the honor of a visit later?"

“Define ‘later’.”

Kaouter leaned in to whisper into Leon’s ear, though not nearly so quietly that the rest of the guards around them couldn’t hear. “It means ‘whenever you want’...”

Leon froze at that implication, and he felt Xaphan’s attention begin to rise.

[Ohhh ho... Be careful with this one, young human,] the demon cautioned. [This one’s a shark, and it seems she’s got her eyes on you...]

“I’ll see you then, Aetos,” Kaouter said, her tone laced with additional meaning as Leon entered the guest chambers and firmly closed the doors behind him. She continued to smile at him until the doors finally blocked her from view.

Leon sighed, letting go of all the stress and anxiety that that conversation had built up.

‘Was she... really flirting with me?’ Leon wondered, unable to see why she’d want to do so. *‘That has to be some kind of trick...’*

He spent a couple minutes there in front of the door trying to puzzle out Kaouter’s intentions, but he received no insights from his ruminations. Having come to no conclusions, he could only hope not to encounter her again before he could get the hells out of this Kingdom.

First, though, he had to steel himself. He could hear Asiya in the other room, and he wasn’t quite sure what to say to her. He didn’t want to talk to her until he had a plan.

And then, something occurred to him.

[Xaphan, you still there?]

[Crawling back to me for help, human?] Xaphan responded. [A most wise course of action. I assume you need advice about women; now, the thing you’re going to have to do is to—]

[No, not about that,] Leon interrupted exasperatedly. [I was wondering if you were willing to go on a bit of a rampage...]

—

Leon and Asiya, with the latter’s ransom paid, didn’t stick around for long within the Samarid Royal Palace, regardless of the invitations that the Sultan and Kaouter had extended to him over the course of the day. They didn’t have much time, and neither were all that interested in experiencing more of the Sultan’s hospitality—Asiya, in particular, had endured more than her fair share.

Some of the Samarids made token efforts to get Leon to stay, but he could tell from the subtle mannerisms of the officials that could muster the will to try that they all wanted him gone. He guessed it was having an unknown eighth-tier mage in their midst made them nervous.

He was fine with that. He wasn’t here to make friends with the people who’d kidnapped another friend.

To that end, Leon led Asiya out to the nearest open-air courtyard to the guest chambers and got ready to leave. He could sense quite a few Samarid guardsmen following them, including Kaouter and Commander Mansur, the male seventh-tier fire mage, and he wasn’t sure if it made him more nervous

or more relaxed that this was the case. On the one hand, it meant that they hadn't found what he'd left in the guest chambers. On the other hand, when they did, they'd be close enough to engage him in battle, possibly harming Asiya in the process. So, while Leon trusted in Xaphan's ability to hide, he still wanted to get Asiya out of here before things started kicking off.

So, with a degree of hurry but not so much to be suspicious, Leon led Asiya out into the courtyard. The young Samarid woman was far more nervous than Leon was, but having him by her side kept a measure of calm about her, enough that she was able to keep a straight face.

The hardest part came next, where Leon pulled all of his clothes back into his soul realm. His face burned with embarrassment at exposing himself like this before so many Samarid guards, but if he was to be believable as an Ascended Beast, he supposed having no compunctions against showing his body could only help.

Still, he transformed back into his Thunderbird form as quickly as he could, shrouding his body in rich brown and gold feathers.

The next part was only marginally better. He wasn't a horse, and he didn't enjoy being treated like one, so it was only grudgingly that he lowered himself and let Asiya jump onto his back. He felt her adjusting herself and grabbing some of his feathers; a deeply uncomfortably feeling, but one he could endure for the sake of getting her out of here.

And with nothing left to do, Leon summoned his wind magic and took off into the evening sky, leaving the Royal Palace behind.

But he'd be back soon.

—

Leon and Asiya watched as Leon's ship ran aground on the sandy shore of the Samar Kingdom about twenty-five miles outside of the city of Samar itself. The ship was built to spend its nights on the coast rather than at sea, so while it seemed strange to Leon, Anshu at the helm was completely unperturbed with the ship now being mostly on land.

It was about midnight, and Leon and Asiya had been waiting around the inlet for hours. Maia and Leon had made such good time in their journey that they'd long since left the rest of the retinue behind, but the ship had still arrived before Leon had been expecting it. Anshu had pushed everyone hard to reach this place in such a short period of time, and Leon couldn't help but smile in pride at seeing his recruitment of the Indradian so validated.

"Asiya!" Valeria shouted as she ran to the guardrails of the ship, frantically waving her hand. A moment later, Marcus, Alcander, Gaius, and Alix appeared at her side, bows in their hands, their eyes sharp as they scanned the horizon, looking for any potential threats that might've followed Leon.

Leon appreciated their vigilance, but there wasn't much need for it, thankfully. He'd flown as fast as he was willing to with Asiya on his back, and quite high up. Some of the Samar seventh-tier mages might've been able to follow them with their magic senses, but Leon hadn't noticed anything. As far as he could tell, the Samar Kingdom had neither followed nor tracked them.

He frowned at their negligence, but in this case, he'd take the unexpected windfall.

Asiya gave him a quick look, questioning him with her eyes, the spark of hope still alive within her. Leon nodded, and she began to walk toward the ship, then picking up speed until she was in a full-tilt sprint, and then using her magically-enhanced strength to leap up onto the deck right into Valeria's arms.

Leon followed just behind her, but he didn't get comfortable. Instead, he gave Valeria and Anshu orders to shove back off and head out into the Gulf. Valeria wanted to ask him questions, but Anshu practically growled at her as he went about fulfilling Leon's order.

Leon, out of an abundance of caution, didn't tell Valeria what he was doing. Instead, he simply asked her to stay on the ship and wait for his return. Then, the ring on his finger flashed green, and he faded from view. Without another a word, he vanished into the night, running back to Samar. His priority had been seen to: Asiya had been recovered from Samar hands. But his job wasn't over, yet...

Chapter 629: Victorious Rescue

Leon worried about his retinue, but he trusted Asiya would explain to them his plan. So, invisible, he sprinted across the sandy dirt of the Samar coast back toward the Kingdom's capital city, where his river nymph and demonic partner awaited him. They didn't have much longer before Asiya's parents would be executed, but if they had any luck, they could pull this off.

Leon just hoped that the dungeons in Samar were as porous as the dungeons in the Bull Kingdom. But if his usual luck held, they would probably be completely impenetrable.

After about half an hour of hard running, Leon crossed the twenty-five miles and re-entered the city, still invisible and with a change of clothes to something dark, nondescript, and kept his face hidden, just in case. Given the time, the streets were largely deserted, and it was easy enough for him to slip past most of the guards. The fortifications, however, would be much trickier by the simple fact that they were magically fortified—if he so much as brushed his arm against the sandstone bricks, the sheer amount of magic power flowing through them would disrupt his invisibility.

So, he needed another plan. He could sense that the canals that wound through the city were magically protected, too, so that ruled them out. With some reluctance, Leon realized that heading north to the edge of the city and out into the water was probably his best bet. With Maia on his side, it wasn't like it was too risky, but he was a creature of the sky, and the idea of swimming even a modest distance out into the Gulf gave him serious mental stress.

He'd have to, though, if he wanted to get around the worst of Samar's defenses, which were concentrated around the coast. If he was able to infiltrate the port, then he'd practically have a straight shot into the adjacent palace... through a number of guards and gatehouses, but he'd be much closer than he was now.

For just a moment, he allowed himself to contemplate the possibility of transforming back into his Thunderbird form. Unfortunately, nothing had changed since the last time he'd thought about it: he still hadn't the magical capacity to transform completely at will, so his two transformations today were already pushing his limits. Even one more transformation might start to severely impact his combat capabilities. Besides, with the way he arrived and departed from the palace, the guards were likely keeping an eye on the sky more than they otherwise would, and the sky was clear with a bright full moon out. He wouldn't be able to infiltrate unseen, and they'd easily identify him if he tried.

So that left the ocean.

Leon scowled, and then made his way a half-mile or so north, back to the coast, and there, frowned at what he saw.

It seemed that his ransoming of Asiya had the Samarids spooked, because their navy was out in force. Their navy wasn't nearly as powerful as the Legion's, with no ships nearly as capable as the Legion dreadnoughts, though they still had many war galleys of comparable size to their Legion counterparts. He could only sigh; no matter what, this was going to be damned difficult.

Despite having successfully done what he'd set out to do—that being to get Asiya out of Samarid hands—he was starting to regret his actions a bit. Not that he contemplated turning around, of course; at this point, he had already committed to his course of action the moment he let Xaphan out of his soul realm.

[Are you ready, human?] came the crackling whisper of Xaphan's voice in his mind.

[Not quite yet,] Leon replied as he hurried out onto the beach. Directing his thoughts to Maia, he asked, [Can you get me into the port?]

[I can do more than that, if you need me to,] Maia replied.

[I wouldn't mind a lift into the palace,] Leon quipped.

[That can be done.]

Leon smiled at how casually she said that, and then dove into the water and submerged himself. He didn't have to swim too far out before he felt a shift in the water around him, and he knew that Maia had a hold of him. Only a moment later, he was pulled out into the water, and then circled back toward the port.

[Xaphan, now,] Leon gravely ordered.

Xaphan didn't verbally respond, but only a moment later, a tremendous explosion rocked the city of Samar. The shockwave was so powerful that even below the surface of the water and protected by Maia's magic power, Leon could feel it resound in his chest, and he could hear the awful sound of countless pieces of glass shattering throughout the city. The Samarids liked to build out of glass, and while he assumed that most of those constructs were reinforced and magically protected in addition to being fairly robust in and of themselves, the power of his demonic partner was just too much for all of them to bear, and many had their surfaces crack and splinter in response to his attack.

The Royal Palace was the center of the blast. Dark red demonfire consumed one of the outlying buildings and reached up into the clear sky, looming over the entire city and filling the air with the demon's power in a wordless promise of what was about to happen.

Almost immediately after, alarms went up across the city, along with the sounds of screaming. With his magic senses, Leon could see what few civilians that were out in the streets scrambling for cover, while the city's guardsmen and nearby military forces hurriedly mobilized. This wasn't the best thing to see, but fortunately, it meant that many of the patrolling galleys pulled away from the port, while those still docked began to slide out of their berths, preparing to defend the port from a potential attack from the

sea. It might make his escape more interesting, but for the moment, Xaphan's attack had successfully stirred up the hornet's nest, leaving it emptier than it was before.

[Go!] Leon shouted to Maia, and a second later, he felt the water around him suddenly pulse. He felt himself drawn back, his river nymph lover's power tightening around him, and then it snapped, sending him flying out of the water and sailing a few hundred feet up and into the air. Unfortunately, his fragile shell of invisibility was sundered, forcing his ring into a five minute cooldown, but in the darkness and with his aura restrained, it seemed that he wasn't seen.

Behind him, as soon as he was launched, the water within the port began to roil and churn as Maia seized control of it and turned it against the war galleys, further capturing their attention and keeping it from him. He wasn't able to watch for more than a few seconds, but even that was enough to see two water dragons erupt from the waves and wrap themselves around the hull of one of the galleys, splintering its frame and pulling it down below the surface, spilling its human contents out into the harbor.

With a smile, Leon sailed over the Royal Palace's walls, clear over any defensive wards that might've been inscribed to prevent such a thing. His hood and cloth mask were in place, hiding his identity, but he wondered if that was even something he needed to worry about. He felt sure that as he flew over the walls that alarms would be going off somewhere, but he was also certain that with the recent blast and with an eighth-tier demon going on a rampage within the palace, the guards had other things on their mind.

And, initially, it seemed his certainty paid off. He roughly landed just beyond the walls, the impact shuddering through his eighth-tier limbs, but in a fairly open space—an unpaved courtyard surrounded on three sides by fairly small buildings, and the wall on the fourth—on the opposite side of the palace complex from where Xaphan was on his deliberately attention-grabbing rampage. There weren't any guards around this courtyard, and more than enough places for him to hide until his ring was usable again.

So, that's exactly what he did. He sprinted over into the peristyle, pulled open the closest door as quickly and quietly as he could, and then slipped inside. To his relief, he found himself in a small room for storing various sports equipment. He guessed this was a place reserved for the leisure of the Sultan or his guests, but that didn't matter too much right now, he just cared that it got him out of the open.

Within the storage room, Leon could feel his heart madly thumping in his chest, resonating with every shockwave from every explosion Xaphan set off. Already, the demon was doing battle with the seventh-tier earth mage who'd confronted Leon earlier, as well as another seventh-tier water mage that he was unfamiliar with. Neither Mansur, the fire mage, nor Kaouter were to be seen, which raised his paranoia quite a bit.

Xaphan wasn't going too hard—Leon hadn't wanted to do *too* much damage to either the palace or the guards, he just wanted to grab Asiya's parents and run. But Xaphan was now contending with two seventh-tier mages, and even though he handily outclassed them on their own, they also had dozens of fifth and sixth-tier mages backing them up, putting more and more pressure on Xaphan as additional high-tier guards arrived to help in fighting the demon. As a result, Xaphan was starting to use bigger and

more powerful magics just to sell the battle as real, and Leon wasn't sure how much longer it might be before Xaphan was pressured enough to begin actually fighting.

If and when he did, then people would start to die.

It felt like an excruciating eternity in that storage room just waiting for his ring to recover for use. Less than five minutes, but every second had felt like an hour. But the time finally passed, and Leon slipped back outside, became invisible again, and started making his way through the palace complex.

The city of Samar was incredibly well-fortified, with the core of the city surrounded by walls, and additional walls, huge gatehouses, and canals broke the city into many easily-defended sectors. However, there were no such fortified districting within the palace, letting Leon practically have the run of the place without fear of accidentally brushing against something that would disrupt his invisibility again.

There were still many Samar guards running around, though, and more than once Leon had to quickly dodge out of the way as a squad of Samarid soldiers rushed past him—a few, he noted with dismay, running toward the courtyard he'd landed in.

His destination was the building that he'd seen Asiya escorted out of earlier, which he assumed to be the dungeon. Only a few buildings away, he found that his guess was correct, as a number of prison guards were rushing around throwing together what seemed to be an impromptu execution in the courtyard just in front of the building. Not too far away stood a huge man with his face obscured wielding a gigantic sword which, while obviously ceremonial, was also just as obviously sharp and well-used.

As Leon ran toward them, the Samarids made his job easy by hauling both of Asiya's bound parents outside and forcing them to kneel on a pair of wooden blocks only a few steps out of the door—it seemed that even though there wasn't any direct evidence that the attack was meant to free them, the Sultan wasn't taking any chances and decided to step up the execution of Asiya's parents. Both of them looked both terrified and at peace; at once unwilling to die here, yet resigned to their fate. They were made to kneel and lean on the blocks facing each other, and Leon could see them lock their gazes, unshed tears in their eyes as they found comfort in being with each other here at the end.

The headsman approached, his blade gleaming in the light of the moon. He took a position above Iset, Asiya's mother. The beautiful, outspoken woman took a deep breath, but a whimper of fear escaped her.

"Please, me first!" Khayu, Asiya's father, shouted in desperation, seemingly unable to watch his wife die, or maybe hoping against all hope that some miracle might happen that would help them to escape from death.

The guards ignored him. The headsman raised his blade, but in the instant before it fell, Leon arrived, his body straining as he sprinted to reach them in time.

Fire burst from his hands, instantly dissipating his invisibility as the power of his eighth-tier magic scattered the magic of his ring. Intense flame leaped from him like a solar flare, burning bright orange as it splashed across the fifth-tier headsman from behind, engulfing him completely.

Leon curled his fingers, causing the fire to double back rather than spill forward, consuming the headsman and only the headsman.

Iset and Khayu screamed in shock and terror, and the dozen or so Samarid guards around the prison reeled with similar emotion. Leon, with such an advantage, ran through them like he was the specter of death itself. He didn't once draw his blade, only using his rarely-used fire magic to incinerate several of the guards around his targets, and then erecting a great wall of fire between him and the rest. With a single gesture, the fire of this wall bent and surged, forcing the terrified fifth-tier-and-below guards hurling back, singed but alive.

With one smooth motion, Leon grabbed Khayu and Iset and hurled them away from the dungeon and back the way he came.

[Got them!] Leon shouted in his mind to Xaphan.

The demon didn't respond, but his power cascaded through the palace a second later as a pair of tiny fiery wings erupted from his back and propelled him into the air. Rising in but a moment to a height of more than a hundred feet, Xaphan began raining powerful fireballs upon the palace, while the fires that naturally covered his body prevented any ranged attack from making contact with his physical form, reducing most projectiles to ash and dissipating most magical attacks. Those few exceptions Xaphan was able to effortlessly dodge.

"What is this?!" Khayu shouted in confusion as Leon practically hauled him and his wife through the palace complex toward the wall closest to the port—their pace was fairly slow, but as he ripped off the two's bindings to let them run under their own power, their pace improved dramatically. There was a tower near the courtyard, and getting into the tower would give them access to the ramparts, and from there, they should be able to just jump down into the port—if the wards were anything like what was used in the Bull Kingdom, they were designed more to try and keep people and possible projectiles from coming *into* the protected areas, not getting out of them. If it were the latter, it might interfere with the guards' ability to defend the walls.

Despite planning on jumping down from the walls, both Khayu and Iset, while rather unimpressive in terms of magic power, weren't so fragile that they couldn't handle a fall of about five or six stories.

"Later!" Leon shouted in response, noticing with his magic senses that guards were now sprinting in their direction. "If you don't want to die, then run!"

Neither Khayu nor Iset made any more arguments and followed Leon as they sprinted for the remote courtyard in the north where Leon had first landed. Unfortunately, some of the guards who'd gone to check it out after Leon set off alarms getting over the wall had stuck around despite not finding anything, and Leon counted at least three dozen guards swarming over the courtyard.

"Shit! Change of plan!" Leon shouted, and he pulled Asiya's parents toward the closest guard tower, instead. This part of the walls weren't quite as close to the water as he'd have liked, but it would have to do.

With a tremendous blast of fire, Leon overwhelmed the tower's locking enchantments and caved in the tower's door, stunning the Samarid guards within. Now out of direct line of sight, he wasted no time

closing with the guards and hitting them with concentrated and almost imperceptible blasts of lightning, rendering them unconscious.

“Up!” Leon shouted, pointing to the winding stairs leading further up the tower and to the wall’s ramparts. Khayu and Iset darted upstairs while Leon checked behind them—hundreds of guards were now converging on their position, and without Xaphan around to take up their attention, the seventh-tier mages that had been focusing on him were now running in their direction.

Without any more hesitation, Leon took off after Asiya’s parents, and together, the three of them burst out of the tower and onto the ramparts. Arrows began to hit the wall around them, and Leon had to let loose with an arc of flame to shield them from the withering hail coming at them from the other nearby towers.

“Jump!” Leon shouted, and Khayu and Iset leaped off the wall. Any hesitance they might’ve had in following his orders was long gone. A moment later, Leon jumped after them, constantly using his fire as a shield to keep the arrow fire from hitting them.

When they hit the ground, Khayu stumbled a bit, but Iset landed with more grace and helped to balance her husband. Together, the three began sprinting for the water. The Samarid attempts to stop them, however, intensified, and Leon watched as the seventh-tier mages reached the top of the wall. The female earth mage jumped after them, while the unfamiliar water mage stood on the ramparts and pulled out a bow of her own. She then drew an arrow that had Leon’s heart skipping a beat: an arrow with a scroll of spell paper tied around it.

The water mage nocked, drew, and loosed, and the arrow sped through the air, but curiously, it wasn’t aimed at any of them. Instead, it looked like it would hit the ground about fifty feet ahead of them. Leon guessed it was some measure to try and block them in with the reinforcements that were now swarming the port, and Leon couldn’t let that happen. He conjured a ball of fire in his hand and threw it in the general direction of the speeding arrow. The fireball detonated in the air, consuming the arrow but inadvertently setting off the spell. In an instant, Leon’s fire was pushed outward in a great wave of heat as an enormous pillar of ice took its place, then fell to the ground with a gargantuan crash, crushing several buildings within the port.

It came close, but it didn’t injure any of them or hinder their path.

The earth mage, meanwhile, was gaining on them. Leon could run much faster than her, and under normal conditions wouldn’t ever be in danger of being caught by her. However, he was slowed down by Khayu and Iset, and though they were drawing close to the water’s edge, the earth mage was gaining.

The ground beneath their feet began to rumble and shake as the earth mage’s power rushed out ahead of her, and Khayu and Iset both started to lose their balance. The stone dock cracked and splintered, and spikes erupted from the ground. Asiya’s parents barely managed to avoid getting impaled, but lost nearly all of their speed. Both went tumbling down, and might’ve been killed by the earth mage if Leon hadn’t suddenly come to a heart-stopping halt, turned, and confronted the seventh-tier mage.

He glared at her, then conjured fire around his fist. He punched out, letting fire spill from his knuckles in an unstoppable torrent. A river of fire was ejected from his body, and the earth mage had to stop in her

tracks and conjure a shield of earth to avoid being completely consumed, pulling her power back to protect herself.

Leon let his fire wash over her shield for a moment, then turned and ran to Asiya's parents. He dragged them to their feet, and together, the three continued their run to the water's edge.

In the distance, Leon could see Maia still wreaking havoc within the bay, her water dragons crushing Samar ships or causing them to capsize—not directly killing anyone, but knocking many into the water and causing a tremendous amount of damage to their ships.

[Maia!] Leon shouted as the Samarid water mage shot another spell arrow at them. He turned and used another fireball to intercept it, then kept on running.

He didn't need to say anything more to his river nymph lover. A relatively small water dragon broke out of the water as the three drew close, sweeping up Khayu and Iset despite their sudden fear and panic, then pulling them into the bay and beneath the waves. Leon dove in after them, and Maia's power wrapped around him, pulling him further and further in.

Maia towed the three out of the bay with incredible speed, leaving Samar behind, their mission successful.

At least, so it seemed

Chapter 630: From the Jaws of Victory

Leon, Khayu, and Iset were spat out onto the deck of Leon's ship without much consideration; Maia was many things, but gentle was not one of them. The river nymph herself leaped from the water and gracefully landed upon the deck like she'd been doing it all her life, flashing Leon a competitive smile as Leon stumbled for a few steps after landing before diving back into the water.

Khayu and Iset missed the look, though, since neither landed on their feet. They didn't get much of a chance to rise to their feet, either, because only a few seconds after their arrival, a voice made shrill by uncontainable emotion screamed, "Mama! Papa!"

A moment later, Asiya appeared as if from nowhere and threw her arms around her parents, weeping and blubbering the whole while. Leon could make out a few words, but nothing too coherent—it sounded to him like Asiya was trying to express her joy at having her parents back, but her emotions had completely overwhelmed her ability to talk.

He, after quickly scanning their surroundings with his magic senses to ensure they were safe, stood back with a smile of pride on his face. Khayu and Iset, once they identified their daughter, wrapped their own water-logged limbs around her, and the small family cried in joy together. Leon hadn't thought it would've been possible, but he'd actually succeeded; Asiya and her parents were reunited, all three freed from their imprisonment within the land of their Ancestors.

After a second or two, Leon felt a hand wrap around his waist, and he turned to see Valeria there, beaming her joy at him at his success, and Leon pulled her in closer, sealing her lips with his own. It wasn't the hardest thing he'd ever done, but it had still been a stressful night and he was looking forward to crashing with Valeria and Maia in his arms. Even if he didn't necessarily need sleep at the eighth-tier, he still wanted to cuddle with them, to feel that they were here with him.

Maybe he was being affected by the family reunion nearby, he couldn't say. However, after about a minute, Leon glanced over at Anshu, who still steered the ship, and at Alix, Gaius, Marcus, and Alcander, all of whom were working the sails.

"We're getting out of here?!" Leon yelled to his retinue, half an order and half a question at what they were currently doing.

Anshu looked like he was about to respond, but Alix beat him to the punch. "That's the plan, boss!" The Indradian scowled, but kept his mouth shut until Leon shouted to carry on.

"Will do!" he replied, his tone somewhat strained. "We'll be back in Ariminium in two days—less, if the wind is with us!"

Leon chuckled and muttered, "The wind will *always* be with us!" Anshu definitely heard him, because the Indradian seemed to minutely relax as Leon summoned his wind magic and filled the sails with his power. With his help, the ship turned around and began to speed off into the night, gliding across the surface of the water with seeming ease.

"Leon," Khayu said from behind Leon, who turned from what he was doing to address the Samarid man, "I can't possibly thank you enough! You have saved me, my wife, and my daughter! I'd thought our entire family to be destined for the block, but... but you..." He trailed off, and his expression of gratitude began to break as all the emotions of the escape and the nearly-completed execution flashed through him. Already emotionally raw after the reunion with his daughter, the older Samarid man began to weep as he pulled Leon into a tight bear-hug. "Thank you!" he muttered into Leon's ears. "Thank you! Thank you! I can't ever repay you for this, but please let me at least tr—"

A small explosion and a wave of heat washed over the two embraced men, violently cutting Khayu off and throwing them both backward.

Iset and Asiya screamed as Leon regained his balance, but found Khayu collapsing into his arms, his body limp. The Samarid man had a burning hole in his back about double the size of Leon's fist, the flesh scorched and the exposed bone blackened by the heat.

'*We're not in the clear!*' Leon thought in momentary panic as he scanned their surroundings. They were a fair distance from the shore, but Leon could see Mansur standing upon the sandy beach, fire still dancing around his fingertips, a cocky smile of triumph on his lips. The seventh-tier fire mage's aura then spiked again, and Leon ordered his people to hit the deck.

Without hesitation, everyone complied, and another wave of fire swept over the ship a moment later. Anshu had some trouble since he was steering the ship, and Leon heard a subdued groan of pain, while Iset and Asiya crawled over to Khayu.

"See to him!" Leon shouted at Valeria. He then turned to the rest of his retinue, pointed at the shore, and ordered, "Shoot him!"

Gaius and Alcander were the first to rise, arrows already nocked in their bows. They drew and loosed their deadly payloads, some of Leon's spells tied to the arrows. However, a fireball from Mansur incinerated the arrows before they even reached halfway, but by then Leon was already moving.

He'd leaped from the deck of the ship in the same breath as Gaius and Alcander fired their arrows. He didn't even think about his clothing, and as he sailed through the air, he summoned his power and transformed into his avian form for the third time in barely more than a day. He felt his soul realm flexing a bit as his magic reserves were overtaxed, but the transformation was successful; in a matter of moments, his body expanded, tearing free of his clothes, and becoming the spitting image of the Thunderbird, if a little smaller.

Leon then operated entirely on instinct. It was his first real fight in his Thunderbird form, and it wasn't one he was prepared for. But any nervousness he felt melted away in the heat of his wild fury. He'd rescued Khayu and Iset and had been just about to bring them back to Ariminium, only for this bastard to attack and severely wound Khayu.

White hot fury lanced through Leon's mind as he beat his wings, a clap of thunder resounding from his feathers so loudly that Mansur blinked in surprise and fear, his eyes momentarily darting around the beach as if looking for someone. The Samarid then turned his focus back to Leon, summoned his power, and in the last moment he could before Leon was upon him, let loose with a cataclysmic eruption of flame from his outstretched fingers. Leon beat his wings once more, and a mighty gust of wind caught the fire blast and sent it rolling back over Mansur.

His own power couldn't harm him, of course, but it entirely took the teeth out the attack. Mansur barely had time to register the heat before talons longer than his legs raked through the fire, wrapping themselves around his chest, and just barely scraping off his armor. Not even a second later, Leon's avian face came tearing through the smoke and flame, his beak shining like polished gold, and tore out Mansur's throat with savage ferocity. Leon's talons tightened, crushing Mansur's metal armor, and his ribs beneath.

The seventh-tier Samarid mage barely had time to gurgle and futilely raise one of his arms to try and launch one last blast of fire before Leon raised one of his legs and slammed it down upon Mansur's arm, snapping the bone within like dry twigs.

And it was over. A seventh-tier mage was dead, clutched in Leon's talons, his body broken and battered, his skeleton so shattered that he was little more than a sack of meat slowly leaking through a few mangled holes Leon had torn in his throat, arm, and torso. And with the deed done, Leon's rage cooled.

He glanced back at his ship and saw Alix, Alcander, Marcus, and Gaius ready with bows out and arrows nocked, scanning the beach for further threats. Asiya, Valeria, and Iset were crouched over Khayu, Valeria pressing a healing spell into the man's back, but Asiya's father remained motionless, his aura flagging. Anshu continued to steer the ship onward, while Maia and Xaphan were still out there somewhere—Maia was closer, but she'd doubled back to make sure they weren't being followed. With a quick message, Leon asked her to return with all haste.

Then, he turned his eyes back to Mansur.

He'd gotten sloppy and let the Samarid get far too close. Now, it seemed that his mistake would have fatal consequences.

Leon was reminded of his father's favorite story to tell when growing up. It was of a man who sought immortality, but upon finding a flower that would bestow immortality upon him when eaten, he'd

gotten careless and celebrated the flower's acquisition too quickly. Before he had a chance to eat the flower, a serpent lunged out and stole it out of the man's hand, eating it right in front of him.

The story changed slightly with every retelling, but the lessons always remained the same: never get careless; the job wasn't done until everyone was home safely; never assume the fight was over until there was irrefutable proof that it was.

When leaving Samar, Leon had kept his magic senses projected, watching for anyone that might follow them and try to prevent their escape. He'd not seen anyone and had assumed that they weren't there and had let his guard down when finally making it back to the ship. However, he, himself, had methods to escape such scrutiny, yet still he'd allowed himself to get complacent. Even though his magic senses had told him that they were in the clear, if he'd remained alert and on-guard, then he might've been able to react in time to save Khayu.

This was on him, and Leon had to fight the urge to tear into Mansur's body even further. Instead, he inspected the corpse.

Mansur's armor wasn't particularly noteworthy, aside from its obvious quality. It wasn't quite enough to get Leon's attention, and the damage it had taken in Leon's attack ensured that Leon wasn't going to bother taking it. However, there were a couple things that *did* catch Leon's interest: an amulet around Mansur's neck that had been shaken loose from beneath his armor during Leon's mauling. It hung from a thick gold chain, and was rather simple, being little more than an oval frame made of gold set with a polished, multi-faceted sapphire the size and shape of a sparrow's egg. It glowed with magic power, so Leon, without bother to transform back into his human form, tore it from Mansur's corpse and sent it into his soul realm.

The other object was a ring on Mansur's finger made of silver and set with a dozen tiny rubies, eight of which were glowing with soft red light. Leon was none too careful in removing the ring with his talons, and so removed Mansur's finger as well, which he shook loose before storing the ring in his soul realm.

[That was brutal,] Xaphan's voice said in an appreciative whisper. [That guy came off as a bit of a shitheel, I'm glad that he finally did something to warrant such treatment. You ought to remember this, human; if you wish for power and the titles that come with power, all who oppose you ought to be treated similarly.]

Leon didn't respond, instead turning his head upward to see a tiny fiery dot in the sky which he knew to be Xaphan flying high above them.

But then, he turned his attention back to the beach. His retinue keeping an eye on the beach had the right idea; if Mansur could get so close without him noticing, then what were the chances that others could do likewise?

Leon thought of the restrictions his ring of invisibility had, and then beat his wings, sending a powerful burst of wind rolling down the beach in one direction, and then again in the other. It took a surprising amount of effort for so little power, and as a figure suddenly appeared on the beach, revealed when their invisibility failed, he had to fight the urge to transform back into his human form and collapse in exhaustion.

The figure appeared feminine, and she stumbled quite a bit with the force of Leon's probing wind, her features temporarily obscured by the sand kicked up in the wake of the gusts. However, Leon didn't even need the sand to settle before he figured out her identity: Kaouther, the seventh-tier water mage.

He stepped off Mansur and, still in his avian form, began to awkwardly try to walk over to her. He felt somewhat ridiculous, but his size and power still seemed to have an effect, as Kaouther paled and an expression of abject fear crossed her face. From the Gulf, meanwhile, Maia appeared, manifesting from the waves fully dressed and with murder in her eyes. From above, Xaphan dropped like a meteor, landing behind Kaouther, and largely trapping her with the three eighth-tier equivalent beings.

"Please, please!" she shouted, probably having never before in her life having seen such power standing in opposition to her. "I'm not an enemy! I didn't come here for violence!"

Leon, Maia, and Xaphan advanced upon her regardless. She still had some room to maneuver, but Leon noted that she didn't take it. Instead, she just held up her empty hands and fell to her knees.

"I surrender!" she shouted, her tone somewhat desperate. "I'm not loyal to the Sultan!"

That finally got Leon to pause, and Maia and Xaphan took their cues from him, pausing as well. Leon coldly regarded the woman—she was beautiful by just about any standard of beauty imaginable. Fit, with an enviably well-endowed figure that he'd rarely seen matched by anyone else. Her features were the epitome of Samarid beauty, with full lips; a strong, but not overpowering jawline; long, lustrous brown hair pulled back into a loose bun; and a pair of hazel eyes that seemed to shimmer almost like gold in the light of the full moon.

Leon then noted that she wasn't wearing any armor, instead being clad in simple dark blue and green sleeveless robes that only went down to her knees. She wore a couple of expensive, yet nonmagical rings, had a tight gold band fastened around her neck, and had gold bracelets decorated with elaborate geometric patterns on each wrist, one of which emanated an aura of light magic that Leon assumed was responsible for her invisibility. Finally, she only wore close-toed sandals on her feet and had a pair of thin golden anklets which the sandals seemed tied to. In short, she was hardly dressed for battle, but instead seemed more like she was dressing to impress someone, lending some credence to her claim that she wasn't there for violence.

Wishing he didn't have to, Leon quietly transformed back into his human form after a moment of thought. He couldn't speak with her in his Thunderbird form, after all. As he returned to normal, he had to carefully control his expression to not appear perturbed at his lack of clothing, but as soon as he could fit into them, he conjured new clothes from his soul realm. Kaouther, he noted, awkwardly averted her gaze as he transformed.

When he could speak again, Leon approached her, his aura and killing intent staggering despite his exhaustion, and loomed over her for several long seconds. Then, when it seemed like she was just about to speak again, he cut her off and demanded, "Your comrade just attacked someone I made great exertions to save. How do you think I should I take your presence?"

"The Commander was sent by the Sultan to watch you on your way out," Kaouther explained. "He wanted to make sure you weren't going to come back and try to break out the traitors... but it seemed you did it anyway. Congratulations, I say."

Leon didn't respond, merely glaring at her, silently telling her to continue.

She audibly gulped, and said, "Today was supposed to be my day off. Instead, I had to respond to your... eh, 'attack', on the palace this afternoon, and then escort you around while everyone else lost their tiny minds over your presence. We didn't speak much, but I have to admit, I was intrigued..."

"By what?" Leon growled.

She paused a moment, seeming to carefully weigh her words. "Beasts... don't usually reach the point of ascension. Humans are far better at gaining in power than they are. But that means that those beasts that *do* manage to seize enough power to assume human form are the sort that will... make waves, so to speak. The sort that are ambitious. Driven. I've never seen an Ascended Beast before, so I was intrigued to see if you fit that mold."

"And if I did?" Leon asked.

"Then I would've asked to join you," Kaouter readily replied, her fearful expression dropping to reveal a smile of greed or ambition, Leon couldn't quite tell. "I have no love for the Sultan; I was forced into his service against my will because of my power. I owe him nothing. If I thought I could get away with it, I'd kill him myself! He's weak, concerned not with glory or ascension, but with the pettiest of concerns—*his* political power, *his* position, *his* rights! I have reached the seventh-tier, but under him, I will go no further; that much, I can say with certainty. So that leaves me with two options: either sign on with someone or something under which I can thrive, or I can strike out on my own. The latter is tempting, but there is power in numbers..." Kaouter glanced first at Leon, then at Maia, and then behind her at Xaphan. "... so I thought that signing on with someone else would be the better option. That is why I'm here, Aetos. I want to join you. I don't care at all for the Samar Kingdom, the Sultan, or any of them. I just want to continue walking the path of magic, and I could be a great *servant* of yours, if you'd only take me under your wing..."

She continued to kneel, but she brought her arms together, pressing her sizable breasts together and giving Leon a look of such fiery passion that he figured if he wanted to tear her clothes off and take her right there on the beach, then she'd let him.

And there was a part of him that was tempted—a rapidly growing part south of his waist. But there was more than just what she was implicitly offering that he found hard to pass up: she was a seventh-tier mage, and if he took her in, it would represent a substantial increase in the power of his retinue. She could be a great asset in whatever struggles might come next.

But she was also abandoning her former liege at what was essentially just the tiniest of sign of a greener pasture, and if he were honest, he found her offering herself to him in front of Maia and Valeria to be almost insulting, rapidly killing much of his physical attraction.

'How long would she remain loyal to me?' Leon wondered. 'Even if I made her a concubine, or a wife, I could never truly trust her. Not if I recruited her under these circumstances. Besides...' His gaze momentarily went back to his ship, where Khayu remained lying on the deck, unmoving, responding not all to Valeria's healing spells, Asiya and Iset crying and pleading over him not to die. *'If I took her in now, I think Asiya would strongly disagree, and Valeria and Elise would side with her.'*

Focusing on Kaouther, Leon growled, “I’ll pass on the offer.” He then laid out the reasons he’d just pondered, but added, “... but I won’t kill you here. You can leave. Just know that we are not friends—but also know that so long as you don’t try anything more, so long as you don’t follow us, so long as you don’t tell anyone what happened here, we won’t be enemies. Now *go*.”

He dismissed her with a wave of his hand,