

Storm King 631

Chapter 631: Saying Goodbye

The mood on Leon's ship as it pulled into the port of Ariminium was somber and quiet. Asiya and Iset had been rescued, but Khayu had been killed by Mansur before their escape could be completed.

Throughout the roughly two-day long journey, Asiya barely said a word. She barely even moved from where Khayu's body had been placed and respectfully covered. Not even Valeria or Iset could get her to speak to anyone.

For her part, Iset was a little more put-together, but Leon could tell from the tightness around her lips that the smile she showed them was forced. A few times, when she thought no one was looking, Leon even saw her dabbing at her eyes.

She was likely putting on a brave face out among relative strangers. As for Asiya... He could understand more than most the pain of losing a father in a violent confrontation. What he didn't much understand, though, was how to provide comfort, so he didn't approach Asiya at all during the trip back to Ariminium. He just let her mourn in peace.

At least, that's what he told himself—he couldn't comfort her, so why try? But he also felt tremendous guilt for letting her father die. Sure, the amulet that he'd taken from Mansur had been imbued with an invisibility enchantment, but if he'd been paying more attention, then perhaps he might've been able to react in time to the Samarid mage's fireball. Maybe then Khayu would've survived.

Leon's stomach did somersaults every time he thought about it, and he could barely even bring himself to look at Iset or Asiya without feeling nauseous. Making matters a little worse, he knew that he wasn't even that set on rescuing them when he left Ariminium—he'd only done so to rescue Asiya. He'd treated Khayu and Iset like afterthoughts, like they didn't matter.

And now Khayu was dead, and Asiya and Iset were devastated.

It was a relief when Anshu guided the ship back into the port. Maia had jumped off the ship about two hours before since she could move much faster in the water than the ship could, and sure enough, Leon saw her waiting at the docks with Elise, Princess Cristina, her entire guard detail, and about a hundred other Legion officials escorting the Princess. There were enough people waiting for them that they were practically occupying this section of the docks, and there were quite a few civilians around who were staring, wondering just what in the hells was going on.

'*Shit*,' he thought, catching the serious and decidedly angry expressions that Minerva and Aquillius wore. He never once consulted with them if he ought to go out on his own, and there was always the possibility that the Samar Kingdom could escalate this into something bigger if they thought this was a Bull Kingdom operation—assuming, of course, that creating a *casus belli* hadn't been their intention from the very beginning.

Leon didn't think they would go to war, though, not with how the balance of power currently rested—especially with losing at least one seventh-tier warrior for all their trouble. And when he glanced back at Asiya and saw her finally rising from where she'd been sitting practically catatonic for more than a day,

the slightest expression of joy and hope crossing her face at seeing who was waiting for them, he could say that he didn't regret the attempt at all.

It was just the sub-optimal result that was sticking in his craw.

As soon as they stepped off the ship and onto dry land, the Princess rushed forward. Seemingly without any care at all to her station or to the hundreds of people watching, Cristina pulled Asiya into a tight hug and buried her face into Asiya's shoulder, shaking with emotion.

Leon awkwardly walked past them and met Elise with a deep, longing kiss. She whispered words of thanks into his ear for going to save her friend, but Leon's response was terse and ashamed, which Elise picked up on.

Before she could ask about it, though, Aquillius and Minerva stepped forward, obviously seeking an explanation. But Leon held up a hand, silently telling them to stop. He wanted to see to Asiya's father, first, and then he would meet with them. Seeing to Khayu first just felt right, but he also wanted to emphasize to them that, as much as he respected them, he wasn't their subordinate.

—

"... and that's what happened," Leon finished his explanation. He mostly kept to the story, but he omitted his involvement with Xaphan, portraying his infiltration of the palace as an act of opportunity after the demon 'just showed up' for reasons he couldn't fathom—which also made the implication that the Samar Kingdom was conspiring with demons, but he wasn't about to clarify the matter.

He and his retinue had been back for about four hours, and in that time, he'd arranged for Khayu's body to be taken to a local mortuary where it could be properly seen to. Iset had accompanied it, seeing to most of the paperwork. Leon didn't know what she might get up to later, but he'd left her with an offer to stay with him and the rest of his family if she wanted to.

Once that was done, he dismissed his retinue and returned to the Heaven's Eye guest house with his family. Only after another hour or two of rest did he finally meet with the Legion higher-ups in the guest house's large conference room and finally tell them what had happened following his departure from their strategy meeting.

"That's... quite the story," Minerva said with disapproval. "His Highness went to great lengths to try and stamp out that reckless streak, Leon. I'm sorry to see that they didn't take as well as he'd hoped."

Knowing that she was referencing Prince Trajan, Leon stared at her, a thin smile gracing his lips. He didn't much appreciate having Trajan's lessons thrown back in his face like this, no matter how deserved it may have been.

Responding to the new Consul of the East, Leon said, "I went with overwhelming force, which should be obvious enough by their loss of a Paladin-level figure. With the disarray in his house and such a massive loss, I think any threats their King may make regarding this incident will be blustering and toothless. They can't threaten the Bull Kingdom."

"Be that as it may," Aquillius replied, "you've still made my job quite a bit harder. We don't want hostile states on the other side of the Gulf."

“Just stick with my story,” Leon said with a shrug. “I’m not one of your knights, nor am I a part of Heaven’s Eye. As far as the Samar Kingdom is concerned, I’m just an Ascended Beast, unaffiliated with anyone they can threaten. Even if they start accusing the Bull Kingdom of this, they have no proof.”

“There can still be massive ramifications for your actions!” Aquillius protested, the disappointment evident in his tone. “Sure, maybe they can’t declare war upon us, but that doesn’t mean they can’t take any actions. They are our biggest and closest trade partner! They can make life *very* difficult for a huge portion of our people! If they elect to take more diplomatic measures against us, then there isn’t much we can do! They could even blockade the Tyrrhenian River, cutting us off completely from southern trade! We’d be well and truly isolated here in our corner of the world, surrounded by hostiles on all sides!”

“Is that a real possibility?” Leon wondered aloud, feeling defensive enough to almost dismiss Aquillius’ concerns out of hand. He was feeling condescended to, and he was hardly thrilled about it.

“They’ve threatened it before, but they’ve never done so,” Minerva pointed out with an exasperated sigh, sounding almost resigned to their state of affairs. “No matter what, His Majesty is an eighth-tier mage, and our armies are stronger and larger than theirs. They also arrested one of our knights, so *some* response was warranted. They can’t have expected us to lie down and let them execute one of Her Highness’ personal guards. They might bitch and moan about this, but in a year or two, they’ll stop, and we’ll all move on.”

“You’re ignoring the enormous diplomatic efforts that goes into making these problems go away so that we can all ‘move on’,” Aquillius murmured just loudly enough for Minerva and Leon to hear, but not for the rest of the room. “It’s easy for you two to say that this isn’t a big deal, and that it’ll all blow over, but it’ll be my people who now have to bear this responsibility. It’s *my* people who will have to deal with this until it is no longer an issue—assuming that day ever comes.”

Leon sighed, and with genuine sorrow, he said, “For what it’s worth, Sir Aquillius, I wasn’t intending to make your life harder with my actions. But you have to understand that I couldn’t let my friend just be taken like that. Surely you understand the need to establish a certain level of threat for diplomacy to be at all effective, no?”

“A rather simple view of things,” Aquillius muttered. “But not inherently wrong, and what’s done is done. I should get back to the Diplomatic Corps. We’re going to want to prepare our response for the inevitable Samar bleating as soon as we can.”

Without another word, the sixth-tier diplomat rose from his seat and left, his adjutants following close behind, leaving Leon and Minerva in the room with only a few other Legion officials.

They sat in awkward silence for almost a minute, an excruciatingly long period of time for neither to speak. Minerva broke it first with a quiet chuckle, her stoic and disappointed expression falling away to one that was a little more mirthful.

“I have to say, Leon, that while I can’t professionally agree with what you’ve done, I’m personally very amused. Well done on getting Dame Asiya back. I’m sorry about her father.”

Leon grimly nodded. “Like I said, I couldn’t just leave her behind.”

Minerva smiled more broadly. "You're a reckless kid, Leon," she said, causing a flash of irritation to run through Leon's mind, "but you're loyal, and so long as you at least hold true to that principle, I think you'll be fine. Loyalty goes both ways, and so long as you always prove to your people that you'll go that extra mile for them, then they'll go that extra mile for you."

Leon relaxed and leaned back in his chair. "I wanted to get Asiya back, to be sure," he stated, "but showing that to my retinue was my personal selfish reason I went out there. Showing my people what I would do for them. How far I'd go for any of them if they were to find themselves in a similar situation."

With another chuckle, Minerva rose from her seat. "I think you'll be fine, Leon. Maybe you're not quite the man Trajan hoped you'd be, but I know he'd be proud of you, regardless."

Leon's face immediately flushed red. He liked the sound of her approval, and her belief that Trajan would've approved of him so far, but there was still a hint of shame within him, too. He didn't think he'd ever be the man that Trajan or his father hoped he'd be, and he was starting to bring himself around to acknowledging that. But it still stung to know that he'd likely never meet those expectations that his father and mentor had for him.

Minerva, sensing that their conversation was over, clapped him on the shoulder, and the two then said their goodbyes. They spent quite a bit of time saying them, too, for both knew that there was a strong possibility that this was the last they'd ever see of each other. When Minerva and her people left, Leon went back to the table and sat down to stare at the wall and stew in his melancholy. He was ready to move on from the Bull Kingdom, but that didn't make his goodbyes any easier to bear.

—

"Leon Raime," Iset said formally as she sat down with Leon, Valeria, Maia, and Elise in the Heaven's Eye guest house, "I need to thank you for your rescue." Her tone was sincere, but it was tinged with incredible remorse.

Leon could understand why; she'd just had her husband cremated.

"No thanks are needed," Leon said as magnanimously as he could without completely disregarding Iset's thanks. "I only wish I could've done better."

Iset smiled at him, but sorrow and grief were still deeply etched into her pretty bronze features. "I wish my husband could be here with us," she whispered, "but his... passing... was no one's fault but ours, the Sultan's, and Mansur's. We got ourselves into that mess, the Sultan viciously rebuked us, and Mansur carried out his orders. Don't blame yourself, Leon. You saved me and my daughter; for that, I will forever be grateful. If you hadn't done what you did, I would've joined my husband in death, and Asiya would've... I don't even want to think about what might've happened to her..."

Elise got up from where she was sitting with Leon and joined Iset, wrapping her arms around the grieving Samarid woman and holding her close. Iset looked close to breaking down, but she kept her eyes fairly dry and hugged Elise back.

For his part, Leon wanted nothing more than to let her grieve, but he was dying to know what had led up to Iset and Khayu's arrest. So, as delicately as he could, he asked Iset about it.

"We didn't lie to you, if that's what you're concerned about," Iset replied with a cheeky smile that seemed just a little too stiff to be natural.

"I wasn't trying to imply that you did," Leon said.

Iset nodded. "We didn't lie to you," she repeated, "but we didn't exactly tell you the whole truth."

"I figured you didn't," Leon responded. "It sounded like you almost did back during the testing for my flight suit, but Khayu cut you off."

Iset fell silent for a moment, and Leon cursed himself for bringing up her husband so thoughtlessly again, thinking she was going to stop her story. However, after taking a moment to compose herself and squeeze Elise's hand for comfort, Iset continued.

"We were promised safe harbor in Dusiris," Iset explained, referring to the Samarid counterpart to Ariminium. "Our allies in Samar were to meet us there. Old friends who assured us of our safety, letting us place our trust in them to the point of allowing our daughter to accompany us. Only for that trust to be betrayed. All of our friends turned us in to the Sultan, and Asiya was caught up in our naivete."

"Why?" Leon wondered aloud.

"I can't say," Iset said. "Our friends weren't very conversational when taking us into custody. We were simply told that the Sultan hadn't pardoned us, and that by returning we were breaking our exile."

"So it was just a ploy to bring you two back into the Samar Kingdom and into the hands of the Sultan," Leon confirmed.

"It would seem that way..." Iset sighed and leaned back into the sofa, letting her eyes drift upward until she was talking more at the ceiling than to Leon. "If they'd tried this ten years ago, I don't think Khayu and I would've been fooled. We might've tried to meet them in Florentia or some other neutral ground. But we wanted to go home so badly, and with Ariminium *right here*, and Samar so far away, we thought it was safe. We thought that... Well, it doesn't matter what we *thought*. We fell for the trap hook, line, and sinker, and my husband paid for that mistake with his life."

"I'm sorry," Leon repeated, his guilt not assuaged in the slightest despite Iset repeatedly claiming that she didn't blame him for Khayu's death.

Iset just smiled at him.

"I don't have much of a future here," she whispered. "As we said when we met you, Khayu and I didn't make nearly enough headway in the Bull Kingdom to ever consider this place our home. And with Samar now... permanently closed to me, I have no home left..."

Leon felt she was leading into something, and he also felt like he knew what it was. Still, he let her ask first rather than offering it, himself.

"I'd like to accompany you south," Iset declared, her warm brown eyes sparkling with hope and determination for just a moment before her grief returned and dulled them again. "I can't imagine letting my daughter go after this, she *needs* me right now. She adored her father, and this must have devastated her."

Iset glanced momentarily at Valeria, who slowly nodded. “Asiya’s been holed up with Her Highness,” Valeria quietly stated. “I don’t think Cristina’s left her alone since she got back. It’s even gotten to the point that Her Highness has blown off meetings with several prominent members of the local guilds.”

“Big loss there,” Leon sarcastically grumbled, remembering the revolt that the guilds had launched in Ariminium only a few years ago. The main culprits had been severely punished, but Leon still had a profoundly negative opinion of the local guilds.

Valeria shrugged. “Dame Maxima hasn’t indicated to me that it’s a problem. Seems like Dame Minerva is more amused by it than anything, and while Sir Aquillius is a little more concerned, these matters with Samar have been eating up his attention, letting Princess Cristina and Asiya be alone for a while.”

“Those two are good friends,” Iset whispered. “Asiya is lucky to have Her Highness. And you, Val. And you, Elise and Leon.” She squeezed Elise’s hand again while giving each of them a smile in turn—even Maia, despite the river nymph’s silence so far.

“Asiya will always find a home with us,” Elise declared. “She is like a sister to us. We’ll always be here for her.”

“Thank you,” Iset replied.

After a moment of silence, Leon stated, “I’d be happy to have you accompany us south. I don’t think you actually want to join *me*, specifically, but our caravan is already going to be big enough that one more capable person who can take care of herself is hardly a burden. And if it helps Asiya with her grief...”

“Thank you,” Iset repeated. “You’re not wrong; I don’t want to join your retinue. I just want to take care of my daughter and try to make a new life in the south. I... can’t stay here. But I can take care of myself, as you said. Khayu and I have our own resources... I suppose they’re just *mine* now...” Iset almost burst out into tears as her voice wavered, and Elise pulled her tighter into her embrace. Iset managed to maintain her composure, though, and after a moment, asked, “When are you leaving?”

Leon glanced at Elise.

“Three days,” Elise stated. “My mother’s business here is complete, and we’re just finishing up our with the preparations to head south.”

Elise and Iset spoke for a little while longer, getting on the same page for when and where Iset should meet them to join their journey southward. Then, Iset left to finish her own preparations and to spend as much of her time with Asiya as she could manage.

That left Leon and his family alone to rest and get ready. In three days, they would leave the Bull Kingdom, and none of them knew if they’d ever see it again.

Chapter 632: Leaving the Bull Kingdom

Leon watched Ariminium slowly recede as the massive Heaven’s Eye ship slowly pushed its way up the Tyrrhenian River, bearing him and his followers away from the Bull Kingdom, possibly never to return. Already, the ship had passed by Florentia, officially leaving the borders of the Bull Kingdom.

It put Leon in quite the mood, watching this stage of his life fade into the haze of distance as the ship sailed on. It seemed that his mood was fairly obvious, because while the others had gone below deck to

get re-settled into the ship, several of them came back topside not long after, joining him at the back of the ship. The first of them, surprisingly, was Alix.

"Hey there, boss man," she said as she slid into place beside him, leaning on the guardrail and fixing her eyes on the shrinking Ariminium. "How's it going?"

"It's going," Leon said noncommittally.

Alix nodded and went silent for a moment, seemingly content to simply share this moment with her friend and commander. But once that moment was over, she glanced at him and asked, "Anything on your mind worth sharing?"

Leon sighed. He then waved his hand back at the Trajan's former city and said, "Kind of. Can't really put my thoughts into words. I suppose I'm just feeling a little sad that something's ending, and excited that something's starting, and those sides are fighting in my head. Whichever is dominant depends entirely on the moment. Right now, I guess I'm just feeling a little more melancholic."

"I get that," Alix whispered. "It's not like we'll never return, though. Even when we go to the Nexus, we'll be able to come back at some point, won't we? This is 'see you later', not 'goodbye'."

With a shrug, Leon said, "I'm not so sure I *want* to come back. You have family here, don't you?"

"I do," Alix confirmed.

"I don't," Leon remarked. "Just bones. House Raime was one of the foremost noble families of the realm for thousands of years, and Thunder Kings for thousands of years before that. So many members of my family lie dead in Teira that an entire other city could be built using their bones as foundations. But no one living. Everyone who I might've considered coming back to visit are... well, kind of coming with us right now."

"You don't even want to visit Minerva?" Alix asked.

"No," Leon definitively stated. "We honestly weren't that close. We're friendly, but not friends."

"Then when I come back to visit my family, you come with me to visit your family's tombs," Alix suggested. "They're both in the Northern Territories, so we can easily go together!"

She smiled at him radiantly, and Leon was suddenly terribly grateful that he had her as a friend.

"Not a 'goodbye'," he murmured, his eyes turning back to Ariminium. "Just a 'see you later'..."

Alix nodded and clapped him on the shoulder.

"And, hey," she said, "if we come back and find that August has run the place into the ground, we can knock him about a little. Get a little justified payback for that war we got dragged into for him."

Leon chuckled and playfully pushed his former squire. "That might be fun."

"'Might' be?" Alix challenged. "I'll have you know that I've been hoping to get a chance to kick that soft Prince black and blue! Boy needs to harden up, I say, if he's going to be ruling a Kingdom!"

"I think his father will have that taken care of," Leon stated. "I wouldn't be surprised to see him equal to the Paladins if we ever come back, so if you want to give him those kicks, you'll have to train like hells to catch up!"

"Oh I'm going to do it," Alix declared, though with more mischievousness than seriousness. "Mark my words, Leon, I'm going to kick that Princeling so hard in the ass someday that he'll be tasting my toes for years to come!"

A voice sounded from behind them, "That would be fun to see." Leon and Alix glanced back and were met with the sight of a smiling Valeria as she leaned against the guardrail on Leon's other side.

She wore largely the same clothing that she was used to: a loose sky blue tunic and tight dark blue exercise pants. However, unlike usual, she was actually wearing jewelry; around her neck was the gold amulet set with a glowing sapphire that Leon had looted from Mansur's corpse. This was the accessory that had allowed the Samarid to turn invisible and evade Leon's detection until the moment he hurled the fatal fireball that claimed Khayu's life. Since Maia and Elise both had their invisibility rings, Leon gave Valeria the amulet so that she would have similar capability.

The ring set with a dozen rubies, on the other hand, Leon wasn't sure what to do with. As far as he could tell, the ring acted as a kind of magical battery. He could certainly use it, but he already had the amulet given to him by Elise as a wedding gift which fulfilled a similar function. Giving it to Asiya was a sore temptation, but he hesitated; he didn't want it to come across as insensitive. She'd lost her father, and Leon blamed his own complacency. Giving her the ring would feel to him like blood money, and he was sure it would be taken as a rude gesture, as if he were trying to buy his way out guilt.

To an extent, that was exactly what he wanted to do: give Asiya a great gift, and hope that that might help make up for his mistake. But he knew as well as anyone that a lost father was utterly irreplaceable, and if Justin had tried to give him such a gift as a way to apologize, Leon would've been incensed. Their situations weren't identical, of course, but Leon was unable to come to any decisions regarding what to do with the ring, so now it just lay in his soul realm gathering dust.

Valeria and Alix continued to bemoan the choices of Octavius and August that led to the civil war, but Leon didn't pay much attention, letting his attention turn back to the shrinking city behind them, and the departure from his life so far.

Before too long, though, soft, loving hands wrapped themselves around his waist, and he felt someone leaning into him from behind. He didn't have to turn around to know that it was Elise, but he did anyway to press his lips against hers. Neither said a thing, with Elise only giving Alix and Valeria loving smiles as her greeting. But then she turned back to Leon, and with a smile on her gorgeous face, she took one of his hands and led him onward.

Leon and Maia had a magical connection, so they could sense each other's emotional states with reasonable clarity. Leon and Elise, however, had no such magical connection; and yet, they didn't need one. Elise knew what was going on in Leon's head, and Leon knew what was going on in hers. As a result, despite her seductive smile and her leading toward the yacht's interior, he knew that she wasn't looking for sex. Instead, she led him through the ship's halls to the covered front of the ship, where the main leisure areas were located. She led him to a private lounge several floors up, one with huge crystal-clear glass windows that gave unparalleled views of the course ahead.

It was only when they stopped in front of those windows that Elise finally spoke.

“Look forward, husband, not back,” she said as she squeezed his hand and rested her head on his shoulder. She didn’t need to say anything more.

Leon smiled and squeezed her hand back, and whispered, “I love you.”

Elise lightly giggled, her love not needing to be said aloud for Leon to know how she felt.

The two stood there in silence for hours, just watching the land they passed, watching the verdant fields by the Tyrrhenian River gradually give way to starker, sandier deserts as they moved south. Soon enough, Ariminium passed out of sight as the hills and haze of distance obscured it.

They’d finally departed from the Bull Kingdom, not to return for a long time, if ever.

—

Leon sat in the yacht’s training room, staring at Gaius sitting just a few feet in front of him. The rest of the retinue was busy training, but Leon wasn’t doing too much supervising right now, preferring instead to put in more time practicing Xaphan’s mental communication technique. Gaius, needing a break from his own physical training, volunteered to have Leon try and communicate to him while he meditated.

So, Gaius sat cross-legged in front of Leon, both facing the other, but Gaius’ eyes were closed as he practiced altering the flow of magic within his body. Consequently, his aura was quite pronounced, which helped Leon greatly with his efforts to learn the new technique. That, Xaphan had told him, was the key to using his technique.

It had been explained to Leon that it was almost a kind of forced auditory hallucination—just as he could use his magic senses to ‘hear’ sound that wasn’t close enough for him to hear it with his ears, he could use his magic senses to make someone else hear what he wanted them to. Magic senses worked by projecting one’s magic power in a wave, and having it resonate within the magic contained within one’s spine, creating sensations that approximated a projection of physical senses. Leon had to learn to use his magic power to mimic the way magic senses resonated with someone.

It was only the first step of the technique, though. It would be useless using it on someone who didn’t share any common languages with him since any projected ‘noise’ he made would be unintelligible. It was also easily countered by someone who didn’t want to be communicated with thusly, thus crushing Leon’s first thought at being able to make people see and hear whatever he wanted them to, trapping them in a hallucination. They’d know what was going on if they were powerful enough, but no matter what, every mage, no matter how weak, would be able to ignore him if they so wished.

But such resonance was only part of the technique. Xaphan spoke directly into his mind, and could do even before their contract; the demon hadn’t simply made him hear his voice. In order for Leon to truly learn this mental communication technique, he’d have to learn at least a little bit about darkness magic—a prospect that made his skin crawl.

He had experience with darkness magic, and none of it was particularly pleasant. The Talfar vampire Bran had used darkness magic and had caused Leon to lose himself in terrible nightmares. More recently, and more obviously, was everything that had happened in the Serpentine Isles: the krakens used darkness magic to instill fear in their prey; the Primal God used darkness magic to screw with

Leon's mind; and the Serpent's Temple used darkness magic to raid Leon's thoughts and conjure a hostile image of his father.

Suffice it to say, Leon wasn't thrilled that he'd have to learn darkness magic.

It was then that the Thunderbird spoke up, pointing out that Leon needed not just a great depth of knowledge, but also great breadth, as well. All great mages, she'd reasoned, had some ability to use all of the magical elements, if only to further their understanding of the universe as a whole. For Leon, if he ever wanted to create a perfect defense against mental intrusion—and Leon very much wanted to create such a thing—then learning about darkness magic was the most important step. He had to know the tool his opponent might use against him if he were to properly counter it, not merely rely upon the Thunderbird's cleansing lightning, which while able to protect his mind against darkness magic, wasn't perfect by any means.

There just weren't enough hours in the day for all the training that Leon had to do, though. He had personal lessons with the Thunderbird who was still teaching him how to manipulate the weather. He had lessons with Nestor in the arts of enchanting. He had resumed lessons with Xaphan regarding fire magic and now the mental communication technique. He had to monitor the progress of his retinue and ensure that he spent enough time with them that they would continue to see him as their leader—and to head off any conflicts that may arise within their ranks, which seemed fairly likely to him if only because Anshu continued to keep himself separate from everyone else. He also had to carve out time in his day for spending some quality time with his wife and lovers, for the last thing he ever wanted to do was to neglect them and find that they were falling out of love as a result.

His schedule was packed, in short. Fortunately, as an eighth-tier mage, his need for sleep wasn't what it once was, and though he still enjoyed sleeping and falling asleep cuddled up with Elise and Maia was an unparalleled joy, he made the choice to start sleeping much less, leaving him with more time to devote to his training and studies. Four less hours of sleep a day could make the difference between life and death, and when viewed from that lens, Leon felt a little better about it.

Though that wasn't to say he was happy about it, but he could make that exchange for greater power. He was still barely twenty-one, and an eighth-tier mage. All others of his power level were likely decades, if not centuries older than he was, and their significantly greater experience meant that for all his advantages, he was likely outclassed and out-equipped by all of them, who'd simply had so much more time to train, learn, and acquire various objects to augment their power.

He saw that clearly enough with Jormun—though he and the pirate were technically on par with each other in terms of power, the pirate was just so much older and so much more experienced with using his power that Leon had to acknowledge that he never really stood much of a chance against him. Time would bring experience, though, and time was certainly something that Leon felt he had much more of; and he was intent on using as much of it as he could shoring up his magical foundation so that he wasn't nearly so outclassed by those he was supposed to be equal to.

In that respect, as much as he hated the idea of being leashed and trapped by it, he was minutely grateful that the extreme growth of his soul realm from his first transformation had forced him to stop his gain in magical power for a while. He still didn't know how long it might be before he could continue

to grow it without tearing his soul realm apart from the strain, but at least it forced him to stop and grow his skill rather than his power.

For the moment, Leon focused only on the first step of learning Xaphan's communication technique, the part where he tried to use his magic power to get Gaius to hallucinate his voice. It was damned difficult, for Leon had to project magic power in a way that was identical to Gaius' aura, and to do that, he had to be absolutely conscious of every aspect of Gaius' aura, every little eddy and current of power that emanated from his body. Even a tiny difference would prevent the technique from working.

He made several probing attempts, trying to magically shout 'hello' into Gaius' ears hoping that the other man would hear him, but he was unsuccessful every time. He wasn't deterred, though, and kept on practicing for days. The yacht was slowly making its way up the Tyrrhenian River, and wouldn't reach its destination for a few days, yet, and he intended to use every scrap of free time he had all to himself to practice this. For all that Xaphan and the Thunderbird had claimed that this technique was useless in most practical ways, it was still a fine way to practice his skills in fine magic control.

So, for days, that's what Leon did: practicing manipulating his projected power, while Gaius sat opposite him, quietly meditating and focusing on trying to learn to wield elemental magic. Unfortunately for him, he'd settled on learning earth magic, meaning that Leon was next to no help in teaching him how to use magic.

By the time the Heaven's Eye yacht had carried them as far as it could, Leon hadn't managed to get ahold of the technique, though he'd learned a great deal about manipulating his aura—enough that he was confident he'd learn the technique by the time their caravan reached Occulara.

For the moment, though, he was glad for the break. As dedicated as he was to expanding his magical skills, he still needed at least *some* time to relax. To that end, he wanted to explore the city a little with his family and retinue, but he was stopped by his mother-in-law, who needed to go over their schedule.

In short, they had arrived at the point where the Samar Kingdom's borders met with Asturias to the east and the Cortuban Alliance to the south, a group of five allied petty Kings who'd banded together to fight against the Samar Kingdom to the northwest, the Kingdom of Asturias to the northeast, and the Halcyon Federation to the south and west. The border they were at was relatively peaceful, but Emilie indicated that it wasn't always so, for Asturias and the Cortubans were almost perpetually at war. Fortunately for their caravan, hostilities these days were mostly relegated to the east—a mountain range separated Asturias and the Alliance, and the only two passes through it were here along the Tyrrhenian River, and one much further east where the northern mountain range met another mountain range that separated the civilized world from the bleak and almost lifeless Screeching Desert.

Leon wondered why the war hadn't spilled out into this western pass, and all Emilie could guess was that the threat of Samar's intervention was keeping this region fairly peaceful, but stating that the possibility of the war spilling out over here was the main factor in her decision not to stick around too long. But they still had to arrange travel for more than a thousand people, so they had to stay for at least a few days.

Grateful for even that much time off a ship, Leon went to meet up with his people and spend some time in a brand new place.

Chapter 633: Bonding With the Retinue

The Tyrrhenian River was wide and deep, and though it continued for a long ways past the city where Leon and his people would be proceeding on foot, the Heaven's Eye yacht was much too large and cumbersome to travel further. Getting everything organized to continue overland would take a few days, so Leon and his family and retinue decided to head out into the city to see what entertainments could be found.

The city itself was under the control of the Samar Kingdom, and it showed in its architecture and layout. It was built in a wide half-circle against the river, with shorter, stubbier buildings made of local stone and timber, while the more important buildings were built of enchanted black glass. The Samarids called it Akhmim, but apparently it had once been a trading outpost of a small petty Kingdom called Ipu. Being the city furthest up the Tyrrhenian River that had artificially deepened the river to accommodate large-scale trade, and being so close to the border of three different states—the Samar Kingdom, Asturias, and the Cortuban Alliance—Leon learned from Elise that it had changed hands many times in the past few millennia.

Akhmim struck him as quite similar to Ariminium—the latter was located in a strategically important place, had a deep population pool, and was also right on the border between several Kingdoms, notably the Bull and Talfar Kingdoms, who'd fought each other many times over recent centuries for control over the city.

But that thematic resonance was where the similarities ended, for Akhmim was a Samarid city through and through, with a vastly different culture and feel to it than Ariminium.

Eager to see the city's culture for himself, Leon left the yacht with Elise, Maia, and Valeria at his side. The rest of his retinue could handle themselves, and he saw Anshu go off on his own, while Marcus, Alcander, Alix, and Gaius all went out together.

Leon and his family spent the day traveling through the more tourist-focused areas, with plentiful food and entertainment to be found. Street performers showing off their flamboyant skills with magic, throwing around fire and light to the delight of their audience, were common. Food stalls abounded, many selling various kinds of kebab or other portable food, nearly all of which had Leon's mouth watering with hunger as soon as he encountered their heavenly aromas.

The city's roads were all built like concentric circles around the city's core, where the administrative buildings lay, as well as the local Heaven's Eye enclave. The largest thoroughfare, however, ran through the center of the city, and was covered by a long roof supported by innumerable sandstone columns. This far south, they were largely out of the desert of the Samar Kingdom, but it was still quite warm outside during the day and the people wanted to be able to explore the markets in the shade and with good airflow. Nearly all other streets with heavy traffic were provided with shade by rows of perfectly-spaced palm trees.

Leon appreciated it, especially when they stopped at a small forum where the locals were selling multicolored garments in more styles than Leon could count, and they decided to take a short break from wandering around the city and window shop in this district a little. Leon largely didn't pay much attention to what the others were looking at, being a little more preoccupied with some of the local street performers who had trained birds and small monkeys to dance and sing.

However, he started paying a little more attention when he noticed his ladies seemingly conspiring amongst themselves, shooting him surreptitious looks with crafty smiles as they picked through some darker-colored clothes being sold by a young man flamboyantly dressed in pinks and bright greens who was eagerly holding up a men's embroidered sleeveless vest. He didn't quite know what they were up to, but he could hazard a guess.

Eventually, though, his interest was captured when he heard the sound of clanging metal, and after the ladies were done and had bought what they were eyeing, Leon led them toward the unmistakable sound of forging.

Not far from the forum was a small smithery. This one caught Leon's interest when he saw that the smiths were forging armor here to complement the nearby tailors.

If he were honest with himself, he didn't really think they were making anything special in this particular open-air smithery—just hundreds and thousands of links to turn into mail. However, he'd never really *seen* an armorer working before, and he found the process almost hypnotic to watch. When he thought of forging armor, he'd always thought of blacksmiths spending hours every day hammering great sheets of metal into suits of plate, and while there were a few people around doing that—with a couple of fifth-tier earth and fire mages supervising and providing some magical muscle to aid the armorers—most of the men in the smithery—and they *were* all men, which Leon took note of—were busy making, cutting, and wrapping wire to make mail links.

Leon wasn't sure how long he stood by, watching those armorers turn thousands of feet of steel wire into mail with incredible teamwork and precision, making five full suits in the time he spent watching them work, with the stronger mages cutting down on the time required a great deal. It was certainly long enough that his ladies grew somewhat bored and interrupted his reverie to drag him off in search of something else to occupy their time.

But though he was taken away from the smiths, Leon found himself rather fixated on what he'd seen.

He was an enchanter, there were no doubts to that in his mind, but it occurred to him that his work was essentially dependent entirely on smiths, jewelers, and tailors. He couldn't make anything himself, he could only enchant what others had made for him. He was still lacking armor after his suit of Magmic Steel had been destroyed once again during the campaign against Jormun, and he knew that he'd eventually need a new suit.

'Could I make my own instead of merely commissioning someone else to make it?' Leon found himself wondering.

His old armor, while fantastic and did the job of keeping him alive magnificently, had also been extremely limited in its ability to hold enchantments. Leon needed something better, something more versatile, and he wasn't sure if he wanted to leave even a single aspect of the armor that he would depend on to keep him safe in the hands of a smith he neither knew nor trusted.

The more he thought about it, the more the idea appealed to him. Enchantments were still his passion, but he could feel some growing embers of excitement growing within him at the thought of making his own gear from complete scratch. Of having absolute control over what he made.

The part of his brain that still demanded he find time to sleep cried out in despair, but Leon decided as he and his family walked away from the smithery, that he needed to learn the arts of blacksmithing in addition to those of enchanting.

—

The next day, Leon decided to spend the day within the guest house within the Heaven's Eye enclave that they were staying at. Most everyone else went out, but a few people, like himself and Maia, weren't of a mind to explore the city any further.

Or rather, they had other things to spend their time on. In Leon's case, he spent most of his day in a large courtyard with Anzu, letting the young griffin run around and get in some exercise that he'd been missing during the long boat ride over the past month. Leon joined in some roughhousing with his griffin, but for the most part, stayed seated on a bench with his nose buried in books.

On their way home the previous day, Valeria had noticed a large bookstore, and Maia insisted that they stop and check the place out. Leon hadn't initially thought that he'd find anything that would catch his interest, but it turned out that the store had a number of beginner's books on blacksmithing, and he bought them all without a second look.

They weren't exactly comprehensive manuals, but he was at least picking up some of the basest fundamentals. He'd still need a proper teacher, but he was happy that he had something to tide his curiosity over until they reached Occulara.

However, as the day grew late, people started returning. Anshu was first, having become seemingly bored with the city already and coming back to spend some time some training. Alix and Gaius were next, the two having left separately but coincidentally coming back at the same time—at least, so they claimed, but Leon noted that they didn't exactly go their separate ways after returning.

Elise and Valeria were next, greeting Leon warmly as they strolled in, and spent some time chatting with him about what they'd found in the city. They were tired, though, and soon left Leon to his studies while they sought rest.

It was Marcus and Alcander's return that truly disturbed Leon's peace, though.

"Leon!" Alcander shouted upon they're return.

Leon, lost in his book, took a moment to look up, and saw the two running toward him.

"We need you!" Marcus said with some desperation in his voice as they came to a stop only a few feet away.

"Huh?" Leon grunted as he sprang to his feet, his killing intent spiking high. "What's wrong?" he growled. "Were you attacked? Are you all right?!"

The two froze for a moment, their expressions of entreatment freezing on their faces for a moment before changing to something more akin to appeasement.

"No, no, no, nothing like that!" Marcus hurriedly faltered.

"We found a fighting ring and we need a patron to participate!" Alcander crowed, the excitement dripping from his voice.

Leon took a deep breath and calmed himself down, letting his killing intent subside. "I see..." he whispered as his heart rate slowed. "I thought you two were in trouble or something. Thought I was going to have to make a few brand new corpses out of whomever was trying to screw with my people..."

"Ah, uh, sorry about that," Marcus replied, though a wide, appreciative smile broke out across his face. "I guess we were a little *too* excited. We wanted to get in on a little bit of action in this local arena, but we needed someone with greater clout to back us. We're only going to be betting our own money if we bet at all, but we still need a patron to cover any expenses and take responsibility for any 'trouble' we might cause. And while we don't know anyone around here with local prestige, the organizers did say that a mage of sufficient power would be a suitable patron!"

Leon chuckled as his body finally relaxed and his magic power died down within his blood. He glanced down at the book in his hand, and then up at the dusky sky. It had been a long day, and he'd spent nearly the entirety of it here in the courtyard reading up on the basics of blacksmithing. He supposed he could use a short reprieve.

With a wave of his hand, all of his books were pulled into his soul realm, and he said to the other two, "Give me a moment, and then we can go."

Marcus and Alcander furiously nodded, and Leon took a few minutes to get Anzu back inside and to tell the others where he was going. Gaius, Anshu, and the rest of his family weren't too interested in coming with, but Alix practically bounced over, declaring that she would like to see this little arena, too.

Leon smiled and shrugged. As far as he was concerned, he spent too little time with these three, anyway, and sponsoring them for some fights sounded like a fantastic way to all of them to get to know each other a little better—or at least, just to spend some time in each other's company.

For that reason, Leon momentarily played with the idea of forcing Anshu to come with. The Indradian was still extremely aloof with the other members of Leon's retinue, and this seemed like a way they could close that gap a little. However, Leon got the idea that it was either Anshu or Alix on this one, so he left Anshu alone, for the time being.

Half an hour later, Leon, Marcus, Alcander, and Alix all found themselves in a somewhat out-of-the-way bar down by the river. Despite the narrow, winding streets they had to make their way through to reach it, the bar itself was surprisingly large, with huge doors in the back that led out to a wooden platform built on stilts elevating it over the swampy edge of the Tyrrhenian River. The platform featured a fighting ring more than big enough for mages without elemental powers to duel, was surrounded on two sides with seats for at least a hundred or more spectators, and on the far side of the platform was a huge chalkboard filled with numerous markings keeping track of the fights, odds, and current bets.

About eighty people were already outside, drinking and loudly spectating a fight between two second-tier mages in the ring, while another forty or so people were spending their time in the bar, drinking who-knew-what, for at least some of them were mages and yet still seemed fairly drunk.

Upon their arrival, Marcus and Alcander went over to the man who Leon assumed to be running the fights, a fifth-tier mage who seemed to be a Samarid if his bronze skin and loose white robes were any

indication, and asked to join the fights, with Alix just behind them. Leon didn't have to say much other than make it clear that he was their patron, and soon enough, the three were added to the chalkboard—though Alix had to argue a little more vociferously to get her name up there. It didn't seem like there were many female fighters around, and the organizer adamantly refused to have Alix fight a man. Eventually, though, he consented to having Alix's name added to the much smaller bracket of female fighters—with some tacit prodding by way of Leon glaring threateningly at him until he agreed.

Leon and the others then took their seats and waited for their fights to begin. The other three were practically bouncing with excitement, but Leon was more tranquil, choosing to observe their competition.

For the most part, he wasn't that impressed, but that was sort of to be expected—the next half dozen fights were between pairs of mages second-tier or weaker. It seemed that the 'real' fights between stronger mages weren't to begin until later.

Leon was fairly surprised that mages that strong were even participating in bar fights, but that surprise soon dissipated when he glanced at Marcus, Alcander, and Alix, all of whom were in the fourth-tier and couldn't contain their eagerness. He supposed that his three retainers were far from unique in this regard.

When he sensed a lull in their conversation, he leaned over and asked his three followers, "So, why look for fights in a place like this?"

Alcander was the first to respond, and he gave Leon an unabashed smile and said, "Seemed like fun!"

Marcus offered a little more information, "We asked around for good places to spend some time and money, and the locals pointed us in this direction. As rustic as it is, apparently this is quite the spot for amateurs to come and fight. Some guilds, mercenary companies, and gladiator teams will even sometimes come and watch, looking for new blood to add to their ranks."

Leon nodded. This wasn't the most prestigious of places, but people did strange things to get noticed. And from what he could tell from the bets people were shouting to the bookie, this wasn't a bad place to earn a little pocket change. By his estimation, if he were to bet a hundred silvers on the winner of every fight, he could walk away with seven or eight thousand silvers. Of course, that would be in the best case scenario, but even then, the betting didn't truly capture his attention—especially since there were relatively low caps for an individual bet.

"Looks like they can have coaches and others in their corner," Leon observed, noticing that for the current fight, and for many others prior, there were older men standing in the fight's corner shouting advice.

"You going to do that for us?" Alix asked half-seriously.

"Might do," Leon said with a smile. "I don't claim to be a fighting expert, but surely there can be some pointers I can give, no?"

"I, for one, would welcome any tips you might have!" Alcander loudly declared, attracting some attention, and little of it was friendly. Leon could feel more glares than stares, and as the bar filled up a

bit more with the bigger fights drawing closer, there were more and more people of local dress and skin tone. It suddenly occurred to Leon just how obvious it was that he and his group were foreign.

He put it out of mind, though. He utterly outclassed everyone present, and while he resolved to keep his eyes open for anything, he wasn't that worried about someone trying something stupid.

'I think I'll refrain from the local brews, though...' he idly mused as he thought he felt a brief hint of killing intent coming their way from some of the bartenders.

"Looks like we have some newcomers!" a voice boomed across the bar, pulling Leon out of his thoughts.

He glanced over to the source of the voice, and he saw walking through the door a dozen men and three women walking into the bar. Eight of the men and two of the women were dressed in fairly skintight apparel that made it clear they were here to fight, but it wasn't any of them who'd spoken. Instead, it was the fifth-tier leader of their group, a rather doughy-looking fellow with sunken eyes; tanned, oily skin; short, greasy hair; a prominent pot-belly; and expensive-looking robes of green silk that did not a thing to complement his soft and unattractive appearance.

In the wake of the arrival of the doughy-man's group, and Leon could see a few of the weaker spectators either averting their eyes from fear or were staring at his group in what looked like anticipation.

"And they look like they're a pack of cows from up north, too!" the man shouted, staring at Leon's group with undisguised disgust and scorn. "Wonderful! It's always a good day for steak!"

The entire bar burst into frenzied whispering as their eyes darted between Leon's rather perplexed group and the newcomers.

"They're up for fights, want to send in your guys against them?" the man running the fights inquired with traces of respect and deference to his tone, and a lazy, friendly half-smile on his lips.

"Absolutely!" the doughy-man roared. "This isn't the place for these little calves, so let's smack them around a bit!"

A few chuckles rang out from the spectators, though they seemed more anticipatory than anything.

Leon himself wasn't too insulted, but he could feel the crowd was on the doughy-man's side. It seemed that his retinue picked up on that, as well, because he could feel the excitement within Marcus, Alcander, and Alix dying down, replaced with determined anger.

"It seems we're fighting these guys," Leon murmured to his people. "You three had better win your fights. We can *not* leave this place after being insulted by *this* fat shitstain."

His words were heard by the doughy-man, and his eyes bulged out and his face turned red with anger. Those around Leon who weren't part of his group went quiet and started nervously scooting away from him to make it clear they weren't with him.

"... Do you know who I am, boy?!" the doughy-man screamed, the clear difference in magical power between the two of them apparently not even a concern.

Leon shrugged. "No."

The doughy-man went quiet for a moment, his eyes squinting the dim light of the bar. Then, a disgusting smile swept across his

Chapter 634: Talal

The doughy-man's champion was a man that was, somehow, even more muscular than Alcander. The latter was practically a giant, standing a head over Leon and built like a mountain; but his opponent was even larger, standing a head over *him*, and looked like he weighed half again as much as Alcander from muscle alone.

"Mmm," the man grunted with derision as Alcander climbed into the ring. "I was craving some beef, and you look just fat enough to satisfy..."

"If you want some meat, I've got all you need right here," Alcander replied as he lightly squeezed his crotch. "And I can *guarantee* you satisfaction..." Leon's retainer then let his eyes drift up and down the doughy-man's champion as a soft, appreciative smile spread across his lips.

The champion did not look pleased at the hungry look Alcander gave him, and even less so by the words he'd spoken. The champion's face fell into a deep scowl, and he didn't say another word.

"A thousand on my man!" the doughy-man shouted to the bookie by the chalkboard, his declaration sending a wave of excited murmuring resounding through the spectators.

The bookie halted a moment, and Leon could understand why: the listed cap for an individual bet was only five hundred silvers, and even then, the odds given to the doughy-man's champion were so in his favor that even if the man won, he wasn't guaranteed anything more than the return of his wager plus a handful of extra coins. If anyone wanted to actually make any money of substance on this fight, then they'd have to bet on Alcander, instead.

The bookie sent a furtive, questioning look to the fifth-tier mage running the fight, and when he made an almost imperceptible nod, the bookie marked down the doughy-man's wager—and it was only then that Leon learned his name: Talal.

He briefly wondered just who this guy was; everyone seemed to know him, and he certainly had a high opinion of himself, but he was only a fifth-tier mage. To Leon, that wasn't much, but he also had to remember that in the Bull Kingdom, a fifth-tier mage was at the level of a Legion Tribune and could have quite a bit of power depending on their position. Talal could be a local bureaucrat or something with a lot of power in the city.

But Leon's caution vanished under the proud, provocative glare that Talal sent his way after so loudly declaring his wager.

Leon glanced at the board and saw that Alcander had only one-in-three odds, so if Leon matched Talal's bet, he'd get three thousand silver when his retainer won.

"A thousand on mine!" Leon shouted, unwilling to back down from such provocation, and once more a roar was kicked up from the hundreds of spectators whispering amongst themselves at the battle happening before them, before the fight had even begun.

Again, the bookie looked to his boss, who clearly hesitated to accept the bet.

Talal jumped on this, shouting for everyone to hear, “The poor little calves have so little credit that they can’t even place a bet! Does their beggary know no bounds? Of course, I don’t blame anyone, Bullish silver is hardly *pure*...”

The crowd roared with laughter, but if there was joke in there, Leon didn’t catch it. But he *did* feel the weight of all that laughter, and his killing intent began to rise. Accordingly, even though it was outside and still beneath the setting sun, the temperature around the ring began to plummet. For the first time, Talal went quiet and paled slightly, while Leon’s golden eyes bored holes into him, and then the boss of the fighting pit.

Slowly, with shaking knees and trembling lips, the fifth-tier mage running the fights, who would otherwise be like a god among the rabble who were in attendance, whimpered, “T-The bet w-will be allowed!”

Leon smiled, and reined in his killing intent, allowing everyone else to breathe a little easier. However, he was in for one last rude surprise.

“We need your bet up front!” the bookie shouted at Leon, which Leon noted wasn’t required of Talal. Despite what had just happened, the bookie seemed largely unaffected—possibly because he was completely mortal, without even the power of a first-tier mage, but Leon say for sure.

But, eager to show off a bit, Leon stood up, and in full view of everyone else, sauntered over to the bookie’s table and, with a snap of his fingers, caused a thousand silver coins, neatly stacked, to appear from his soul realm. Then, instead of returning to the stands, Leon waltzed over to Alcander’s corner of the fighting ring, and there waited for the fight to begin.

Alcander nodded to him, and Leon gave him a confident clap on the shoulder while everyone else stared at the small mountain of glittering silver, practically shining a molten red in the light of the setting sun.

The crowd had gone completely silent, and only started talking amongst themselves again when the fight’s fourth-tier referee finally stepped into the ring. Leon noted that more bets were cast, and nearly all of them were in favor of Talal’s champion rather than Alcander, despite the odds—though a few were cast *for* Alcander, as well.

“No killing!” the ref shouted to the two combatants. “No permanent maiming, either! Both are illegal, and will not be tolerated! Any rule breaking will result in legal ramifications, as well as a lifetime ban here and in all other arenas within the Sultanate! Am I understood?!”

Alcander nodded, his eyes locked upon his massive opponent, who likewise nodded and remained quiet.

That seemed to be enough for the ref, though, who responded, “Good! Now begin!”

‘*No other rules?*’ Leon wondered, but those thoughts were scattered when Alcander’s opponent surged forward, his speed belied by his massive bulk. Alcander was no stranger to battle, though, and he lunged forward to meet Talal’s champion, ducking low under his opponent’s opening right hook and hitting him in the abdomen with a solid jab.

Leon thought Alcander was aiming for the man’s stomach, but his aim was off and landed square in his abs, doing little damage with the champion flexing in defense.

The two were now deep in each other's range, and any attempts to back up and gain a little bit of space would only put them permanently on defense. So, neither backed off in the slightest, flinging punches at each other like a pair of well-trained brawlers. Their feet remained firm, and neither tried to dodge, letting their defenses consist entirely of blocking and countering when overwhelming aggression wasn't enough to keep the other at bay.

Despite getting in a good opening blow, Leon frowned as he watched the match devolve, with neither man giving any ground nor gaining any, simply exchanging blows with all the subtlety and grace of headless chickens. But their strikes, if they connected, were deadly and damaging, and Leon could see that Alcander wasn't faring too well without a weapon in hand. Still, though, his retainer was doing quite a bit of damage, himself, and soon enough, both men were bloody and bruised.

After about two minutes, a bell rang, and the ref forced himself between the two, driving them apart with surprising strength.

"You have one minute to rest!" he shouted, his tone brokering no argument with the break.

Talal's champion went back to his corner, where one of the men and the only woman who didn't seem to be there to fight began to attend to him, getting him water and rubbing his arms and shoulders.

Leon took this to mean that healing spells were against the rules, and so didn't break any out. Instead, as Alcander came back to lean into his corner, Leon inquired quietly enough so that only Alcander could hear, "What do you think of him?"

"A good striker," Alcander succinctly summarized just as quietly as Leon had asked, his breathing heavy though still spirited. "I don't think I can win. Might be a hard one."

"I think you'll do fine," Leon whispered with confidence, his eyes narrowing as they flitted between his retainer and Talal's champion.

"What makes you say that?"

"He's clearly right-handed," Leon explained, "but he favors his left leg. Maybe he's just left-footed, but I thought I saw something... I think he may have some kind of old injury that wasn't healed correctly or something. Try giving him a few kicks in the right knee and see where that gets you."

"Kicks, huh?" Alcander murmured somewhat reluctantly. "I don't want to bring feet into a fist fight..."

"Don't think of honoring rules that haven't been made," Leon growled in mild annoyance. "Just win. Kick his teeth in if you have to, kick his fucking balls up into his throat. We will *not* lose to these arrogant shits."

The whole time he and Alcander were speaking, Leon had kept his attention fixed on Talal's champion, who was staring daggers at him and Alcander while Talal himself muttered into his ear and occasionally glared at them. Leon didn't think that Alcander's initial courteous intent was going to be reciprocated in the next round. Alcander, after glancing at his opponent over his shoulder, seemed to pick up on that, and after taking a deep breath, he softly said, "Very well."

The bell rang again, and Leon straightened up and stated, "You've got this. No doubt in my mind. You're going to win."

"Thanks," Alcander said as he pushed himself back to his feet. "I won't let you down."

"You couldn't if you tried," Leon replied.

The ref announced the resumption of the fight, and the two fighters went at each other again.

As Leon had suspected, Talal's champion opened with a feinting jab, and then pivoted onto his left leg to aim a roundhouse kick at Alcander's midsection. Alcander had approached swiftly, but hadn't abandoned caution, and so had more than enough time to halt and take a quick step back, letting the champion's foot taste nothing but air.

But then, once the champion's foot hit the wood of the ring again, Alcander surged forward, slamming his foot into the champion's right knee.

With that one strike, Leon knew without a shadow of a doubt that Alcander was going to win—the champion, for just a moment, wore a face of pain and exertion as he threw a few punches at Alcander to get him to back off, and then stood up straight. But Leon could see the tiny limp in his right leg had grown worse, and the champion didn't try to kick again.

But Alcander wasn't so accommodating. With Leon and the others behind him, with Alix screaming for their comrade to take the champion's head and Marcus shouting his encouragements, he didn't hesitate to kick at the champion's knee several more times.

In the end, the fight went as Leon had predicted: Talal's champion, after five kicks to the knee, collapsed in pain, and the ref called the fight. He *did* give the champion a few more seconds than anyone in the earlier fights had gotten, Leon noticed, but it didn't change the outcome, so he was hardly upset.

Talal, however, was *furious*, and he seemed to make little effort in concealing that fact; his face contorting with rage, his oily cheeks flushing red in anger.

All while Leon stood in his corner, not saying a word, but smiling with pride and triumph as Alcander roared in victory and held up his arms for applause that didn't come. None of the crowd seemed particularly thrilled that Alcander had won—not that that stopped him from celebrating with his arms held aloft.

'Maybe it's because most of them just lost their bets?' Leon quietly mused.

Eventually, Talal's champion was helped out of the ring, Alcander stepped out, and Leon hopped down from the corner to collect his winnings. The bookie seemed unwilling to part with so much silver, but Leon laid a hand upon his shoulder and squeezed ever so slightly, letting the mortal man feel with his body what he might not have been able to feel before: Leon's comparatively titanic strength.

And he made no more arguments, letting Leon take his silver back and hurriedly pulling box after box of loose coins out from under his table to pay Leon the remainder of his winnings. Talal coming forward to practically throw his thousand silver at the table helped, but the bookie still took some time counting out what Leon was owed, and Leon could practically feel the fight ring's manager dying on the other side of the room as every coin was handed over.

When he walked back to his people, Leon said to Alcander, "Far as I'm concerned, most of that coin is yours, but I can hold onto it until we get back."

Alcander, not wanting to burden himself with the weight of thousands of coins, agreed. Leon then pressed enough healing spells into the man's hand to fix all of the cuts and bruises he'd sustained during his fight.

Then, it was time for the next match. Leon had pointedly ignored Talal as much as he could throughout all of this, but he knew the man to be incensed. However, after Alcander's win, he seemed a little more circumspect—still glaring hatefully at Leon, but not arrogantly bragging or shouting insults for all the bar to hear. Instead, he spoke with the manager for a minute or so, and then sent out his next fighter, a pale-skinned man of a much lither build, but tall and handsome.

"I'll take this one," Marcus said as he stood up and entered the ring.

Talal didn't bet on his fighter this time, so neither did Leon bet. Instead, the two just stood in their respective corners, with Talal glaring furiously at Leon while Leon grinned back with muted smugness; the eager shouting and betting of the crowd might as well have not existed for all the attention either man paid it.

Finally, when the ref started the fight, Leon turned his gaze to Talal's fighter. Marcus was a much more tactical fighter than Alcander was, and his opponent matched well against him. The two didn't immediately come to blows, but slowly approached each other, their guards raised, their eyes evaluating the other for any potential weaknesses they might be able to exploit.

Talal's man broke the stalemate first, sending a few weak but quick probing strikes to test Marcus' defenses. Marcus expertly deflected and directed a couple of kicks his opponent's way to counter, none of which did any appreciable damage.

The two slowly built up more power, but the pace of the fight didn't change that much for the first round. They slowly circled each other, staring the other down as they slowly and methodically probed for any opportunity, occasionally punctuating their probing strikes with bursts of intense violence, exchanging half a dozen or more blows in a matter of seconds, only to separate and go back to their slow circling, neither much worse for wear.

When the round ended, Marcus came back to Leon's corner to quietly talk, while his opponent did likewise, with Talal bending down to hurriedly whisper in his fighter's ear while his support staff did their best to help their fighter relax with water and massages.

"How do you feel?" Leon asked Marcus as the latter crouched down on the other side of the posts.

Marcus understood that Leon meant that question in several ways, so he said, "I'm doing fine, no damage to report. But I think I can take this guy; he's too cautious, and if I go for a more aggressive approach, then I should be able to overwhelm him. I'm stronger than him, anyway, and quicker, too."

"True," Leon agreed, "but I'd guess that he's getting similar orders right now." Indeed, both men could feel the killing intent start to radiate off Talal's fighter as his doughy manager whispered in his ear, his eyes locked upon Marcus. "I think the pace of the fight is going to change whether or not you intend for it to..."

"Any advice?" Marcus inquired.

“He’s not a good kicker—it throws him slightly off balance. If he starts to kick, lean into it and bring him to the ground. Use your greater strength to make him submit.”

Marcus nodded, and a moment later, the second round began.

As Leon predicted, as soon as the ref announced the resumption of the fight, Marcus’ opponent began a blitz of strong punches and elbow strikes that put Marcus on the defensive right from the get-go. Marcus’ defense was superb, and he dodged, deflected, and blocked every strike sent his way. After about fifteen seconds, though, things changed: Talal’s fighter tried to kick at Marcus’ back knee as Marcus dodged backward, but Marcus did as Leon suggested and leaned into the hit, crouching down slightly to take it in a meatier part of his thigh, and then using his forward momentum to grab his opponent’s leg and roll him to the ground. Marcus fell atop him, driving all the air from his opponent’s lungs, and pulled him into a tight headlock.

The fight was essentially over at that point, but Marcus had to choke his opponent almost into unconsciousness before he gave up. As he struggled, he managed to get in a few hits on Marcus, finally drawing a bit of blood, but it didn’t change the result, and he eventually had to tap out. Leon almost thought he wasn’t going to, but he was glad to be surprised.

Only once it was over did Leon start tuning back into the state of the crowd. Marcus shot to his feet once his opponent gave up, and the crowd responded with polite, if decidedly unenthusiastic applause. If anything, Leon thought he heard more grumbling than celebration.

He put it out of his mind, though, and he clapped Marcus on the shoulder in congratulations as he stepped out of the ring, and then slapped a healing spell to fix up the superficial damage that his opponent had given him.

As he did, he felt Talal’s eyes boring into him from behind, and more than a hint of killing intent, as well.

Leon started to play with the idea of just calling it quits here. He had a bad feeling that since Talal might only think him a sixth-tier mage, then he might try something more violent and drastic if he were made to lose too much. The man had certainly entered the bar like he believed himself untouchable, and for all Leon knew, he *was*—at least, for most people in the city, his personal fifth-tier power notwithstanding. For a man like that, Leon figured that his pride was worth more to him than any amount of silver.

Leon didn’t want enemies, even if they were relatively inconsequential. He enjoyed the feeling of kicking someone as arrogant as Talal down a few pegs, but it was a different matter entirely if things escalated from there. He was quite distinctly reminded of the matter with Gaius, and how their rivalry within the Knight Academy only cooled down once Gaius himself had decided not to continue escalating matters—Leon honestly wasn’t sure if he were capable of making the same decision in the moment. If Talal were to take his antipathy outside of the ring, then Leon would feel obligated to destroy him entirely. And that would likely only make him even more enemies than he might already have within the Sultanate.

For much the same reasons as his decision not to directly assault the Sultan’s palace when Asiya had been arrested, and for his personal desire to enjoy his peace for a little while longer, he felt that ending this little show early might be for the best.

However, before he could say anything, Talal's only female fighter jumped into the ring and shouted in the common tongue, though heavily-accented, "All right, cow-whore! You're up!"

She pointed directly at Alix, and all Leon could do was sigh when Alix leaped to her feet and nimbly climbed into the ring with a deadly smirk on her face. Leon didn't once try to stop her. After such a blatant callout, his pride refused to allow him to back down—or, as it was, to order *Alix* to back down.

When he saw Talal's irate expression, he just hoped that allowing this to continue wasn't a mistake.

Chapter 635: Night on the Town

Alix's fight started with a bang. Neither woman seemed willing to take the more defensive posture that Marcus and his opponent had, and so launched themselves at each other with all they had.

It made Leon fairly nervous, but it also gave him more than enough time to inspect Alix's opponent's fighting style.

When the two had entered the ring, once again, Talal didn't instigate any betting, and Leon didn't want to start anything. As it was, he already felt like, with how hatefully Talal was staring at him, this was starting to go too far, especially since the crowd was *not* on his side. Even with his people winning against the odds given by the people running the fights, it seemed that they were making more people angry than they were entertaining them.

Fortunately, it seemed that this fight was going to be over quickly, without a need for a second round.

Alix pulled back a little, letting her opponent hit her with a flurry of blows while she let her aura sag and her killing intent abate. To anyone else, it would seem like she was tiring or starting to feel the hits she was taking. However, Leon had fought alongside Alix for a long time, now, and had even taught her much of what had formed her personal fighting style; he could tell that she was faking, drawing her opponent in and enticing her to commit more and more to offense, to the detriment of her defense.

It was a risky strategy, and one that struck a stark contrast between how the fight had started less than a minute ago. But it seemed that her initial intent was paying off, as Alix's opponent smiled viciously and began striking harder and faster, pressing Alix hard, who was busy keeping her hands up and dodging wherever she could.

And then, with less than ten seconds left in the round, Alix seemed to explode with magic power, with her retracted aura erupting from her with an almost physical force, laced with her killing intent. After even just a few seconds with it gone, her opponent was caught completely off-guard, and was subsumed completely within Alix's killing intent; she froze with the instinctive terror of someone unexpectedly coming across some terrible monster that they knew without a shadow of a doubt could and very well *might* end their life.

Alix didn't go that far, but she did take advantage of every microsecond that her opponent gave her, and slammed her fist first into her opponent's liver, jabbed at a few key pressure points, and then swept her opponent's leg out from under her, all in barely more than a second.

Alix's opponent went down hard, and she didn't get back up. She just lay on the floor of the ring, curling up and moaning in pain.

“Ha ha!” Alix shouted in triumph as she raised her arms toward the crowd, and then further toward the sky. Then, she wobbled a bit on her feet, the damage taken during her brief feint just now hitting her.

Without another word, but still with her victorious grin plastered across her face, she lowered her arms and staggered back over to Leon in her corner.

“Well done,” he said appreciatively as he helped her out of the ring and passed a healing spell into her hand.

“Couldn’t have done it without you,” she replied as she pressed the spell into her forearm.

“Me? I didn’t do a thing other than watch you win,” Leon said with a laugh.

“Count it as inspiration, then. I remember you telling me how you did something similar during your time in the Knight Academy.”

“Yeah,” Alcander muttered next to her, a hint of bitterness in his voice. “He used it on *us*.”

“It was a good, if risky strategy,” Marcus added. “If it went wrong, though, I think everyone would be calling you a fool.”

“That’s why I waited until the round was almost over,” Alix explained with a prideful tone. “Didn’t want to spend the entire round getting my ass handed to me trying and failing to do that from the start.”

As they spoke, Leon glanced around the room and saw that Talal was just as furious as before, though Leon noted that it seemed his rage was only directed in his and his retainers’ direction; the fighters who’d lost to Leon’s people weren’t being shouted at or abused. Leon didn’t take that to mean much—Talal could still do that behind closed doors, for all Leon would know—but he at least took it as a sign that the oily man wasn’t completely filled with hate.

“Hey,” Leon interrupted as his retainers gushed over their wins, “let’s head back.”

“So soon?” Alcander complained. “We’ve only had one fight each!”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t mind staying a bit longer,” said Marcus. “Surely some friendly fights with people who aren’t trying to kill us can only expand out horizons?”

“The keyword there is ‘friendly,’” Leon noted, and he subtly nodded to the spectators around them. “We’re not in the friendliest crowd. Let’s head out before we step on too many toes.”

Alix and Alcander for a moment looked like they were about to continue to protest, but after a look around, Marcus spoke up in agreement with Leon. With great reluctance, the two got to their feet, and all four made their way toward the exit.

“Thanks for accommodating us, but we’re going to have to call it here,” Leon said good-naturedly to the fight manager on their way out, who spared him only the briefest of acknowledging glances.

At the door, Leon took a quick look back, noting that nearly everyone in the bar was watching them leave in a manner that had him feeling extremely exposed. He may be more powerful than everyone in the room combined, but the sheer weight of the social pressure put upon him and his people was deeply uncomfortable.

Talal, in particular, stared after him with a look of... well, Leon couldn't quite tell, but he felt that this wasn't the last time he'd see the Samarid.

Stepping back into the early night, he found that in his few second's pause at the door, his three retainers had already immersed themselves in a lively debate about where to go and what to do next.

"... under good authority that it's an extremely nice club," Alix advocated.

"That may be the case, but a club is hardly my sort of place," Alcander responded with a deep frown, his arms flexing with restrained energy. "Somewhere where I can hit some more people would be my choice."

"You can hit people at a club," Alix pointed out. "Just depends on how drunk you get, and how drunk *they* are. Might get us all banned for life, though."

"Hardly matters; not like we're planning on making it up to this city often," Marcus countered.

"True," Alix acceded, "but I'd rather not make a habit of getting kicked out of every fun place we visit on our way south."

"If you don't get kicked out, though, did you really have a good time?" Alcander inquired, and Leon honestly couldn't tell if he was being serious or not. Alcander then clapped Marcus on the back and added, "I think if it weren't for our family names, we would've gotten kicked out of quite a few places back home!"

Alcander punctuated his statement with a booming laugh, and Marcus couldn't help but join in.

After a moment, though, Marcus quieted down and said, "I've a hunger, though not for food. Did your source say this club is a good place to pick up some ladies?"

"I don't know about ladies," Alix said with a wry smile, "but she *did* say that it was a good place to find some *seriously* fuckable guys..."

"That'll do, I guess," Marcus said with a shrug. "Count me in for that club. Al?"

With a sigh of contemplation, Alcander replied, "Yeah, I'm in. If nothing else, there should still be drinks."

In tandem, all three finally turned to Leon, eyes bright with expectation.

"How about you, boss?" Marcus asked. "Feel like staying out a little longer?"

There was absolutely nothing that Leon wanted to do more than to leave. He was fighting his embarrassment and mortification at the reception the four of them had received in the fighting pit, and the thought of staying out even longer in a place like a club did *not* appeal. However, the reason he'd accompanied everyone to begin with was to build up the bonds within his retinue, not so much for the 'fun' that he could have at such a place.

With tremendous reluctance that he hid as best as he could, Leon agreed, and the other three happily led him onward. All the while, he felt like he'd just made a terrible mistake.

—

"Had some fun out there, husband?" Elise asked with amusement as Leon walked back into the Heaven's Eye guest house. Over his shoulder he'd easily draped the massive unconscious form of Alcander, while next to him, Marcus and Alix were stumbling with their arms over the other's shoulders for support and balance.

"Fun, of a sort," Leon grumbled as he unceremoniously dumped Alcander's body onto a nearby sofa, where Valeria and Maia walked over to curiously inspect him.

"Ugh!" Valeria groaned as she immediately recoiled. "He smells like a brewery in the *worst* way!"

"Yeah," Leon responded as he herded Marcus and Alix into seats of their own. "Not really sure what he drank, but I think he underestimated how effective it would be on a fourth-tier mage. Whatever it was, he drank *a lot* of it. *These two* weren't any better."

"What happened?" Elise wondered as she got up and walked over.

Leon quickly narrated the night's events, starting first with the short time they spent in the fighting pits. By the time he finished with that, both Marcus and Alix, who'd interjected several times with their own slurred, drunken additions, had fallen asleep.

"... so we went out to a club."

"A *club*?!" Valeria cried in disbelief. "*You* went to a *club*?!"

Leon shrugged, a look of muted disgust on his face. "Yeah. Yeah I did. Kind of wish I didn't, but I did."

"Was it really that bad?" Elise inquired, a smile of pity and skepticism spreading across her lips.

"Loud, harsh music, hundreds of people in too small a space, all dancing and shaking on one another? Not my scene. It's clearly to other's tastes, but not mine. Never mine."

Leon, by this point, had collapsed into a nearby chair, and as he expressed his exasperation, Valeria walked over and hugged his head from behind.

"I think our little misanthrope protests too much," she whispered as she winked at Elise. "Maybe we ought to take him to more clubs, see if we can't get him a taste for the night life? Or at least raise his tolerance a bit?"

"A wonderful idea!" Elise enthused, which was immediately followed by a loud groan from Leon.

He pushed himself free from Valeria's tight embrace and declared, "Never. Never again. Hate those places. No more."

"I think it sounds like a lot of fun," Elise protested with a teasing look in her eye. "And if you don't want to come with, I'm sure there are plenty of other guys around who might want to act as our escorts—"

She was barely able to finish her jest before Leon shot to his feet, crossed over to her in the blink of an eye, picked her up quite handily, and tossed her down on a nearby empty sofa. Then, he crawled over her prone form, a lion about to take his mate.

But then, as their eyes drew level, hers glittering, baiting, his jealous and territorial, he paused, and his gaze turned a little more serious.

“Do you really want to go to places like that?” he asked.

“I want to go everywhere with you,” she quipped. But when his eyes narrowed slightly, she added, “It sounds like it can be a lot of fun if you go with people you enjoy being around.”

“I *do* enjoy being around them, for what that’s worth,” Leon quietly said, jerking his head back toward his three passed out retainers. “Well, when they’re sober.”

With a shout of triumph that interrupted Elise’s attempt to reply, Valeria leaped up and landed on Leon’s back, hugging him from behind.

“Gotcha!” she declared. But then her tone and demeanor changed to match Leon’s more earnest attitude. “I doubt either me or Elise will let ourselves go nearly so much as these three. I think you might actually enjoy yourself if you don’t have to worry about keeping an eye on your retainers, making sure they’re all right and aren’t starting fights or getting into trouble. That’s what you were doing all night, wasn’t it? Not cutting loose and having fun, but watching out for the people you’re responsible for?”

Leon sighed, giving no other answer than that, but with Valeria and Elise, no other answer was needed; they knew that was exactly what had happened. Leon had spent the night as the only sober person among a group of drunks and had about as much fun as that implied.

“Maybe not a club,” Elise then said, “but it would be nice to get out and about when we get the chance, especially before we leave the northeast. To my understanding there aren’t many large cities in the Wetlands and finding a place to have fun will be nearly impossible until we get to the Ilian Empire. Will you go with us, husband?”

Again, Leon sighed, and again, that was all the answer either Elise or Valeria needed. While he was of the mind that spending time with his lovers was never a waste, pushing outside of his social comfort zone was not something he was eager to do. But for them, he would, without any real hesitation.

Elise reached up and touched Leon’s cheeks, taking his head into her hands. She pulled him down to press her lips against his, but then just as quickly, pushed him back and turned her head toward Maia.

“And you?” she asked. “Fancy seeing what kinds of things good, wholesome people like us get up to at night?”

[If you expect me to ‘dance and shake’ on someone else, you’ll be disappointed,] Maia growled into all three of their minds. Her expression was one of stony indifference, but then it softened just a bit, and she added, [But I’ll go, too.]

“Wonderful!” Elise shouted, and she pulled Leon down for another kiss. This time, she didn’t break it all that soon, and at the same time, Valeria wrapped her legs around Leon’s waist and pressed her face into his neck. Maia seemed to take that as a challenge, and her expression soon morphed into something predatory.

Leon watched her sashaying over from the corner of his eye, and even with Elise seemingly trying to suck his face off, his lips started to widen into a smile of anticipation. It seemed his night wasn’t even close to being over, yet. The only question that remained was how they were all going to get to the master bedroom without breaking their embrace.

A tricky riddle, but one that Leon was eager to solve.

—

Leon was awoken the next morning by loud, but respectful knocking on his bedroom door. Elise and Maia lay next to him, both stirring, but neither quite awake just yet. With a deep sigh, he disentangled himself from their limbs, dressed himself with clothes from his soul realm, and went to crack the door just enough to see who was outside.

It was a Heaven's Eye messenger, who informed him of an invitation Emilie had extended to him to meet with the local Heaven's Eye managers. He wasn't that thrilled at the idea, but he figured that if Emilie was taking the time to send him the invitation, then it had to be worthwhile. He told the messenger that he'd be there, and then he shut the door.

Looking back at the bed, there was nothing he wanted to do more than crawl back beneath the covers and go back to sleep. But Maia and Elise were already stirring, and while some morning sex might be on the table, sleeping in wasn't.

He sighed as he walked back over and sat down at the edge of the bed, remembering the previous night—or rather, that morning. He and Valeria had yet to go all the way, but they'd given each other a satisfying amount of physical attention while Elise and Maia went at each other. However, after some time spent focusing on each other, Valeria then left him with the other two, choosing to go to sleep in her guest room rather than stay with the three of them.

Given how much longer he, Maia, and Elise continued showering each other with affection for, Leon couldn't entirely blame her for that, but he still wished she would've stayed. She would never share a bed with Elise or Maia in that way, but Leon couldn't help but wish that things were different.

It was what it was, though, and for all his wishing, he wasn't going to put any pressure on Valeria to change. As Elise and Maia awoke, the three kissed each other good morning—or good afternoon, Leon wasn't entirely sure—and Leon properly got up and readied himself for the day.

An hour later, he was walking into the central administration building for Akhmim's Heaven's Eye branch, guided by a Heaven's Eye attendant.

It was a far cry from the Heaven's Eye Towers he was used to—while an important trade city, Akhmim wasn't anywhere near important enough to warrant a Tower. The biggest difference was that it was *just* an administrative building, rather than the lounge-market-bureaucratic center that the Towers were, and while richly decorated, it wasn't even close to the luxury that Leon had, by now, come to associate with Heaven's Eye.

It wasn't long before Leon was taken to the conference room where Emilie would introduce the local Heaven's Eye management to him.

On his entrance, Leon was struck at how small the room was, with it seeming more akin to a sitting room with only about half a dozen plush armchairs arranged around a low, rectangular table rather than a large business conference room. There were several stacks of paper on the table, and three of the men sitting on the same side of the table were hunched over even more sheets of paper, quietly speaking with each other in tones low enough that Leon didn't bother to listen in.

Of the three remaining people, all of whom sat facing away from the door, one was Emilie, who was smiling and laughing as Leon walked in, deep in conversation with another woman just to her right who was dressed all in black. The man to her left, however, Leon needed no introduction to, for he'd 'met' him only the night previous.

Leon froze just inside the door, his eyes wide with disbelief and recognition, then narrowing slightly in suspicion and antipathy. The others around the table quieted down upon his entrance and turned to face him. Emilie's smile grew wider, and she warmly welcomed Leon into the meeting.

Talal, on the other hand, quietly rose from his seat and turned to face Leon, his expression morphing from one that reflected Leon's disbelief, to one of deep fear and regret as the reality of Leon's presence sank in.

Chapter 636: Trusting a Retainer

Leon and Talal stood there, staring at each other, surprise and just a hint of displeasure on the former's face, while shock and rapidly deepening regret and fear graving the latter's.

"This... is your son-in-law?" Talal eventually choked out.

Emilie, an eyebrow raised in a tacit curiosity, said, "Yes, he is. This is Leon Raime, an eighth-tier mage that is interested in joining Heaven's Eye."

"E-eighth-tier?" Talal whispered rhetorically.

Leon's smile widened and he nodded in confirmation. "Only recently ascended, though," he added.

Talal nodded, no trace of the arrogance he exhibited during the previous night's fight anywhere to be seen.

"Uh... excuse me for a moment," the doughy man muttered, and he slid past Leon to poke his head out of the door and wave to someone just outside. Having just passed through the room, Leon knew there to be about a dozen people in the room just outside, whom he now realized were the assistants to everyone in the meeting.

Talal began to hurriedly whisper to one of his assistants, and while Leon would've liked nothing more than to listen in, Emilie called out, "Leon, please come and join us! I'd like to introduce you to everyone here!"

Leon smiled and nodded, making his way over to the meeting table. Behind him, he could hear Talal muttering with something that sounded like panic, "... just bring them all back! Drop everything and bring them back now!"

With that, Talal retreated back into the meeting room, his bronze face looking a few shades paler than they had when Leon had walked in, and shining with more panicked sweat than whatever oil he'd covered himself with.

Meanwhile, as he narrowed his eyes and pondered the meaning of Talal's words, Leon sought out a seat. The only empty one was the one that Talal had just vacated, and while the man hadn't made a good first impression upon him, Leon didn't want to steal the man's seat. That just felt like such a petty thing to do.

However, Talal seemed to realize the lack of seating, and instead of moving immediately to retake his seat next to Emilie, he instead chose to stand at one end of the table, standing there about as awkwardly as Leon was.

“Well aren’t you two just the cutest,” Emilie cooed. She then patted Talal’s old seat and ‘suggested’, “Leon, come sit with me. Talal, this place has no shortage of chairs elsewhere, have one delivered. And next time, arrange a meeting room with seating for all.”

Talal looked like he wanted to respond, but a brief glance at Leon seemed to freeze his tongue, and he just shuffled back over to the door.

Feeling more than a little bad about the situation, and the fact that the other three men who were in the meeting had stopped working to watch, Leon hesitated to take the offered seat, but after some quiet prodding from Emilie, he slowly sank down into the armchair.

Several minutes then passed, and Leon was introduced to the other four people at the meeting. They were essentially other regional managers for Heaven’s Eye in nearby cities who’d made the trip to Akhmim to meet with Emilie as she was passing through. Talal, however, was the Heaven’s Eye manager for Akhmim itself, and he was all that Leon could really focus on. Eventually, another chair was brought, though it was just a tough armless wooden chair that stood in contrast to the plush armchairs that everyone else sat in.

Talal didn’t let a single complaint pass his lips, though, and he took a seat and sat ramrod straight as if he were awaiting an inspection from Emilie.

“Now,” Emilie loudly whispered as Talal sank into his seat and the others went silent, “I take it you two know each other?”

“Not really,” Leon replied. “We were acquainted last night when we both sponsored a few fighters in a small local arena.”

“Lord Leon’s fighters were honorable and fought admirably,” Talal added, his voice quivering slightly. “I’m quite proud of my gladiators, but they were thoroughly trounced.”

“I’m lucky to have such retainers,” Leon stated. “Your gladiators were quite skilled, though. I think they may have been more skilled than my people, but mine are veterans of many battles. And please, just ‘Leon’. I’m no Lord, and even if I was, I’m not the sort to care for titles.”

“You’re too kind,” Talal replied mechanically, not once bringing himself to look Leon in the eye.

“I see,” Emilie murmured, clearly sensing that something else was up, but not pressing either of them for the moment. “Let’s then get on to other business, shall we? Talal, I believe that you had some business to bring up with me?”

The bronze-skinned Samarid seemed to want to do nothing more than to sink deep into the ground and disappear forever, but under the weight of Emilie’s expectant gaze, he eventually responded.

“Yes... I believe that a fugitive has stowed away in your crew.”

“A fugitive?” Emilie said, alarmed. “Who? And who and what are they running from?”

"I believe the man's name is 'Anshu Bodhi Rahulani'," Talal explained, and Leon's blood ran cold, the possibility of his retainer having lied to him suddenly consuming his mind. "The Indra Raj put a sizable bounty on him a couple decades ago. He's a pirate and smuggler who's been on the run from them for a while, now. I believe he's also wanted for treason against the Rajah, as well."

Leon could feel Emilie turning to look at him, but he at least calmed slightly, the charged against Anshu not exceeding what he already knew. When he glanced over at her, he saw that she wasn't looking at him with anything but curiosity—if he had to guess, he'd say that she was waiting to see what he would do about this before weighing in, herself.

Leon had no trouble finding his tongue with that realization.

"Anshu is one of my retainers," he softly, but strongly declared. His golden eyes locked onto Talal, wordlessly daring the Samarid to try something.

But Talal didn't. Instead, he visibly gulped and said, "Very well. Nothing is forcing us to aid the Indra Raj in apprehending their fugitives..."

For a moment, Leon stared at the man, wondering if he was trying to subtly shame Leon for defending an accused pirate. When that moment passed, and his instinct to defend his retainer died down slightly, he realized that he would leave some ruffled feathers behind if he didn't explain himself—the other four Heaven's Eye managers weren't looking upon him too fondly, after all, and the last thing he wanted to do was to start alienating powerful members of the Guild before he'd even joined it.

With a sigh, Leon explained, "I can't speak for Anshu's past. He certainly answered the call of the notorious pirate Jormun, fighting against the fleets of the Bull Kingdom on his orders. But all of that was put behind him when he joined my retinue. He is no longer a pirate, of that I can guarantee."

The woman sitting on the other side of Emilie hesitantly asked, her tone dripping with apprehension, "Are... you sure about that? How can you make such a guarantee? Most nations around here have long-standing policies to execute all pirates they find..."

"If Anshu betrays me and goes back to being a pirate, then I will personally kill him," Leon said. "He is my problem right now, and I take full responsibility for him."

The woman seemed likely to try to argue the point, but after a second of thought, merely replied, "The word of an eighth-tier mage carries weight. And you have Lady Emilie vouching for your integrity."

Taking that as her deferring to him on the issue, Leon nodded in gratitude. The other three men at the table followed her example.

But that didn't mean that the issue was done, for Talal had one last piece of information to share, following Emilie's prompting.

"I have to ask," Emilie said, "how did you learn of Anshu's presence? To my understanding, he generally keeps to himself and doesn't draw attention..."

Talal nodded and expounded, "I like to keep an eye on all the goings-on around the docks. Pays to keep informed of who comes and goes. And you're right, it wasn't until hours after your arrival that Anshu popped up on my radar. He arranged for quite a few letters and packages to be sent from one of our

post stations, and then spent quite a bit of time purchasing up-to-date information on the Indra Raj. Just last night, though, a letter arrived for him bearing the seal of the Prince of Tosali.”

“You didn’t open this letter, did you?” Emilie asked, alarmed.

“Of course not,” Talal replied, “but the letter’s seal was impossible to ignore.”

Emilie nodded, and when Leon remained quiet, the conversation rather awkwardly died out. It seemed clear enough to Leon that Emilie wanted to speak with him, and sooner rather than later, but they still had the rest of the meeting to get through.

Fortunately, after all of that, no one much wanted to stick around, and so no other business was brought up for Emilie to weigh in on, and within half an hour, the managers excused themselves from the meeting. Talal was the first to leave, and though he tried to hide it, Leon saw a look of relief cross the man’s face for just a moment as he left the room.

Emilie waited for the door to close, sealing them in again before she gave voice to her thoughts.

“That could’ve gone better,” she quipped as she leaned back in her chair and stretched, her business-like demeanor dropping completely with the enchantments in the walls ensuring that she and Leon were alone and in private. “Could’ve gone much worse, though.”

“Have you so little faith in me?” Leon asked.

Emilie burst out with a full-bodied laugh, and she glanced over at him, her bright green eyes flashing with mirth. “Diplomacy is... not your strong suit.”

“Maybe,” Leon said with a self-deprecating smirk, “but I’m learning. Slowly.”

“If you could learn a little faster, I’d be much happier,” Emilie jokingly replied, and she straightened up. As she sat up in her chair, Leon knew that she was about to get more serious, and he straightened up, too. “So,” she began, “you and Talal. There’s more to how the two of you met, isn’t there? He wasn’t exactly acting like the two of you have no history. He seemed like there was nothing he wanted more than to run away as soon as you walked in the door.”

“That he did,” Leon agreed. “The truth is what we told you, though: we met last night in a fighting ring. His attitude wasn’t that great, though, and he provoked my people into fighting his. My people beat his without fail, but I had us leave early to try and prevent us from starting anything that would be taken outside of the arena.” Leon recalled how Talal reacted when he arrived at the meeting, and what few words he’d overheard the manager whispering to his assistant. “I’m... unsure how successful I was in that endeavor, though.”

“Yes, I think he’s not a man who takes losses gracefully,” Emilie stated.

“I don’t think he knew who I was. He seemed to realize that we were from the Bull Kingdom, but he didn’t know that we were from your caravan?”

“This is a busy trade city,” Emilie said with a dismissive wave. “Many foreigners ply the Tyrrhenian River, and thousands of Bull Kingdom expats live in this city. Hundreds more pass through here every month. Our expedition is large, to be sure, but this place isn’t so culturally uniform that someone like you, who deliberately refused to attend any welcoming ceremonies, would stand out that much.”

Leon winced, hearing the slight recrimination in her tone.

“Makes sense why he wouldn’t know you by sight,” she continued. “Still, he was acting provocatively, you said?”

Leon nodded. “He wanted his fights, and my people wanted to fight. So some words were exchanged and they fought. Honestly wasn’t that bad now that I’m thinking back on it, but still not appreciated.”

“Were those exchanged words bad enough that they might need to be punished?”

“No, no.” Leon shook his head in the negative. “Even if they were, I’d rather not make a big deal out of this.”

“A big deal might be made of it no matter what you intend.”

“You mean what he whispered to his assistant or whoever?” Leon asked.

Emilie nodded.

“Sounds more like he was calling something off. Maybe he was going to try escalating this beyond a simple friendly clash, but backed down when he realized who I am. Maybe it was something completely unrelated to me, I can’t say. Regardless, it seems like I’ve nothing to fear from him.”

Emilie sighed. “I still rather want to look into this. If he’s been abusing his power here...”

With the thought of how Talal had acted like he owned that arena, Leon couldn’t argue that he wasn’t likely abusing his power. He may not want to make an enemy out of Talal, but he wasn’t going to try and protect him, either.

“So be it,” Leon whispered.

The two went quiet as their conversation died down.

After a few awkward seconds, Leon said, “Thank you. For this.”

“Hmm?” Emilie responded with some confusion, her mind clearly still on Talal.

“Introducing me to people from Heaven’s Eye,” Leon explained. “I appreciate it.”

“It’s always good to know people,” Emilie said.

“It is,” Leon agreed. “Even if they’re only powerful within their own regions—even if I never come back *here* again—it’s good to know people in powerful positions within the Guild. Might come in handy someday.”

“It’s good for everyone. They get to meet someone who’s on a fast track to becoming one of the Guild’s most powerful agents, and maybe even more than that...”

Again, Leon nodded, but he said nothing more. He’d said his piece, and that was that. After a few more somewhat awkward seconds, he and Emilie finally rose from their seats and left the meeting room, separating once outside. Leon returned to the guest house while Emilie went off presumably to look into Talal’s history as the regional Heaven’s Eye manager.

They only had a few more days in Akhmim, and then they'd be setting off on the most strenuous part of their journey: the overland trek from the southern marches of the Samar Kingdom all the way into the Illumerian Wetlands.

—

When Leon returned to the guest house, he sought out Anshu after giving his greetings to his family. What Talal had informed him of during the meeting was something that he wanted to confirm for himself, especially since he'd committed to helping Anshu with some vengeful business down in the Raj. If the man was communicating with a Prince, then that was something that Leon wanted to be informed about.

He found the Indradian in one of the guest house's meditation chambers, quietly circulating the magic power in his body and whiling away at forging his magic body.

Leon didn't immediately interrupt the man, though. Instead, he quietly knelt on one of the luxurious Samarid meditation mats in the meditation room and waited for Anshu to finish. As important as Leon thought his questions were, his retainers' training was of paramount importance in his mind. The stronger they were, the stronger he was as a result.

He waited for almost an hour, Anshu too into his training to even realize Leon was present. It became clear when the Indradian realized he was there because he practically jumped out of his own skin and cried out in shock.

"Gah! Make some noise, Leon!" he said in his thick Indradian accent. "How long have you been here?"

"About an hour," Leon responded.

Anshu rolled his eyes. When he saw that Leon was being honest, though, he reeled slightly and asked, "Really?"

Leon nodded.

"Oh. I apologize, I didn't realize you'd arrived..."

"Don't worry about it," Leon said and waved his hand dismissively. "I came here to speak with you, if you have a couple of minutes..."

Anshu nodded his assent, and Leon quickly informed him of everything that Talal had brought up at the meeting. It didn't take long, they hadn't exactly discussed him at length.

When Leon was finished, Anshu looked rather annoyed, but not much more than that. "Ah. All of that," he stated, unimpressed. "I was aware that the Rajah wanted my head, as I believe I informed you of when signing on with you."

"By implication, if not stated outright," Leon replied.

"Right. Well, my life following my exile was not the sort that makes many friends among established powers. I freely admit that I partook in some smuggling of valuable spices, which is how I eventually became acquainted with Jormun."

Leon's expression momentarily darkened at the mention of that name.

"Mm. I believe you also told me that you weren't a pirate, but here I am finding out that you're wanted for piracy."

"The Raj's laws don't see much difference between smuggling and piracy," Anshu stated with a shrug. "I never raided, reaved, raped, or anything else of the sort. I just moved things from place to place and avoided tax men and port authorities."

Again, Leon nodded. He was willing to give Anshu the benefit of the doubt, but he was still somewhat concerned.

"What's this about receiving a letter from a Prince?" Leon asked.

Anshu shrugged. "I still know *some* people in my homeland, and they keep me informed of the goings-on within the Raj. No more, no less. I am not conspiring with Princes, or anyone else. My plans for vengeance are not yet that advanced."

"And how dedicated are you to seeking your vengeance?" Leon asked.

Anshu went quiet for a moment, his eyes drifting everywhere but in Leon's direction. When he finally turned back toward Leon, his aura was laced with killing intent and his gaze was murderous.

"I am a patient man, Leon," he darkly said. "I can wait a year, a decade, a century to strike back at those who caused the downfall of my family. But the reason I yet live and breathe and don't end myself to begin life again without these painful memories is to slaughter those who killed my family. My vengeance is my reason for being, and if forced to choose between it or anything else, *anything else*, I would choose it. My enemies *must* die, and I will not rest easy until they are cold and lifeless."

Leon smiled. "You've certainly made yourself clear. I only ask because the parameters have changed slightly. I know I promised to aid you—and my decision hasn't changed, I assure you—but I don't like when new information like this comes to light. Knowing that you're not only actively wanted by one of the most powerful states on Aeterna, but also still in communication with people whose identity you're still playing coy about, isn't that consequential, but it shows that there are aspects to this that I wasn't made aware of. So, I want you to tell me here and now if there's anything else that may be relevant to your goal. Is there anything else that you need to tell me?"

For a long moment, Leon and Anshu stared at each other in silence, the former waiting on the latter to finish thinking.

And eventually, Anshu shook his head and replied, "There's nothing that I can think of right now. But I assure you, Leon, that if I remember or otherwise learn anything of the sort, then I will inform you as quickly as our circumstances allow."

The Indradian seemed serious, but Leon wasn't entirely sure. However, in the spirit of showing trust, he decided to accept Anshu's statement. It would be a long time until they went to the Indra Raj, anyway, and things were going to change between then and now, no matter how honest Anshu was being.

He'd just cross that bridge when he came to it, he supposed. But if he found out that Anshu *was*

Chapter 637: Tempting Heaven's Wrath

When Leon imagined his group leaving Akhmim, he imagined that it would be quite extensive, but when he finally laid his eyes upon the convoy that Emilie had arranged, he found that his imagination had been rather limited, even with his experience in marching with tens of thousands Legion soldiers.

The convoy stretched for more than a mile, with most people boarding huge carriages that could bear a dozen people in luxurious comfort. These carriages were in turn pulled by teams of six enormous white horses almost too big to comfortably ride by anyone. At the front and rear of the extensive column were large units of chariots, and each with teams of four operating them. Interspersed at regular intervals throughout the convoy were additional chariot teams—Leon knew them to be the convoy's guards, for even though every chariot and carriage was prominently stamped with the golden seals of Heaven's Eye, some people had more greed than sense and might make moves against them as they traveled. He took comfort in the fact that their convoy had himself, Maia, Damien Makedon, and Xaphan with it, all eighth-tier equivalent beings, making the power at their command more than enough to ensure safety against essentially all conventional threats.

Leon and his family had an entire carriage to themselves, while his retinue would travel just behind him in a carriage of their own. To Leon's understanding, they would largely spend their time quietly meditating and focusing on their training, but Leon wasn't going to be too strict with their training while on the road. Already, he was dreading the long ride, though he was pleasantly surprised to find that the carriages had been extremely well-enchanted, perfectly controlling the temperature within and absorbing every bump in the road with ease, ensuring the most comfortable journey south that Leon could've ever asked for.

As his family was boarding their carriages, Leon found that Justin Isynos was riding in the carriage just ahead of theirs. When he saw the man, Leon found that he was staring at the horses pulling the carriages with a look of such nostalgic longing that Leon couldn't help but approach and ask him about it.

"I had horses just like these not too long ago," Justin had told him. "Saternan horses, they're called. Mightily expensive; I spent a significant amount of the resources given to me upon my arrival on this plane to purchase some. Incredibly impressive beasts, and in such numbers..."

"They certainly look impressive," Leon remarked, feeling somewhat awkward about speaking with Justin even though he initiated the conversation. But he agreed with the man, these horses were quite beautiful. Each one seemed to be greater than the second-tier, and Leon could even sense a few that were as high as the fifth.

"The extravagance of this trip boggles the mind..." Justin murmured. "Of all the carriages, all the wealth that Lady Emilie is traveling with, those horses are by the far most ruinously expensive part..."

Leon slowly nodded, unsure how to respond. So, at the first opportunity he found to bail on the conversation, he took it, leaving Justin as politely as he could—Anzu was being loaded into his family's huge carriage, and the griffin wasn't too thrilled about it. So, Leon walked over and let the griffin stay outside for a while. Even if Anzu would spend most of the trip in a carriage with him, the griffin hadn't gotten much exercise in a while, so Leon arranged for him to travel alongside the carriage instead, attended by at least one of his beastmasters at all times. Leon himself chose to ride the first couple of hours on Anzu to spend some more time with his griffin.

It took a while for the convoy to get moving, requiring a great deal of coordination and planning. Making matters more complicated was the fact that they took on new traveling companions for their journey to Occulara, for in the course of Emilie's investigation into Talal, she found sufficient cause to have him removed from his post. Leon wasn't too privy to the details, but Emilie informed him that Talal regularly abused his position. Not enough to have him expelled from Heaven's Eye entirely, but he was to be recalled to the Heaven's Eye headquarters for judgment.

Consequently, about a hundred people were added to their convoy, representing Talal himself and his household. Leon hadn't seen much of him since the introductory meeting. He got the distinct impression that the Samarid was avoiding him; an impression that only grew stronger when he noticed Talal staring at him briefly many carriages down the line, and hurriedly stepping into his when he realized Leon had noticed his gaze.

Trusting that Emilie had Talal in hand, Leon put the former city manager out of his mind and focused instead on greater things. After riding for a couple hours, he stepped into his carriage where Elise, Maia, and Valeria were relaxing. Leon was tempted to join them, but he'd spent the past few days relaxing, and his hands were getting restless. So, he instead laid down and cast himself into his soul realm, where he spent the rest of the day practicing his enchantment skills under Nestor's experienced supervision.

When he emerged back into the physical world, he found that the convoy had traveled a staggering hundred miles. He knew how far they had to go and the timeframe they were planning to do so in, but to see it happen was another thing entirely. At that rate, they'd finish this leg of their journey in only about a month at the latest. Less, if they weren't sidetracked.

Unfortunately, after a few days, it became clear that their journey wasn't to be completely without excitement. During those few days, Leon largely spent his time studying enchantments, reading up on the basics of smithing, and further preparing himself to learn the new art by having Xaphan tutor him further in fire magic. So, while he wasn't able to see it for himself, he was informed that after they left the Samar Kingdom, they started encountering destitute refugees fleeing the regions ahead of them. It was hardly a great diaspora, but there were enough that it was becoming clear *something* was going on.

Given that, this far north, they were skirting the border of the Cortuban Alliance to the east and the Halcyon Federation to the west, Leon dearly hoped they weren't going to get caught up in some kind of border dispute between the two states. The road they were following swung eastward soon, leading further into the more populated—and thus, *safer*—regions of the Alliance, but that wasn't for several more days of travel.

Leon counted them lucky that his fears were less dramatic than a war—at least, on this side of the Alliance. After getting some more information from the passing refugees and a few passing trade caravans, they found out that it seemed that the war the Alliance was fighting with Asturias in the mountains far to the east was the primary problem the Alliance was facing, and it was causing many more issues out in the poorer border regions, for the war was eating up so many of their resources that they weren't able to properly pay their soldiers patrolling the western border with the Federation. Those troops, unable to get support from their commanders in the Alliance, then turned to raiding the villages and towns they were ostensibly supposed to be protecting.

The issue had been going on for long enough that now people were fleeing these border regions for places that were better protected.

Emilie, when meeting with Leon and the rest of the convoy's leadership to discuss the matters, was confident that they would be untouched. Damian Makedon, the man who'd been sent from Occulara to 'investigate' her, had apparently gotten through the area with no trouble on his trip north, but after she brought this up, Damian himself, who was part of the convoy, disagreed. He'd moved with a small contingent of relatively elite Heaven's Eye guards. They'd moved quickly and with obvious force. He was worried that these unpaid soldiers who'd turned to banditry in desperation, might just be desperate enough to try raiding their convoy before they reached the safer regions of the Alliance.

Leon shared those worries, and during the following day, he hopped onto Anzu and took to the skies, scouting out ahead and around their convoy with both physical and magic senses, searching for any sign of imminent attack. He was tempted to shift into his Thunderbird form, but he decided to save the power until something truly warranted its use.

He was rather dismayed to see his initiative pay off. He'd hoped Emilie was right and that no one would dare try anything against the Heaven's Eye convoy, but he detected no less than five small groups of heavily armed, though lightly armored men shadowing their convoy from the hills and sparse forests they were passing through. Though their equipment was largely in tatters and clearly in need of good maintenance, Leon could see that all of these people following them wore hard, determined expressions, like they'd already experienced the worst that the hells had to offer, and were set on surviving their current hardships, no matter what.

Flying down to the convoy, he met with Emilie and the rest of the convoy's leaders, telling them what he'd seen. The guards were put on alert, and when Leon took back to the skies, it seemed the extra caution Heaven's Eye showed spooked their followers, for they'd disappeared into the hills.

He didn't take that to mean they were gone, though, and so when he flew back down again, he remained alert and on guard with his magic senses projected, just in case.

But nothing more happened for the rest of the day. The convoy sped into a fairly sizable city of about twenty thousand with sturdy, if simple, walls. The farmland that surrounded the city seemed reasonably peaceful, so many let themselves relax, safe in the knowledge that even for soldiers so desperate that they were resorting to banditry, Heaven's Eye was still an untouchable existence.

But Leon wasn't so ready to relax. He'd seen just how many scouts were out keeping an eye on them, and when it was clear that the convoy was raising its defenses, they disappeared—they didn't run away, terrified and lacking all semblance of order, they'd *vanished*. Leon took that to mean that they had methods of hiding in their surroundings that he couldn't quickly penetrate. He was a man of the forest, and the outdoors was where he was most comfortable, but magic senses and his skills as a ranger weren't infallible, and having even just a few warded camps or other sorts of safe places would be all someone would need to hide from him, especially in unfamiliar terrain.

Leon couldn't sleep that night, no matter that Elise, Maia, and Valeria did their best to wear him out, worried as he was about this new, unknown threat. So, early that morning, as the convoy was getting ready to leave the city, Leon rounded up his retinue and made sure that they were ready for violence.

They could stay relaxing in their Heaven's Eye carriage, but they had to be fully armed and armored and ready to drop everything and join him if he needed them.

He just hoped that he was being needlessly paranoid.

—

"... they're moving damned fast, though," the buck-toothed bandit said as he ran his greasy finger over the crude map that had been spread out across the table.

"The mountain of silver each of those horses must be worth..." another bandit whispered from behind him, the others in their group practically able to hear him salivating at the thought.

Not that anyone could blame him; they were living in a hole in the ground that one of their leaders had dug into the side of a heavily-wooded hill only a couple of years ago. It was meant to be a fallback point and storage chamber for emergency supplies in the case of an invasion by the Halcyon Federation that might penetrate their border defenses. In the worst case scenario, they would've used this place, and the many others like it, as a base for lightning-quick hit-and-run attacks on their enemy's supply lines.

Now, these places were used as camps from which they could monitor the heavily-traveled road cutting through the Cortuban Alliance and leading up into the northern Kingdoms. It was a critical supply line for anyone trying to trade with Samar, Asturias, the Bull, or Talfar, and as such, was supposed to be heavily patrolled and defended...

...by *them*.

They hadn't been paid by the Conclave in years, and they'd received no supplies in almost as long. That meant that anyone who traveled along these roads was fair game, for the alternative was to starve and die like abandoned animals.

They hadn't been doing this for long—only about a year or two—but many of their number had already deserted after their first few raids. Most of the former soldiers didn't *want* to be bandits, but when left with no other choice, they participated in the initial raids willingly. Once they were fed and had a little coin, though, their number began to melt away into the night, disappearing without so much as a goodbye.

Those that remained were more dedicated to their new lifestyle, and there were quite a few of them. Twenty-thousand men had been assigned to guard the border along the northwestern corridor, the only real route that Halcyon could take to invade the Alliance. The bandits that those men had become now numbered less than half that number, though not all remained unified under one leader.

Those affiliated with the men in this cave numbered almost four thousand and were spread all across the safehouses that watched the road.

"Careful," rumbled a deep voice from the head of the table the map had been spread across, "you don't want your eyes to outgrow your stomach. This is Heaven's Eye; they don't leave their people out undefended, and a group this size will be *well*-defended, even more than we'll be able to see."

Their leader was a sixth-tier mage, a veteran of many battles in the east. He'd been assigned to the west for his meritorious service to the Conclave, but even with their change in circumstances, he was still

widely respected among the former soldiers. When he spoke, even those few of the same tier listened—though how much longer that might continue, he couldn't say. Already, some of his former immediate subordinates had begun to grow more assertive as military discipline among their ranks broke down.

He was a tall man, and handsome, with short blond hair, a heavily-muscled and perfectly-toned frame. His most striking feature, however, was his eyes—a steely gray that shone like silver in the light, and constantly seeming unfocused, as if his attention was on something a thousand miles away.

“We don't need to kill them all,” another bandit said, his look appearing almost the polar opposite of their leader's. He was similarly handsome, but his lips were always turned upwards in a perpetual smirk, as if he regarded everything he ever saw as one giant joke. “We just need to steal some of their horses. Maybe some of their women, too; it's been too long since we last had some fine pussy to sate ourselves with.”

This strategy meeting was attended by some six or seven dozen other bandits—former captains of their old military regiment—and more than half raised their voices in a great cheer of support.

The bandit leader could only sigh. This was their life, now, and he had to see to his people first and foremost. And as he glanced around the room and saw the greed in his people's eyes, he could see that if he didn't order this assault, then he'd be facing a mutiny soon after.

He hated it. He made a point to avoid Heaven's Eye where possible. They weren't as powerful as the Central Empires, but the Imperials stayed in their own lands, which made Heaven's Eye the most powerful group that they could possibly encounter. And he knew better than most that they defended their own.

'At least I might be able to maintain order if I go with them,' the bandit leader thought, unable to shake the feeling that this was a terrible mistake.

“What do we know of those within the convoy?” he asked the buck-toothed bandit, the captain of the scouts that kept an eye on the roads for targets worth their time.

“Their guards are mostly relegated to their chariots at the front and rear. A few more are interspersed throughout, and some of the more important carriages have guards of their own, but the line is long and their guards can't be everywhere.”

The smirking bandit laughed. “Using chariots on our roads?! With the size of those carriages, those at the front and back won't be able to reinforce their people without dismounting if we hit them in the middle while they're moving through the hills! And we'll have more than enough time to take what we want before they do!”

Another great cheer rose up from the bandits, and their leader frowned in thought.

'This might actually be a good thing,' he thought to himself, a plan forming in his mind. He could see the way that thing were blowing—with those most pre-disposed for banditry being the vast majority who didn't desert after their first few raids, his more *discerning* attitude wasn't doing him any favors. The smirking bandit would likely try to usurp his position within a few months if things kept going the way they were.

And here was a brick wall that the smirking bandit and those he seemed to speak for more and more were all-too willing to hurl themselves head-first against.

“All right, here’s the plan,” the leader said, and the room went quiet as he spoke. For just a moment, he allowed himself a moment of pride to swell within him, for as much as he was losing their hearts, he still maintained enough of their respect to get them to listen in these moments.

He then pointed to the map and began spelling things out for his less-than-educated fellows. Given its size, the Heaven’s Eye convoy had to stick to the main road with no deviations, and that made them predictable. His people, if they ran through the night, would be able to set up an ambush further ahead, and take them unawares. If they were lucky, then they could get away with all the women and horses they could snatch. If they weren’t... then they wouldn’t be his problem to worry about anymore.

It shamed him greatly to treat his people like this, but how much longer until they made it clear they *weren’t* his people? He couldn’t say. He could only help those of his people who weren’t willing to bring the wrath of the heavens down upon them.

When the silver-eyed leader was finished, the smirking bandit’s titular smirk thinned, and he looked at the leader with suspicion.

“Are you sure about this plan?” he asked, his tone both questioning and tempting. “This way, you’ll miss out on all the fun. I’ve heard that there are some true women of *quality* riding in those carriages...”

The leader waved his hand. “I have no such problem getting pussy that I have to force it. I understand that the rest of you hopeless whoresons aren’t so blessed, and I’m not so greedy as to take away this golden opportunity. I’ll provide the distraction, the rest of you go wild—but stick to the timetable!”

Another great cheer went up around the cave, this time from just about every single one of the bandits. The smirking bandit just shook his head, but he said no more. Only a few minutes later, the meeting dispersed, and the captains returned to their own subordinates to explain the plan and to prepare their late-night march.

The mood among the bandits was electric. They’d gotten away with raiding villages, then towns, and then even a city here and there. They’d killed nobles and fat merchants alike, and over the past year, had been practically untouchable with the Alliance’s attention taken by Asturias in the east. Now, they were about to embark upon their greatest raid, and hit Heaven’s Eye where it hurt.

And it would happen in only a matter of hours.

Chapter 638: Ill-Advised Raid

Things started off fairly quietly when the Heaven’s Eye convoy got moving again, but Leon couldn’t dispel the disquiet in his heart. While he fully hoped that no one would be so stupid as to attack a group from Heaven’s Eye this large, everything he’d heard of the local bandit problems had him continuously watching for any more groups of men stalking their convoy.

Making him even more paranoid were the environs they found themselves in: hilly and reasonably forested. If he were to run through this land, he knew that he could find no shortage of places to hide and avoid detection by all but the most dedicated of mages using their magic senses.

As it was, he spent the first half of the day running himself ragged exhaustively probing the land around the road ahead for anything unexpected. And the road itself hardly gave him much confidence, either, for given the general roughness of the terrain, the road was relatively narrow, which would hamper the ability of the Heaven's Eye guards in their chariots to move if they were to be ambushed.

By the time noon rolled around, Elise had to force Leon to relax, else he'd completely waste all of his magic and mental energy before anything were to happen. Trust in the guards, she'd told him, and rest. If they were to be attacked, *then* he could start moving again.

Leon wasn't too happy about it, but he listened to his wife. She had a lot more faith in the name of Heaven's Eye than he did, though, and relaxing wasn't something that he was able to do easily.

And so, it came as absolutely no surprise—and even a little bit of relief at seeing his worry vindicated—that the guards up front called the convoy to an abrupt halt. Leon, having no doubt that this wasn't just a normal stop, burst out of his carriage and stared wildly around, weapon in hand, his magic senses almost exploding out of his body in his rush to analyze the situation.

He was almost disappointed, then, to see that there weren't hordes of murderous bandits rushing down from the nearest hills, intent on plundering their caravan, and embarrassed at the strange looks that a few others nearby gave him at his dramatic exit.

But then, he saw it, the reason for their abrupt halt: a great cloud of smoke in the distance, just over the hills and in the very direction that they were moving. He directed his magic senses in that direction, sending them rolling across the grassy hills between where they'd stopped and where the smoke was originating from.

He saw a village under assault by hundreds of wild, unkempt men armed with what looked like standardized military equipment and moving with relatively strict discipline.

'The soldiers-turned-bandits,' Leon instantly identified. By his count, there could be as many as a thousand assaulting the village about ten miles further down the road. He guessed that they were there for food, for the village wasn't that large, and with not a single building larger than a single story, it hardly seemed like the place that would have great stores of gold, silver, or other treasures just waiting to be stolen.

But for several miles along the road on either side of the village were long fields growing various unripe grains, so Leon took it as not that much of a stretch that the soldiers, after having turned to banditry from having not been furnished with pay or supplies, were looting the village for its food stores.

And yet, even as he settled on that explanation, something seemed off about it. He leaped down from the doorway of the carriage and pondered why it seemed strange as he ran toward the front of the convoy, closely followed by Anzu, who seemed to sense Leon's excitement.

By the time he reached the guard detail up front, he finally figured out what was bothering him: the fields weren't even close to ripe for harvest, and if the Cortuban Alliance operated at all under similar principles as the Bull Kingdom, Leon knew that this village of less than a thousand residents would hardly be storing their own harvest for long. In short, apart from whatever stores of food the farmers might save for themselves, there wouldn't be much for the bandits to steal. All the food would've been taken to nearby granaries where it could be distributed or sold, and more importantly, protected.

Maybe the bandits didn't care about the farmers, Leon considered, and were taking their stores and leaving them with nothing. But as he watched the bandits, he didn't see a single one of them actually *taking* anything. It almost seemed like they were just driving off the farmers and setting their homes and fields ablaze.

When he realized that last bit, Leon's excitement died down, and all of his worry came rushing back. The Heaven's Eye convoy was huge, and even if those bandits weren't affiliated with those groups that Leon had noticed keeping an eye on them the day before, they still had to know that they were passing through.

Nothing about this sat right with him. He acknowledged that maybe the bandits were burning the village just because they could, but he couldn't believe that was the case. There had to be a reason, he just couldn't see it yet.

Jordan, Emilie's first husband, sixth-tier mage, and Elise's father, was in charge of the guards at the front. Leon called out to him on approach, and Jordan turned to answer.

"Leon! Good to see you up and about!"

"Everything all right up here?" Leon asked, walking up to Jordan's chariot. The man smiled and dismounted, so that he could speak with Leon on even terms.

"Yes, but we don't want to go much further with those fires in front of us. There's a village in that direction, and I wanted to send out some scouts before proceeding..."

Leon told him not to bother, and quickly informed him of what he could see.

"A bandit raid, huh?" Jordan growled with a look of distaste. "I would love nothing more than to drive that parasitic vermin off, but that's not something I can do."

"Heaven's Eye must be separate from these issues?" Leon asked despite already knowing the answer.

"Yes," Jordan wearily replied. "Unless we're contracted by a Kingdom in question, we cannot act as peacekeepers or interfere in their internal politics at all. We can only adapt as well as we can and fight back if provoked."

"That's unfortunate," Leon stated. "I'm not Heaven's Eye, though."

Jordan gave him an intrigued look. "No, you're not."

Leon smiled and glanced around. "Bad place for us to stop, though. I can't see any threats, but who knows what could be hiding in these hills?"

"Aye, it's not an enviable position. I'm going to try and establish some security around us and hope that *someone* deals with those bandits and clears the way for us to continue, else we'll have to wait out here for them to pass or attack us first. Having to camp out here is not something I want to do..."

Leon nodded once more and took a quick look at Anzu. The griffin was standing close, staring at Leon with his blood red eyes, a silent question within them. Running his hands through Anzu's head feathers, Leon said his goodbyes to Jordan and then turned around to return to his carriage. He was going to deal with those bandits, but he needed to actually tell people that's what he was doing instead of running off

without another word. He also didn't want to head out alone, but that's why he had his retinue; six experienced warriors stood at his back, and he'd be a damn fool not to use them.

Elise didn't object to Leon heading out drive off the bandits, especially after hearing that their strongest warrior was only of the sixth-tier. Valeria, already suited up as per Leon's standing directive from the previous day, went to get the rest of the retinue ready, but Maia was where Leon met his first issue.

He didn't want her coming with him. He wasn't going to let his guard down, but he thought that going even just by himself was overkill. She and him together weren't needed out there, but she might be needed *here*, for Leon wasn't being cheeky when he told Jordan that anything could be in the surrounding hills. He asked Maia to stay behind to protect Elise and the rest of the convoy just in case, and while Maia wasn't happy, she did consent to stay behind.

Stay behind *again*, as she reminded him.

"I'll make it up to you!" Leon enthusiastically replied as he leaped back out of the carriage and met with his retinue. His people had done as he'd requested and remained ready for battle, spending most of the day armed and armored within their carriage. As a result, they were ready to go just as soon as Leon needed them to be.

Without further ado, they set out at a brisk pace. Leon felt it was kind of slow, actually, but he was an eighth-tier lightning mage, while they could only go as quickly as his fourth-tier subordinates could maintain. Still, he estimated that the ten miles between the convoy and the village could be traversed in less than half an hour.

They made good time, but slowed as they entered the village's fields. With Leon and Valeria, the fires that the bandits started were no obstacle, and Leon had everyone get in a line to his right and left. He took the center while Anshu and Valeria anchored the sides, with Alix and Anzu in the center-right and Marcus and Alcander in the center-left.

They were up against about a thousand bandits by his estimation, though, so Leon knew that their specific tactics weren't going to mean much. There was only one way through this, and that was using power. The villagers had been largely driven off, so they couldn't even rally any militia around them. It was just them against the bandits.

To start with, Leon had them use ranged attacks. The more they could delay closing with them into melee combat, the better. Fortunately, he didn't have to lend anyone any weapons, with both Marcus and Alcander remembering the humiliation they endured having to borrow Legion bows during the campaign through the Serpentine Isles and subsequently making sure to pack their own bows.

That said, Leon still distributed spell arrows amongst them, greatly making up for the disparity in the powers of those with elemental magic and those without.

It wasn't long before they were seen by the bandits at the outskirts of the village. Their appearance drew some cries of alarm from those bandits keeping watch, but Leon had them answered with a salvo of explosive arrows. He wasn't intending to be particularly stealthy, and the ear-splitting explosions that killed a handful of bandits were proof enough of that—he'd yet to truly let himself go after reaching the eighth-tier, and a thousand bandits were just what he wanted to explore his power.

The explosions were more than enough to alert the rest of the bandits to their presence, and Leon watched as they, like ants reacting an invader, swarmed through the village in their direction. Showing off their roots as former soldiers, they moved with good coordination, ensuring that they didn't come at Leon's retinue with anything less than what might've been overwhelming force if they were fighting more conventionally.

Bandits poured out of village and into the burned field. Leon kept his people from immediately firing at them, merely maintaining a good distance just inside the max effective range of their bows as the bandits formed up into tight formations. First, it was a few dozen, then a hundred, two hundred, and soon enough, Leon and his comparatively tiny retinue were facing a horde of at least half of the bandits that had attacked the village.

Through the smoky haze of the burning village, Leon could see the man who seemed to be their leader quite clearly. He was tall, handsome, and well-built, with eyes like glimmering silver, and an air of deep solemnity about him as he met Leon's gaze across the field. A frown spread across the man's heavily tanned face, and Leon saw him whisper something into the ear of a buck-toothed bandit next to him, after which the subordinate scurried off.

And then the bandit leader did something that Leon truly wasn't expecting: he ordered his men to hold the line and lock their shields into a tight shield wall.

"Look at them cowering at the sight of us!" Alcander roared more than loudly enough for the bandits to hear. "Just us seven and a single griffin, and they can't even bring themselves to advance!"

"Are these our opponents?!" Marcus added. "These cravens who hide behind their shields out of fear?! Well-suited attitudes for brigands, I see! Not a shred of courage to be found!"

The bandits were clearly proud, for Leon saw many of them scowl at Marcus and Alcander's words, and a few here and there almost charged out of their shield walls before being pulled back by who Leon thought to be their equivalent of Legion Prefects.

"If they're not going to come out and play..." he muttered just loudly enough for his people to hear, "... I can live with it. They'll just die like terrified turtles instead of as men."

Leon stepped forward, his magic surging through his body, and so much lightning danced across his body that his form was almost entirely obscured within its silver-blue light. As he strode forward, he scanned the shield walls, looking for weak spots; and he found many. These weren't the great rectangular shields of the Legion, designed to protect their bearers from neck to shin, but were much smaller and rounder, and with obviously less robust enchantments. A Legion shield was enchanted with ingenious fractal enchantments that fit together almost like puzzle pieces with the shields of those at an infantryman's right and left, strengthening themselves when the Legion closed ranks. These shields were just... shields, nearly all without anything more than one or two strengthening enchantments to keep from being torn apart by a single swing of a strong mage's ax.

Leon supposed that the shields were adequate enough for a garrison army that was about as far away from the frontlines of the war their state was fighting as they could be, but they were not nearly enough to stop him. With little more than a thought, lightning glazed across his blade in a dazzling display of power.

Then, with a single swing, Leon let loose with a wave of lightning that cascaded across the field, digging trenches into the scorched earth several feet deep and wide enough to strike the entire frontline of the bandit shield wall. Silver-blue lightning tore into the bandits, crashing into their shields and throwing their wielders back, surging through the gaps between each shield and searing and ripping and tearing at armor and flesh, laying utter waste to the men in the shield wall.

With a single swing of his blade, packed with as much power as Leon built up in the few seconds he'd taken to stride forward, more than a hundred bandits perished, hundreds more were injured, and their formations were torn asunder.

"Open up!" Leon roared as the formations shattered into men screaming in pain, terror, and disbelief, a terrible cacophony that rose to the heavens that Leon thought might've even been so loud as to be audible to the convoy miles away.

A moment later, four more explosive arrows were sent sailing through the air from Leon's four fourth-tier retainers, while Anshu and Valeria sent spikes of ice and rays of light slicing into the bandit lines. Leon then again added his power to the mix, conjuring a lightning bolt in his off-hand and hurling it into the great crush of men that the bandits had become. His lightning bolt exploded amongst them, sending dozens flying as many were ripped apart and a couple were burned almost entirely to ash. Fire from the explosive arrows washed over their shattered lines, and Anshu and Valeria picked off the more composed bandits shouting for order, peppering them with their respective magics.

But after that second strike, Leon stopped, and so did his retainers, for what they now saw was a horrific sight. With just those two moves, Leon and his retinue had completely crushed the bandits' will to fight, and they were trying to flee as quickly as they could; all order within the few survivors was lost, as was all sense of camaraderie they had with their fellows to their right and left. Men were trampled, others were left behind, too injured to flee with their comrades and left screaming in the dirt.

During his days in the Legion, Leon had been taught that the place of the common soldier was in large formations where they could reinforce their comrades, while the stronger mages were to act as 'formation breakers', using their magic to disrupt enemy lines and tie down their enemy equivalents in duels. But it wasn't until Leon saw his lightning utterly ravage the bandits that he truly understood what it was to use his magic to break a formation. If he'd ever killed so many people with a single strike before, or caused so much damage to the forces of an enemy in one move, he couldn't think of it.

"Keep it up!" Marcus shouted from not too far behind him. "They're on the run! We have to ensure the rout! Keep them from rallying!"

Leon was pulled out of his momentary reverie, and he opened up with another blast of lightning as his retinue loosed more arrows and launched more of their own magic into the bandit's lines. Dozens more fell to light, ice, fire, and lightning, until the bandit's retreat was too desperate to stop, and hundreds were left behind as little more than charred corpses.

Leon even saw that the silver-eyed bandit leader had chosen to retreat as well, having been far enough behind his formations to avoid any serious injury, though he was still admirably trying to get his people to retreat in an orderly fashion. As he did so, he tossed a glance back over his shoulder, his expression one of fear and regret, and Leon reveled in that look. In barely more than a minute, Leon had won a battle, and put the fear of the gods into his enemy.

He was just about to order his retinue to pursue and cut down as many bandits as they could before they vanished into the hills, but then he saw the bandit leader pause his retreat just long enough for his expression to morph into something almost akin to a smile of triumph, though tinged with deep sorrow.

That look struck Leon—the man had just lost at least a quarter of his total force in seconds if not more, and yet he *smiled* as he was driven away from the village.

‘Maybe he got what he came for?’ Leon wondered, but as he turned back to give his retinue further orders, he stopped and projected his magic senses to check in on the Heaven’s Eye convoy, and a dark look crossed his face.

He was right once more. This raid on the village was only a distraction; even now, thousands more bandits had appeared from the hills and were surrounding the convoy. Some were even already clashing with the guards protecting the central carriages.

“Keep going!” Leon shouted, making a snap decision. His priority was the convoy, but it was defended well enough that he felt secure in leaving them to Maia and the rest of the Heaven’s Eye guards.

Actually, he couldn’t help but feel a little bad for the bandits. He supposed greed and desperation might be reason enough for them to attack Heaven’s Eye, but now they were attacking a convoy protected by three eighth-tier equivalent beings between himself, the Heaven’s Eye Investigator, and Maia—four, if he included Xaphan. Two were about to demolish their forces attacking the convoy, while the other was going to slaughter their decoy force.

And as he watched the convoy with his magic senses, he saw an enormous water dragon erupt into being and easily sweep aside two dozen bandits who’d come close to Elise’s carriage, all traces of mercy died within Leon. At almost the same time, a bright white light rose over the convoy and began to fire deadly rays of light into the bandit hordes, slicing scores to pieces with every blast as Damien Makedon made his move. Maia and Damien would keep everyone safe, but the audacity

Chapter 639: Santiago

Leon and his retinue pursued the silver-eyed bandit with ferocity, cutting down many bandits that weren’t able to flee fast enough. All of Leon’s retainers, and even Anzu, spilled their fair share of blood as they cleaved through the raided village. By the time they emerged on the other side, the silver-eyed bandit still fleeing with all haste, at least half of the bandit force had fallen to their magic and steel.

Throughout this all, Leon stayed at least partially focused on the battle happening around the convoy. He was confident in the ability of Heaven’s Eye to defend itself, and even more confident in the likes of Emilie, Maia, Damien Makedon, and the few other seventh-tiers that were traveling in Damien’s entourage. So far, it seemed his confidence was paying off, for Emilie had emerged from her carriage and joined her guards in protecting the caravan, sending deadly rays of light into the bandit ranks that rent and tore through them with ease, adding her substantial power to the similar rays of light from Makedon’s hovering star that continued mowing the bandits down with terrible power. Maia, meanwhile, kept her water dragon surging through the enemy lines, crushing dozens with the weight of all of that water alone, while sweeping many more up into the dragon’s body to be torn apart in various terrible fashions within the water.

At the slightest sign that the bandits were gaining headway, Leon intended to turn back around and return to the convoy, but since that seemed to hardly be necessary, he kept up the pressure on the silver-eyed bandit, pursuing him all the way out of the village's fields and into the hills.

"How far are we going to follow?" Anshu called out as they left the village.

"Capture their leader!" Leon shouted back, and they redoubled their efforts in pursuing their quarry. For all his power, Leon was having a bit of trouble, for the bandits seemed willing to die in droves for their leader, showing the kind of loyalty or suicidal bravery that Leon found decidedly not bandit-like—perhaps reflecting their past as soldiers of the Cortuban Alliance. Leon found himself unable to just leave any of them be and felt almost obligated to cut them down as they charged his retinue—they *were* bandits, after all.

As they pressed into the hills and still found bandits charging at them in the dozens to cover their leader's retreat, Leon found a growing part of himself wanting to meet the man. Fortunately, the silver-eyed bandit seemed to be running low on reserves, and soon enough, only a few bandits remained between him and Leon. Those few remaining were summarily cut down as Anshu, Anzu, and Valeria charged forward, covered by Alix, Gaius, Marcus, and Alcander with their bows. The few remaining bandits had scattered into the hills.

It was only then that the silver-eyed bandit finally stopped running, the only men left at his command being just three to his right and three more to his left. He stood with his back to a short stubby tree, the hills around them largely bare of any vegetation larger than knee-high bushes and dry yellow grass.

"Keep going!" he shouted to his men. "I'll hold them here!"

His silver eyes didn't once leave Leon, remaining fixed upon him as he strode through the small valley, his own retinue at his side.

"Or you could all surrender!" Marcus called out. "Spare us all the trouble of chasing you down!"

"You've shown no quarter so far, slaughtering all of my people like they were wheat before a scythe!" the silver-eyed bandit retorted.

"Can you blame us?!" Marcus shot back, but Leon silenced him with a raised hand.

With a quick wisp of intent, Leon pulled his sword back into his soul realm and strode forward, telling the others to stay behind. His power was such that he didn't believe that he was in any appreciable danger, but still, he kept his magic senses projected and lightning surging through his body. If anything did happen, then he'd be ready for it.

But he also wanted to speak with the man who'd gotten hundreds of bandits to throw themselves upon Leon's retinue to buy him time to escape.

Sensing Leon's intention, the silver-eyed bandit quietly lowered his blade and took a few hesitant steps forward before some of his last remaining subordinates tried to stop him. But brushing them aside, he continued to approach Leon, with the two meeting in the middle of their respective groups.

Leon started first with an introduction. "I am Leon Raime," he said. "What might I call you?"

"I am called Santiago de Lagos," the silver-eyed bandit replied, his tone more questioning and confused than proud.

"Santiago de Lagos," Leon said, a smile of appreciation on his face. "Are you the man in charge of all the bandits in these parts? Or is that someone who's with the rest of the brigands getting slaughtered back at my convoy?"

Santiago's handsome features contorted into a fierce scowl, but then softened a moment later into an almost self-deprecating grin. "Technically speaking, I'm in charge," he claimed, his accent light and lilting. He spoke his r's with a prominent trill, and his l's were given a light emphasis that Leon found fairly pleasant.

"Only 'technically'?" Leon inquired, one of his eyebrows rising slightly.

"Only 'technically'," Santiago affirmed. "I was their commander when we were soldiers. I led a force of ten thousand. Those who accompanied me to the village were those whose loyalties I had no cause to doubt."

"Sounds like there's quite the story there," Leon noted. "Would you care to surrender to me, and then accompany me back to my convoy? It looks like those whose loyalties you didn't fully trust have almost been entirely wiped out, and I'd like to continue on my journey as quickly as possible."

"If I don't care to surrender?" Santiago asked.

Leon responded with a dangerous smile, and his retainers, who were all close enough to easily listen in, assumed slightly more threatening postures. Santiago's few remaining bandits, on the other hand, looked like they were only one or two more bad glares away from bolting off into the hills as quickly as their legs were able to carry them.

Getting the picture, Santiago sighed, and his armor was pulled into his soul realm.

"I'll surrender to you, Leon," he said, to the shock of the men at his back. "But I want your guarantee that my remaining people won't be harmed further."

"I can't guarantee that entirely," Leon honestly replied. "Whether or not anything more happens to your people will depend upon them, for I don't want them to leave this place only to return to a life of brigandry. If they surrender, too, though, then we might be able to work something out."

"What can you work out?" Santiago said with a derisive snort. "You're Heaven's Eye! You don't get involved in internal affairs of nations! You're obligated to turn us in!"

"I would caution you against thinking too hard about this, Santiago," Leon whispered. "Way I see it, you have two choices: either you and your followers surrender here and now, or you don't. You get to live at least a little while longer in the former, but you'll die right here in the latter. Make your choice..."

Santiago scowled, but he only needed another moment of thought. He summoned up his courage and declared his choice to Leon.

—

Leon marched through the raided village with the captured bandits, his small retinue more than enough to keep Santiago and his half dozen fellows under control. The remaining members of Santiago's force had scattered into the hills, numbering only a couple hundred compared to the thousand or so that he'd started with. Throughout the village lay the bodies of those that Leon's retinue had cut down, burned and torn apart by their magic.

Some of the villagers who'd hidden themselves came out to watch them pass, watching on in shell-shocked silence as the leaders of the men who'd laid such waste to their village were paraded down the main road.

Leon noticed that, to his credit, Santiago didn't avert his gaze, though he didn't relish in the attention. He got the impression that Santiago wasn't the sort of man to second-guess his decisions, taking responsibility for his actions and their consequences.

Seeing if that impression was accurate, though, had to wait until they returned to the convoy about ten miles away.

With their prisoners, it took a longer time for Leon and his retinue to return than it had to reach the village—long enough that by the time they reached the Heaven's Eye guards at the front, any fighting further back had already wrapped up.

Having kept an eye on it from afar, Leon knew that Maia and Emilie had held nothing back in their defense of the convoy, slaughtering the bandits that attacked them with greater viciousness than even Leon had done in the village. Piles of corpses lined the road near the middle of the caravan, where the bandits had focused their assault.

As they walked down the road, now accompanied by additional Heaven's Eye guards to keep an eye on Santiago and the other prisoners, Leon couldn't help but turn toward the silver-eyed man and ask, "What were you trying to accomplish here? If it was killing all of your people who weren't 'loyal' to you, then it seemed to have worked out quite well..."

"That was part of it, yes," Santiago admitted without shame. "My control over my people has been slipping of late. Honestly, I'm just not cut out for banditry, and those who remained with me after our desertion were those who were more inclined towards it than I ever was. There were a few strong commanders, though, who were more brutal than I am, and more and more my people were listening to them instead of me. I never wanted to attack your caravan, but greed clouded the eyes of my comrades, and my hand was forced."

"If you didn't want to do this, then why did you raid that village?" Leon inquired.

"As a distraction," Santiago explained. "I thought that my people in the village would've been able to draw your mages away from your caravan, giving the main force enough space to make their assault, and then vanishing back to our safehouses before you could do any real damage. Clearly I was wrong..."

"That seems like quite a bit of danger you placed yourself in for a plan you didn't support," Leon observed.

"Maybe," Santiago conceded. "I thought that if the raid went well, then great! If it didn't, then I'd at least be rid of dissidents in my ranks."

Leon stole a quick glance back, gauging the effect Santiago's words were having on the other six that had been captured alongside him. To his surprise, none of them seemed surprised by his words, lending some credence to the idea that they were his most loyal men.

Before Leon could continue, he felt Maia's attention hit him like a tsunami, and he turned away from Santiago toward his river nymph lover, who sped down the road within a relatively small water dragon, knocking over a few piles of dead bandits here and there as she went. Following behind her and struggling to keep up was Emilie, Elise, and a host of other Heaven's Eye guards. Leon also noted that Dame Maxima was slowly making her way toward them, stoically cleaning blood off of her weapon as she did. Damien wasn't, however, and seemed to be taking charge of the clean-up in Emilie's stead.

Leon didn't get much of a chance to look around further, for Maia exploded out of her water dragon, letting it dissolve back into nothing, and leaped into Leon's arms. He caught her easily, and they embraced tightly, though briefly. Santiago behind them watched with an expression of shock and fear that Leon hadn't seen on him since he'd first shown up at the village.

A moment later, Emilie arrived, and less than a minute later, Dame Maxima. Leon refrained from explaining or asking for explanations until they gathered with Santiago in one of the carriages that had been reserved for some of Emilie's concubines. The men had been cleared out, though, so that the carriage could be converted into a prisoner transport, and the rest of Santiago's captured bandits were escorted away, to be held in Heaven's Eye's custody until they could decide what to do with them. Leon's retinue, too, went back to their own carriage, though Valeria and Elise both joined Leon, Maia, Emilie, and Maxima with Santiago.

As they were getting settled, Leon decided to check in on everyone else before dealing with the captured bandit.

"Everyone all right?" he asked the carriage. "Any casualties to speak of?"

"None on our front," Maxima stated neutrally. "These feckless cravens kept far away from Her Highness' carriage, though I think that Dame Asiya might find that disagreeable."

"She does? Really?" Elise asked in disbelief.

"I think when she heard of everything going on outside, she wanted to head out and fight," Maxima explained. "Something about working off some frustrations."

Leon nodded his head, understanding Asiya's desire. She was still grieving, and part of that process involved quite a bit of anger. He supposed that she hadn't gotten much of an outlet on that front, lately.

"I'll go and talk to her later," Elise decided, speaking almost to herself. Turning her attention fully back to everyone else, she added, "It seems that everyone else in our caravan is fine. No injuries that haven't been fixed by our healers, thank the Ancestors."

"No casualties of note?" Leon asked, seeking confirmation.

"None," Elise affirmed with a smile of pride. Her eyes then turned toward Santiago, a hint of derision sparkling within. "Seems these bandits weren't that coordinated, despite being former soldiers. Blinded by greed, maybe? Lax discipline?"

Santiago shrugged, brushing off her judgment. He seemed remarkably relaxed, given his situation. However, his expression froze on his face as Maia added her piece.

[There might've been more casualties,] the river nymph said, [had I not acted when I did. I sensed their attack and slaughtered all those who came for us.]

"We had much more space to work with once Lady Naiad began doing the heavy lifting," Emilie whispered with a look of gratitude. "Besides, it seemed like killing our people wasn't their goal; they seemed quite fixated on our horses, though they never got close enough to a carriage to steal so much as a bell off their harnesses."

Leon nodded, grateful to hear that everyone and everything was all right, then finally turned his attention back to Santiago. "So," he began, "you told me some of your story, but now I want to hear the rest. What was the point of all this? What did so many people die here today for?"

"The Lady has the right of it," Santiago explained, nodding to Emilie. "Some of my people estimated that those horses were worth their weight in gold, at the very least. For men like us, they'd be brilliant prizes."

"You'd use them to continue raiding?" Leon asked.

"If I'd gotten any of them, I'd planned on selling them to feed my men," Santiago retorted, now sounding slightly more indignant. It was the same kind of affronted pride that Leon noticed within Anshu back when he'd interrogated the Indradian and accused him of being a pirate. "We were *honorable* soldiers!" Santiago continued, his fury starting to rise. "We served with loyalty and distinction! But we were left out to dry so that the armies in the east can grow fat and degenerate off the supplies that should've gone to us! Do you know how many of my people starved to death?"

Leon almost thought it a rhetorical question, but Santiago paused, clearly waiting for a response. So, Leon shrugged and said, "There's no possible way I could know that."

Santiago, seeming to accept his word, just leaned back in his chair. "None of them did," he whispered, "because I took action. We were guarding the Alliance from threats from the west, and for our service, we were abandoned! Our loyalty was wasted, our efforts unappreciated. My men started to weaken and fall sick, started to turn on each other out of frustration and desperation. A few were injured, a couple were even killed when arguments got out of control. I had to execute some of my own troops to keep order, but that wasn't enough. Soon enough, we were receiving neither pay nor food—bureaucrats further in-country probably stealing it all for themselves, I'm sure—and something had to be done."

"So you turned to banditry," Leon finished.

Santiago glared back at him, his expression furious, but unapologetic. "We inflicted great pain and distress upon our countrymen here," he said, "but we survived. And once we raided one village, raiding another didn't seem quite so monstrous. And then a third, and a fourth. Soon enough, we'd filled our bellies, and taken what we felt was owed us for our service. But we were done serving." Santiago made like he was going to continue, but there, he stopped, cutting himself off before he could say anything else.

“An interesting story,” Emilie spoke up before the silence grew too awkward, “and while I think we’d all like to hear more of it, you don’t look like you’re in much of a talking mood.”

“More of a ranting mood, I suppose,” Santiago admitted with a smile. “Are we then to decide what to do with me? So, what’s it going to be? Beheading? Drowning? Hanged, drawn, and quartered?”

Leon and Emilie shared a look, and he understood that she was going to leave this up to him. She hadn’t lost anything during the raid, despite its size, so she had no obligations to her people to get vengeance.

“None of the above, I think,” Leon said. “I’d like to speak with you more later, but for now, we’ll be taking you into custody. At the very least, I think the authorities in the Alliance would be interested in knowing that we caught a rebel after a failed attack on our convoy. Maybe we’ll even get a reward for bringing you in alive.”

Santiago scowled, and he stared at Leon through narrow, suspicious eyes. He didn’t argue over his fate, seemingly content to let them dictate to him what would happen, but he was still curious enough to ask, “What more do you wish to talk about?”

“I suppose we’ll find out,” Leon replied.

The man was strong, decisive, and charismatic enough that he kept his soldiers together even long after their turn to banditry. Those were qualities that Leon wanted within his retinue, but he didn’t want to just spring that question on Santiago right now. He needed to get to know him better, first, and then decide whether or not to make the offer. He was a little desperate to fill out his retinue’s ranks, but he also knew that he had to be discerning with his recruits. A bandit, regardless of his reasons for such lawlessness, couldn’t just be accepted without thought.

There were a few days before their caravan entered the Alliance’s heartland. Leon hoped to use those days to sound out Santiago’s mindset a little more, to delve a little deeper into who the man was and if that would mesh well with the retainers he already had. He hoped that he would like what he found.

Chapter 640: Santiago’s Interview

Leon’s first opportunity to speak with Santiago came the night the man was captured. The Heaven’s Eye convoy traveled through the raided village, but they couldn’t do much to help. They weren’t a relief column and didn’t even pack that much food for their journey, but here and there, some alms were given out and a few of the guards pitched in with some physical labor.

But for the most part, the villagers were on their own to rebuild. The convoy continued on to the nearest city, a settlement of ten thousand lying on a nearby river, where they resupplied, informed the local authorities of what had happened out in the hills, and set up camp for the night.

There wasn’t much the local authorities could do, either, since Santiago’s band wasn’t the only group of former soldiers-turned-bandits out in the brush, but Leon was glad to see at least some attempt at providing some relief was sent to the village.

But that also left him with a bit of a dilemma: what to do about Santiago and the rest of the prisoners. They offered to turn them over, of course, but security in a provincial town wasn’t that great, so Leon made the local magistrates another offer: he’d personally take Santiago and his remaining half-dozen

bandits further in-country. He didn't offer anything more than that, letting them make their own assumptions about what he meant by that.

After all, he wanted to recruit Santiago, and only if he couldn't do that would he turn the man over to the Cortuban authorities. Of course, recruiting the man, a bandit and deserter, might be a headache unto itself, but Leon figured he'd cross that bridge when he came to it.

The local magistrates wound up agreeing with his offer, paying Leon a nominal fee for transporting the prisoner. Then, Leon went to speak with the man himself.

Santiago was kept in strong anti-magic bindings within a Heaven's Eye carriage that had been retrofitted to transport him, with the rest of his people being held in another carriage. So, Leon was able to speak with the man alone.

"Hey there," Leon said in greeting as the Heaven's Eye guards showed him into the large carriage. Santiago just made a somewhat exasperated face at him in response. "I was hoping we could talk some more," Leon continued as he strode in and took a seat near the front of the carriage and got comfortable, Santiago restrained near the back.

"How much choice in this do I have?" Santiago asked.

"None," Leon responded with a cheeky smile.

Santiago shrugged, and Leon took that as his cue to continue.

"I'll be taking personal charge of you as we take you to Andalus," Leon explained, referring to the capital of the Cortuban Alliance, which their caravan would have to pass through on their way south.

"I'm surprised," Santiago replied. "I thought that you'd be dumping me off on the locals."

"Would you rather I do that?" Leon wondered aloud. "Looking for a chance to escape from their lackluster jail facilities?"

A chuckle was Santiago's response. "No," he said. "They wouldn't imprison me; they'd execute me as soon as they possibly could, and probably without trial. A sixth-tier mage like myself? They don't have the capabilities to hold me, nor can they let me go. No, they'd just kill me and end me immediately."

"Are you expecting similar treatment when we hand you off again?"

"More or less," Santiago replied almost nonchalantly, giving off no impressions at all that he cared a single iota about his fate. "I'm not just a bandit, I'm also a deserter, and so will receive a deserter's punishment. Such is life, I'm afraid."

Leon paused in his questioning for a moment, pursing his lips in thought. He leaned back in his seat, staring at Santiago, taking in the man's relaxed posture, his easy-going, somewhat self-deprecating smile, and his unfurrowed brow.

"Does it not upset you at all?" Leon finally asked. "You're looking death in the face, and yet you seem like... well, like you don't care at all."

"As I said, Leon Raime," Santiago replied, "this is life. Or do you disagree with my punishment? Or is it my demeanor that you take issue with? Should I protest and wail to the gods of this injustice? Should I demand that they deliver me from this fate?"

Leon quietly chuckled. "No, it isn't the punishment that I argue with—traitors ought to be punished harshly, and traitors to a state are to be executed. I don't disagree with that at all."

"Then you think I'm too calm?" Santiago asked.

"Yes."

Santiago's smile widened. "Raging at you, the Gods, the Kings, the Conclave, none of it would change my fate, and I would rather die content than filled with fury."

"Are you furious, though?" Leon inquired, his eyes narrowing as he finally started to approach the reason for his questioning. "Do you wish that your fate was different? Would you take a chance to live if it were offered?"

Santiago's eyes turned in Leon's direction, his gaze sharpening for a moment in seeming comprehension of what Leon was getting at. However, when he answered Leon's question, he only answered the face-value meaning.

"What I wish hardly matters, but if you must know, *yes*, I *am* furious. Furious beyond words. Furious beyond my ability to express. Furious at you, at my country, at my fate, at gods-damned *everything*!"

Leon nodded, remaining silent as Santiago finally started to channel the rage that he claimed filled him.

"I was a loyal soldier!" he loudly declared. "I turn one hundred in three weeks. Of all that time, I've given eighty *entire years* to my people, to my Kings, and to the Conclave! Only for me and my people to have been abandoned by the corrupt bureaucrats who refused us pay and supplies! Such is the reward for *loyalty*!"

"And my people, who followed me into our new lives, were rewarded for *their* loyalty to me with death at your hand! So, yes, Leon Raime, if I had the breath to spare, I would curse out everyone, for everything that I devoted my life to was for nothing! Loyalty is for the dead! Had I just watched out for myself and not for anyone else, I think I wouldn't now be on my way to death! I think I would be thriving, not at the mercy of... how old are you? You look like you're about twelve, but that can't be right..."

"I'm twenty-one," Leon replied with a smile of pride that was almost the exact opposite of Santiago's sudden look of utter dejection.

"Twenty-one..." the silver-eyed bandit muttered. "Can't believe it. Beaten by a child. Absurd."

"Such is the way of things," Leon said with a shrug.

"Such is the way of things," Santiago echoed, his tone despondent.

The two went quiet for a moment longer, and Leon rose from his seat. "I'll leave you to whatever it was you were doing before I entered," he said. Santiago merely shrugged, his more nonchalant demeanor now returned, and Leon left the carriage.

He empathized with Santiago's position, but the man had just about killed any desire that Leon had to make him a retainer. It was much the same as when Kaouther practically threw herself at him, declaring that since he was strong, she wanted to join him in whatever way he saw fit. She did so entirely for power, and for that, he couldn't possibly trust her, for what could he expect from her but betrayal or desertion at the first sign of someone stronger than him?

Likewise, after Santiago's rant about his disillusionment with loyalty, Leon now had doubts about him. The bandit still had an impressive résumé, and if Leon could be assured of his commitment, then it would've been a no-brainer. Saving him from execution might've even made up for having captured him in the first place.

But if the man was done being loyal to anyone or anything, then there was no place for him in Leon's retinue. He had no time for those he couldn't trust.

—

"So, what do you think about him?" Elise asked as Leon walked back into their carriage. The town they were staying at had a Heaven's Eye branch, but it was small enough that the branch was little more than a bank and a warehouse. The convoy had to make their own camp, but fortunately, the carriages were luxurious enough that it was hardly a problem for everyone to use them as shelter.

"Who?" Leon asked. "You mean the bandit?"

"No, I mean the lust phantom I sent after you to bring you back to my bed!" Elise sarcastically replied, though Leon could tell that she wasn't entirely joking about wanting him back in bed, if the heated look she gave him for a moment was any indication.

But instead of taking her up on her tacit offer to put the conversation off for a while in favor of more pleasurable activities, Leon sighed, collapsed on a small pile of pillows in a corner, and said, "I don't quite know what to make of him. I suppose 'broken' wouldn't be wrong, but it still seems kind of wrong to use."

"Do you still want him as part of your retinue?" Elise asked.

Leon lightly scowled. "I don't think so."

"Why not?"

"He went on a rant about how disillusioned he is with the concept of loyalty," Leon explained, and then further explained the conversation he had with Santiago. "... and I could see it in his eyes that he wasn't ready for anything that I might offer him. At least, not in that moment."

"That's unfortunate, but I can see how you see him as broken," Elise remarked. "But is that really that much of a deal breaker? If he's only about self-interest, then can't you just pay him to be your retainer? You don't even have to keep him on for that long, or give him any real responsibilities."

"I'd have to have responsibilities for me to delegate any to him," Leon pointed out.

"Are you saying you don't have any responsibilities, husband?" Elise asked with a challenging smile.

"None that I care to delegate," Leon replied, sending a challenging smirk of his own to match hers.

Elise slunk over, her eyes shining like emerald fire, lightly biting her bottom lip. She slid into Leon's lap, wrapped her arms around his head, and then pressed her lips against his with fiery passion. But then, she pulled back, the fire still in her eyes, but a more business-like expression on her face.

"I want to see you succeed, husband," Elise declared, slightly breathless. "Your success is *our* success. And having more powerful mages on our side is something to seek out, to strive for. A sixth-tier mage that has the experience of commanding thousands might require, I think, more consideration than just a single, brief conversation."

Leon's eyes narrowed. "Are you encouraging me to take a risk on a bandit?"

Elise shook her head. "I'm encouraging you to give your recruitment more thought. I understood your turning down that Samarid seventh-tier mage—she was too strong and too unpredictable. But I just don't want you to ignore good men and women because you locked them into your first impression. Don't make your choices so quickly. It's all right to take more time to think these things over."

With a sigh, Leon let his hands wander over Elise's tight waist, and then pulled her in closer. He pressed his forehead against hers for a long moment, and then leaned back again.

After another moment of silence, Elise's expression turned a little more nervous.

"I'm not advocating you to take this Santiago as one of your retainers," she explained. "I don't know the man and I have no real opinion of him other than he's sixth-tier and he's a bandit—hardly the best material to make a good retainer, but desperation can make monsters of all of us, and tarnished honor can still be redeemed. My concern is you, husband. You, and *us*."

Leon nodded, a smile snaking across his face. "I'll give it more thought," he said. "I'll speak with Santiago a little more. Maybe he'll surprise me."

"That's all I was trying to say," she replied. "And for you to keep in mind that not everyone is going to be fanatically loyal to you right from the start. Think about Anshu—if our circumstances were to deteriorate enough, I don't think he'd stick around for you. We're not paying him enough, and there's no love lost between us."

Leon's smile slowly turned into a frown, knowing that Elise was right. Anshu was probably his most problematic retainer at the moment. Alix's loyalties he was certain about, as he was about Gaius'. Marcus and Alcander he was a little iffier on, but he thought it would take quite a bit for them to abandon him. Anshu, however... Leon didn't imagine it would take all that much for the Indradian to abandon, or even betray him. He wanted to believe in the man's honor, but the fact remained that he was a former not-pirate and a wanted man back in the Indra Raj.

The last thing Leon wanted to do was to invite too many people into his retinue whose loyalties and commitments were in doubt.

"Not everyone I recruit has to be in for the long haul," Leon whispered, and Elise's smile widened. "I just have to temper my expectations and treat people with the respect and trust that they've earned. Not expect respect or loyalty from them until they've proven themselves."

"Yes," Elise whispered.

Leon rubbed the back of his head in thought. He could see himself taking Santiago as a subordinate, but he'd have to pay him quite a bit and not expect that much from him. Given that he surrendered quickly during the battle with the bandits, Leon didn't even know how well he fought—though, he supposed that that could be easily remedied with some sparring.

"I'll try to keep an open mind from here on," Leon swore. Elise just smiled at him, still straddling his waist, and Leon didn't hide the fact that his eyes were wandering her body, taking in the gorgeous sight of his wife in tight traveling clothes that hugged her body in all the right places.

Elise seemed just about ready to escalate their current state of intimacy, but then she paused just as she pressed her hands into Leon's built chest.

"How are *you* doing, by the way?" she asked. "I know how excited you were to finally learn how to transform, and you were in the sky every waking moment you could after gaining the ability. But I haven't seen you transform since that ugly business with Asiya. Should I be worried about this?"

With a chuckle, Leon shook his head and said, "It takes a lot of power to change my form. It takes pretty much all the power I can generate in a day just to transform once, and that's not even getting into how magically-intensive it is to actually fly in that form. Or to fight. During all the time I spent learning how to move and fly about in that form, I wasn't building up my reserves of magic, and even ate into them more than I should've. All of that culminated in *five* transformations in only a few days, along with a *long* flight, and a fair amount of violence to further expend my power on.

"I'm fine, love," Leon finally declared, his voice filled with all of his affection for his wife. "I'm just letting my reserves build back up. I need to train and practice, but after all of that business with the Samar Kingdom, I let my reserves get dangerously low. I need to use a little more discretion with how I use that form, otherwise I'll run myself ragged in no time."

Elise raised a hand to cup Leon's cheek, then tracing his jaw upward until she was pressing a finger into his forehead. "And how about what's going on in here? All of this doing all right?"

Leon reached up to take her hand in his, then brought it to his mouth where he playfully kissed her fingers a few times.

Locking his gaze with hers, he said, "Nothing to report. Only the usual going on up here, so... not that much, really."

"I'd hardly say that 'the usual' is 'not that much'," Elise shot back with a hint of genuine bitterness.

Leon took that hint seriously and sat up a little straighter, taking her head in his hands when she turned away for a moment.

"Are *you* doing all right?" he asked. "There something you want to talk about?"

She smiled somewhat morosely and leaned into him. "I don't so much need to talk as just do more of this."

Leon's arms fell to her waist, and he held her close, understanding what she meant completely. The two had been married for months, but this moment felt like the first time in forever that they had been

alone together. It probably hadn't been that long, in point of fact, but the fact didn't really matter; it *felt* like they hadn't been spending as much time together as they should be.

"How much farther to Andalus?" Leon whispered into his wife's ear.

"A few hundred miles," Elise whispered back to her husband.

Leon smiled. At their pace, that was only three or four days away.

His smile faltered just a bit as he realized that that meant he had just three or four days to deal with Santiago—to decide if he wanted to recruit the bandit or turn him over to Cortuban authorities. And right now, he didn't know what he should do.

But that also meant that he had only three or four days until the convoy would stop for more than a day, letting him spend some true quality time with his wife.

But until they got there, he could settle for this. Just laying back with her in his arms. They didn't need to talk about anything, though he would love to hear her voice more.

Quietly, he told her that he would put off his work and his training for these next few days. For now, he was hers. Valeria and Maia certainly had their claims staked onto him, but right now, he needed to see to Elise's happiness.

The two sat there in each other's arms for a long time, not speaking anymore, just reveling in the other's presence. But, eventually, their hands began to wander beneath clothes, and they started to undress. Soon enough, they were taking full advantage of their solitude, making love until each had been fully satisfied. Maia and Valeria later found them naked, wrapped around each other, blissfully passed out.