

Storm King 641

Chapter 641: Recruitment Consultation

Leon and his family meandered their way through the market of the city they were stopping at for the night. Only two days remained until they reached Andalus, the capital of the Cortuban Alliance, and the place they were supposed to leave Santiago and his other bandits, yet Leon still had yet to reach a definitive decision regarding the man.

He needed to speak with the Cortuban more, he knew that, but he felt like he needed to work out what exactly he wanted from the man, first. Alix, Marcus, Alcander, Gaius, Valeria, and even Anshu to an extent, he expected would follow him for a long time, even into the Nexus and further. But Santiago, he was a little less expectant of—if he were to recruit the man, he couldn't ever possibly trust him unless something drastic were to happen.

He was coming around to the idea that that was all right, and that he could have uses for men and women who weren't completely loyal to him, but it was still a hard step to take. Beyond that, he might have to go to bat for the man if they couldn't ignore the request that they'd received to escort the bandits to the capital for punishment. It was an unofficial request, fortunately, so there wasn't a paper trail, but for all Leon knew, the authorities had called ahead and relayed what they'd asked of the caravan to their counterparts in the capital.

All of this was on his mind as he walked arm-in-arm with Elise, picking their way through the packed and colorful market as the sun above slowly sank toward the horizon. Leon, being rather hungry, paid special attention to the foods that were available to choose from. They were far from any major rivers or the sea, so fish was out—not that he particularly liked fish—but there were good selections of various breads, fruits, and even a few butchers here and there selling fresh meat—mostly various kinds of poultry.

The market itself was incredibly lively—it was a huge forum located at the southeastern end of the city, closer to the richer agricultural zones, and was filled with an extremely orderly series of tents, each made of brightly colored fabrics that were designed to demand attention. Each tent was set up on a set-aside lot, so while the forum itself was packed with people going about their shopping, the tents were laid out in a ruthlessly orderly grid, and Leon noted that they couldn't go more than a couple of tents without seeing a group of two or three well-armed guards keeping the peace and watching for thieves. It was a sharp contrast to the northwest of the Alliance, where there were few uniformed guards to be seen—possibly because they had all gone rogue with Santiago, but he couldn't be sure.

Leon was also rather shocked at seeing the diversity of people around. He'd seen a great many people of various dress and skin tones in Ariminium, but they'd mostly kept to the port and the neighboring districts. Most of the city was still the relatively pale-skinned people of the Bull Kingdom. Here, however, were people seemingly from all corners of the world, selling silks and other fabrics, various instruments, clothing in more styles than he could count, books, and even a few people using their tents as places to play music or recite poetry for small crowds. Leon also realized that he couldn't understand what most of the people were saying, hearing more than seven different languages being spoken throughout the forum in addition to the standard common tongue.

It seemed like a diverse and prosperous place, and one that he hadn't quite expected to find so far inland. He supposed it made some degree of sense, though, for it was a major highway cutting through the civilized lands of the northwest, so there were going to be many people bringing their wares through here. When he marveled at it to Elise, she quickly informed him that the city was also the capital of one of the petty Kingdoms that made up the Alliance, which meant that there were a *lot* of moneyed people around, attracting even more merchants from all over the world.

It was delightful to explore—at least, for a while. There were so many things to see, so many things that were being offered for just a few silvers that even Leon, as miserly as he was, wound up spending a few coins on meaningless things. But they stayed in the forum for long enough that its charm started to wear a little thin, and Leon began to see the ugly side of the city.

Running around here and there, always sticking to the shadows or the interiors of the tents where they could remain mostly out of sight, were young children dressed in simple garb, with leather collars around their necks, occasionally speaking with the tent owners and running off, or ducking in and passing the merchants a note or a parcel. And once Leon started noticing them, he began to notice some of the more well-dressed man and women watching over the tents had faint collar-like tattoos applied to their necks.

Slaves.

Intellectually, Leon knew that there were more than a few Kingdoms that practiced slavery, but it was the first time he'd really seen any, himself—or rather, the first time he'd seen any and known about it. Given how deep they were in the Cortuban Alliance, he figured that it was probable he'd seen some before this point and just hadn't recognized them.

He noted that there didn't seem to be anyone watching these slaves—the guards around the forum would likely stop them if they ran, but other than that, their masters seemed willing enough to let the slaves work without much active supervision. When Leon asked Elise about this, she said that slavery was a complex thing, and that these slaves were likely cared for and quite trusted if they were handling money. Educated slaves weren't particularly common, she said, and that it wasn't the worst thing ever to be one.

Leon, who prized his freedom and autonomy greatly, disagreed, though he wasn't about to get into it right then and there in the forum. However, he picked up on Elise's qualifier: 'educated' slave. He asked about those who weren't educated, and she quietly responded that they were mostly used for labor and weren't prized quite so much. Everywhere was different, but for those states that practiced slavery, back-breaking labor on a farm or in a mine was the usual sentence for serious crimes that didn't warrant the death penalty, or for captured prisoners of war.

These slaves looked no less happy than everyone else around the market, but Leon swore in his heart right then and there that his would never be a Kingdom built upon forced labor. He despised the idea of slavery, and the more he thought about it, the less he liked it.

But with three gorgeous women with him and other problems fighting for his attention, it was soon enough that the prospect found itself being pushed from his mind. There were no slaves being abused there in the market, after all, it was just something there in the background, always there but not shoving itself in his face if he wasn't looking for it.

The problem of slavery here wasn't one he could solve, but the problem of what to do about Santiago was.

To that end, that night, he sought out the rest of his retinue, and then went to speak with Santiago once more. The man was sullen and taciturn, but it was clear enough from his attitude that all of his professed loyalty to the Alliance was gone, and he didn't intend to replace it with anything else.

When the conversation was over, Leon sat down with his retinue to ask them their opinions.

Anshu, surprisingly enough, was the first to offer his thoughts. "He's powerful," the Indradian stated. "Stronger than everyone here, save for you and the daughter of Ellalan. Such strength would be put to great use in your company."

"I disagree," Alix passionately protested, drawing a venomous look from Anshu. "You don't just need strength, you need people you can trust. That man is less than a mercenary; I think that if you were to undo his bindings, he'd run away in the night, regardless of what he might say. Given that he's a bandit, better to turn him over to the Alliance. What's more, do we really want a bandit in our ranks? Especially one like him? I think he actually said the words, 'fuck loyalty' in there."

"Sixth-tier mages don't exactly grow on trees," Marcus offered, "but neither is there much of a shortage of them on this plane. There will be others, and we've no great need of strength right now. What rush is there to build a strong army? What pressing need do we have to take such a risk on a known criminal who, himself, professes to hold no love in heart anymore for anyone but himself?"

"A man out for himself is not one to trust," Alcander whispered in agreement. "I would rather I not fight alongside such a man. We need to trust those to our right and left, and I don't trust him."

Leon sighed as he sat back in his seat, feeling justified in his thoughts about Santiago now that he was seeing them reflected in his retinue. However, as his eyes turned back to Anshu, he was struck once more by the fact that his and Santiago's situations weren't that different, though they differed in just the right ways.

"I don't think I like the man that much," Leon said after it became clear that neither Valeria nor Gaius wanted to offer their opinions just yet. "He's kind of like you, Anshu."

The Indradian slowly nodded to Leon, accepting the comparison as valid.

"I recruited you. I trusted you. So far, I haven't been let down. But that doesn't mean that I want to be taking these kinds of risks often. I turned down Kaouter, and she was seventh-tier. I can refrain from making this sixth-tier an offer and sleep soundly. I can't just try and recruit every single person I run across. That's no way to build a retinue."

"I sense a 'but' coming," Marcus observed.

"But," Leon cheekily said, "a sixth-tier mage isn't that big of a threat to me. He is to all of you, but not to me. And that's part of the reason why I wanted to get your opinions of him. If I were to recruit him, then he'd need to be tied down with more than loyalty, for I've inspired none in him. If anything, he'd have reason to slit my throat in my sleep, not follow my orders."

"All the more reason to pass on this guy," Alix firmly stated.

Leon went quiet for a moment, a thoughtful look on his face.

“You don’t look convinced,” Alix observed.

“I’m not,” Leon replied. “I’m still thinking this over. You know, trying to give this matter the serious consideration that it deserves. And I haven’t reached a conclusion yet. I’m just arguing in circles with myself, constantly switching back and forth from taking the chance or not. I was hoping for more opinions to help with that, but so far, while you’ve helped swing me away from recruitment, I’m still not quite convinced.”

As he spoke, Leon glanced at Gaius and Valeria, the two members of his retinue who had yet to speak.

Gaius sighed and said, “People are employed all the time who aren’t exactly ‘loyal’ to their employers. It just depends on what they want and what you provide. What does Santiago want, and what can you give him? What do you even want from him? If you can answer those questions, and you are willing to pay his price, then I think he’d be a worthy addition to your forces. Just remember that he’s not going to be the most reliable man and give him due responsibilities.”

Leon nodded in gratitude.

“I mostly agree,” Valeria said. “Or, I agree on principle. Santiago himself is where I disagree. He’s a bandit, we shouldn’t recruit former criminals. We don’t know what he did during those couple of years he was raiding his own country, and we don’t know what response might be waiting for us from the Alliance. I’ll follow your lead, Leon, but I don’t want to fight against a Kingdom for a bandit that I neither like nor trust, especially when I don’t think he deserves such treatment. Just give him to the local authorities and let’s be done with him—there’ll be other opportunities for strong recruits, there should be no problem in passing on this one.”

Leon nodded again, taking her words to heart.

He honestly hated this kind of thing, but he understood it was absolutely necessary. It was on him to spearhead the recruitment for his retinue. Eventually, it would grow on its own as others were given more responsibility, but for now, it was still small enough that the responsibility was entirely on him.

But the risks were shared by all. The best case they could hope for if Santiago were to betray them was if he simply ran away in the night. Worst case, he might try to kill them all, or sell them out to someone who wanted to do them harm.

Leon, with those thoughts in his head, finally made his decision.

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Andalus was an enormous city—not quite as large as the capital of the Bull Kingdom, but easily the largest city they’d come across on their journey. Leon estimated at least half a million people lived within its enormous walls, let alone those who lived outside of it, for the city had outgrown its sprawling walls.

He couldn’t see much within, though, for the walls were warded against his magic senses. But they were able to get a good look at the city’s interior as they came in through the hills to the city’s west, being just high enough to mostly see over the walls without needing magic senses.

While there was little that Leon wanted to do more than to relax and then maybe see the sights a bit, he knew that he had other business to attend to, first. To that end, he and a few other Heaven's Eye personnel paused at the checkpoints leading into the city and asked where they could drop off their prisoners, for Leon was recruiting none of them. As impressive as it was that Santiago had managed to keep his people alive and together throughout their troubles in the northwest, ultimately, Leon couldn't let go of his doubts, and he figured that if he had doubts about anyone, then they weren't worth recruiting.

Better to let him reap the rewards for his banditry and maybe win some goodwill with the Alliance while he was at it. The Cortuban guards informed him that those manning the first gatehouse through the city's walls would be able to take the bandits off their hands.

And so it was that Leon finally handed off Santiago to the commander of the guards at the gatehouse, a darkly-tanned sixth-tier man who signed several papers taking formal possession of the bandits, and then led them into the gatehouse. Leon didn't know what might happen after that, but it was no longer his business. As Santiago was practically dragged away in chains, he could only hope that he hadn't let a golden opportunity slip through his fingers.

With that done, though, Leon was finally free to turn his attention toward the city of Andalus itself. It was impressive, with many concentric layers of walls protecting and segregating the various districts of the city.

In the central, most heavily defended district, he saw an enormous citadel made entirely of visually striking bricks either blood red or faded pink in color. He didn't see any gardens or other 'leisure' areas around the citadel, which spoke volumes about the citadel's inhabitants, but he was impressed nonetheless, for the citadel was quite possibly the single largest fortified structure he'd ever seen, dwarfing even the Bull's Horns.

The citadel was more than twenty stories tall, had no less than twenty directly attached towers, and more than ten baileys. Combined with the multiple layers of city walls cleanly dividing the city into more defensible districts, and Leon could envision that taking this city would likely be just as hard as taking Ariminium.

In the neighboring districts were the sort of palaces that Leon had been expecting: vast, sprawling, sumptuous complexes attended by hundreds or thousands of servants, expansive gardens filled with exotic flowers and plants of all shapes, and nearly all built with the same red and pink brick as the citadel. The palaces were blocky in design, and while all were built of the same materials, they were all accented differently, with many featuring marble courtyards and pavilions, some featuring enormous windows of stained glass, and some choosing a smaller, more natural look with greater emphasis on gardens over structures.

The most impressive of all these palace complexes, however, was the Heaven's Eye enclave within the district. It was easy to see, for while the palaces were red brick, the tall Heaven's Eye Tower was built of familiar white stone, capped with roof tiles made of lapis lazuli, and at twenty stories tall, was matched in height only by the upper floors of the citadel.

Surrounding the Tower were a series of smaller palaces made of red and pink bricks that Leon assumed to be the rest of the enclave, where the local Tower Lord lived and where he and the rest of the convoy would be residing for their stay in the city.

Sure enough, the caravan began to make their way in that direction, and Leon continued to inspect the city as best as he could, only getting a few flashes here and there as they passed through the various layers of warded walls. He noted that the red brick used in the palaces, unlike white stone in the Bull Kingdom or black glass in Samar, wasn't used exclusively by the wealthy as a sign of their station, but rather was used as the most common building material in the city. Nearly every building, whether run-down slum or opulent palace, was built largely of red brick—though the lighter pink bricks *were* reserved for wealthier estates, he noted.

It was a beautiful style, he had to admit, and accented well by the sheer amount of greenery that the city sported along its main thoroughfares. Tall trees and lush bushes provided cover from the sun and gave the interior of the city an almost close-to-nature feeling that Leon quite enjoyed. However, the effect was ruined somewhat as he began to notice the lesser parts of the city.

There were slums here, to be sure, as there were just about everywhere, but what really captured Leon's attention was that nearly every walled-off city district had at least a few segregated streets filled with people who were obviously enslaved. Most were dressed in the simplest of garments, barely more than cloth sacks, and were each and every one of them fastened with iron collars. The streets they lived on were clean and cared for well enough, but their homes were ramshackle, and many people who seemed to be living there looked dirtier than anyone should've been who had access to running water—implying that they didn't have such access, whether magical or otherwise. After some inspections, Leon saw that not a single slave in any of their ghettos were stronger than the first-tier, and even those who were that strong were rare.

"Lots of slaves here," Leon quietly observed with distaste dripping from his tone.

He and the rest of his family were riding with Emilie for this final leg of the journey, and his mother-in-law, understanding what he was talking about when she noticed the direction of his gaze, explained, "Owned by the Alliance, I believe. They're public servants, keeping the streets clean and tended to."

Leon clicked his tongue, but said no more. Not that he had a solution for any of it, but it disgusted him to see people forced to live in such conditions. He tried to put it out of his mind, to squint past the city's imperfections, but it was proving impossible, for now that he was keyed into what to look for, he saw people with collars or collar tattoos everywhere along their journey, constantly reminding him of something he couldn't change.

"I hate this place," he muttered as they drove further on into the palatial districts.

Chapter 642: Cortuban Arena

Leon and the rest of the caravan were to stay in Andalus for about a week or two while they restocked and prepared for the rest of their journey. They were about a third of the way to the Illumerian Wetlands, but they were now traveling through regions that had much denser populations, and would be for a while, so Leon wasn't anticipating any more repeats of the bandit incident. The rest of this leg of their journey ought to be much less exciting.

Andalus' Tower Lord was determined to be a good host for the duration of their stay, having come out to personally welcome Emilie and everyone else into the Heaven's Eye enclave and to see that they were all properly taken care of. He was a jolly man, tall and thin, with a perpetual smile on his black-bearded face. He was rather pale, about what Leon would've expected from someone from Talfar or the Bull Kingdom, whereas the Cortubans were generally tanner.

Leon was grateful for his hospitality, especially since it meant that he was under no pressure to leave the guest house during their stay. He found himself extremely uncomfortable with how blatant the Alliance's rampant practice of slavery was, and knowing that there wasn't anything he could do about it filled him with a sense of powerlessness that he couldn't possibly do anything about.

He'd rather not think too hard about it, and so he spent much of his time secluded in the guest quarters, spending time with Anzu, his family, and his retinue, quietly studying the books on smithing he'd bought back in Akhmim, studying enchantments, or training. His attention was being split in so many different ways that even if he were of a mind to do so, he wouldn't be able to find the time to leave and relax.

Fortunately, he was perfectly able to relax while practicing his runework or training with the Thunderbird, having great fun doing so.

He wasn't able to spend all of his time in such a manner, though, for several days into the stay, Andalus' Tower Lord invited all of his guests—or, at least, all of his guest of sufficient status—to join him as his guests of honor at a showing in the local grand arena featuring some of the best local gladiators that Andalus had to offer.

There was no way Leon could refuse, both because he was curious about local fighting styles, and because if he were to join Heaven's Eye, he needed to not be too aloof with people in high positions of authority, such as Tower Lords.

It wasn't until the day of the fights that Leon found out just how big of an event this was to be, for not only was he and his family going to attend, Emilie and several other highly-ranked members of Heaven's Eye were, too, such as Talal and Damian Makedon. In fact, the event wasn't even being organized by the Tower Lord, but by a couple members of the Cortuban Royal Families, which also meant that in attendance would be high-ranking members of their Conclave, the duties of which Leon was still fuzzy on, as well as Cristina and her entire guard unit.

At first, Leon thought this was going to be just a showing of gladiator fights, but as he learned more about the guest list from Elise, he realized that this was going to be a huge diplomatic affair, with members of ruling families from two states and the plane's biggest and most powerful merchant's guild all rubbing shoulders.

Or, as Elise put it as she excitedly raved about it, a 'great opportunity', and a 'party of the year', among other things. A large part of Leon just hoped that he would be left alone despite the how great of an opportunity it was. If that wish came true, then he wouldn't have much of a chance to put his foot in his mouth, and there were going to be a *lot* of people he could potentially offend present.

When they arrived at the arena, the event was about what Leon expected. The Royal box was gorgeously appointed, with gilded furnishings everywhere, a well-stocked bar complete with three beautiful attendants acting as bartenders, and one entire wall opening onto a massive balcony that

overlooked the sands below. At least fifty high-backed seats covered in rich red velvet had been set up on the balcony so that all the most important people attending this party would be able to watch the games below, but two of the seats more resembled thrones than 'merely' rich seats—the place for the two attending Kings to sit, Leon presumed.

"Damn, I like this place," Alix muttered as Leon's retinue followed him inside, her eyes fixed on the intricate crystal chandelier hanging from the high roof, sparkling in a thousand different places with ten thousand different colors.

"It's a bit much," Leon murmured back.

"You need to get a taste for the finer things," Marcus said as he draped an arm over Leon's shoulder and practically dragged him further inside. "Lady Elise!"

Elise, only a few steps away, looked at the two of them, a look of amused curiosity gracing her face.

"How has this man not woken up to the comforts of luxury, yet?" Marcus asked, poking fun at Leon.

"Alas," Elise replied, only too happy to join in the playful teasing at Leon's expense, "my husband has always had such tastes! It vexes me to no end! If he had his way, he'd live in a shack without so much as a carpet to cover the bare floorboards!"

"You say that like it's a bad thing," Leon protested, his cheeks twitching from the effort he made to not to smile as he leaned into their teasing. "Shacks can be perfectly functional dwellings. Helps to keep clutter down when you don't have anywhere to put excess stuff, easy to keep clean, nice and cozy."

"No thank you," Elise replied, her radiant red hair cascading marvelously over her shoulders as she shook her head.

"Yeah, give me marble and silk over that any day," Marcus added. "Leon, I think we need to talk a while. I mean, this is a dreadful emergency! Every man needs to know how to appoint their living spaces to impress! And to have standards for where they lay their head!"

Leon shrugged. "Any hole in the ground would do for me, why have all that extra stuff? As a matter of fact, I think I'd take a hole in the ground over all this excess..."

Before Marcus could reply, a voice boomed across the room, "Ah! A man after my own heart!"

Everyone looked to the source of the voice and saw a man walking into the room flanked by at least a dozen followers, with even more taking up stations just outside. The man himself was powerful—seventh-tier, Leon noted with interest—and regally dressed. But even several layers of gilded silk and blood-red velvet couldn't hide his bulging muscles, his imposing stature, or his piercing green eyes. His hair had been shorn almost to the scalp, though his hairline hardly seemed to be receding, and at his side hung an ostentatious, though undoubtedly only ceremonial, sword that appeared to be made primarily of gold, and encrusted with as many gems and crystals as were in the chandelier.

The man wore a deep, joyous smile, and he spread his arms in a welcoming gesture as he strode confidently into the room, ignoring for the moment Damien, Emilie, and all the other Heaven's Eye representatives who'd given him their attention upon his entrance. Instead, he stepped in Leon's

direction and added, "But such trappings are expected of those of us in high positions, and besides, such places are beautiful in their own way, are they not?"

Leon didn't need a formal introduction to know who this man was, who was so powerful and acted like he owned the room—this was one of the two Kings that would be in attendance. So, still smiling, he nodded and said with as much poise and decorum as he could, "I can't deny that. Certainly more comfortable than a hole in the ground, even if the hole is 'good enough'."

The man let out a thunderous laugh, stepped forward to clap Leon on the shoulder—Marcus withdrawing a few steps as the man stepped in—and asked, "And might I have the honor of knowing your name?"

"I wouldn't say it's that great an honor to know it," Leon modestly replied, "but my name is Leon Raime." Without a word, he extended his arm to Elise, who exuberantly took it and smiled with almost inhuman brightness and beauty—at least, in Leon's opinion—at this pentarch. "And this is my wife, Elise," Leon finished.

Elise bowed her head slightly and gave the King a polite greeting. Notably, no one in the room had bowed, and Leon had expected at least a few dirty looks for his rather casual greeting, but it seemed Cortuban ways just didn't have that ceremony, for no one batted an eye.

"Wonderful to meet you two!" the King practically roared. He continued, while batting aside one of his followers who seemed just about to introduce him on his behalf, "I am Alfonso, son of Sancho, seventh of my name, Head of House Barcino, King of Faventia, and Second Lord of the Cortuban Conclave!"

"A pleasure to meet you," Leon replied, unsure how to refer to him, or if Cortuban Royalty even adopted styles at all, and fortunately, Elise was right there to rescue him.

"We're truly honored, Your Majesty," she said.

Leon filed that away—it seemed that some styles were shared in places. He made a mental note to check with Elise about these kinds of things later, for he realized now, in the worst possible time, that he was ill-prepared to deal with people who might take offense at his lack of preparation.

Fortunately, it seemed that Alfonso wasn't one of those kinds of people, for after introductions were made, he didn't miss a beat, launching directly into describing his happiness at their presence, how grateful he was that they were attending the games, and all sorts of other platitudes that, were they coming from anyone else, might've seemed token and empty, but which Alfonso's boundless enthusiasm made seem completely genuine.

Or, hells, Leon eventually started to think they *were* genuine.

"... and please, come and sit with me when the games begin!" Alfonso said, having hardly given either Leon or Elise a moment to cut in during his entire spiel. "I'd love to hear your opinion of our gladiators! A man like you, at least, must've seen his fair share of blood!"

Leon smiled and nodded, unsure quite how to respond to that. He'd seen quite a bit of blood in his time, for sure, but he was still exceptionally young by mage standards, and he wasn't sure what he could say that this King might want to hear. However, he still nodded and accepted the King's offer, only after

which Alfonso finally begged his leave and went to properly greet Princess Cristina and the rest of the Heaven's Eye delegation, leaving Leon and Elise largely alone.

"Well, he was certainly *something*," Elise said with a smile as she momentarily tightened her grip on Leon's arm.

"Ran right over us, didn't he?" Leon quietly replied, punctuating his statement with a chuckle.

"Right over *you*, more like," Elise retorted after a chuckle of her own. "His eyes barely ever *left* you. Kind of made me feel invisible. I don't think *anyone's* ever made me feel invisible before..."

"Was he really staring that much?" Leon wondered as he and Elise wandered out onto the deserted balcony so that they could speak with a little more privacy.

Elise just gave him a look that suggested she was entertained at his asking a foolish question.

Leon shrugged and stated, "I was trying *not* to stare, so I wasn't looking at him all that much. Besides, how could I spare that much time for him when I have you on my arm?" Leon quickly leaned in and stole a quick kiss from his wife, which she happily returned.

When they pulled back, Elise said, "As soon as he walked into the box, his eyes found you and almost never left."

"He's a seventh-tier mage," Leon theorized out loud. "I'd guess that he evaluated everyone as soon as he walked in the door, and then made a beeline for one of the strongest person he could sense."

Elise smiled and nodded. "Seems a reasonable thing for a King to do. I'm surprised he didn't approach our favorite river nymph first, though..."

Leon took a quick glance over his shoulder and fixed his eyes upon Maia. His river nymph lover had sat down in a plush seat in a corner and had pulled a book from her soul realm, into which she buried her face.

"She's radiating 'get the fuck away from me' energy," Leon observed. "I think the fact that we were mingling a bit made it easier for him to approach. Signaled that we might've been invited here for a reason other than power."

"... That *you* might be here for a reason other than power," Elise corrected.

Leon just shrugged and half-smiled. "Good to greet to the most powerful mages in the room—at least, those who seem open to being greeted, and then moving on to the rest, I say."

"A good philosophy to have going forward," Elise agreed. "Have you greeted anyone here who hasn't approached you first?"

"No," Leon replied without a hint of shame or remorse. Elise gave him a slightly reproachful look, and he professed, "Look, becoming an eighth-tier mage means a lot of things. Gives a lot of perks. Bigger soul realm, more magic power to call upon, get a lot of respect from people, but the single greatest perk is that I don't have to do a damn thing in situations like this. People come to *me*, not the other way around."

Elise sighed, but her face was split by a wide smile. "It's good to know your value, I suppose," she conceded, "but it would still do to have a little more courtesy for our hosts."

Leon pointedly looked back into the main box where Alfonso was warmly embracing Emilie and laughing at something that the Tower Lord had said just a moment before, while Damien Makedon watched on in stoic silence, his demeanor only marginally more inviting than Maia's. Alfonso was about as far from regal as Leon could imagine, acting more like he was among his close friends rather than with his social inferiors who owed him respect.

"I don't get the feeling that he cares much for courtesy," Leon observed.

"Not everyone's going to be like King Alfonso," Elise, to which Leon could only shrug in defeat.

As if to prove her point, only a moment later, the doors opened again, and a woman walked in, flanked on both sides by a dozen more followers. The woman herself was also of the seventh-tier, while her followers spanned the magical spectrum from fourth to sixth.

She was tall and rather thin, and almost inhumanly pale, especially considering the fairly tanned skin tones of native Cortubans. Her long blond hair had been pulled into a crown braid, showing off her sharp, severe beauty, and her brown eyes were harsh and devoid of warmth. She paused only a moment in the doorway, her gaze coolly surveying the scene before her.

Alfonso was making merry with the Heaven's Eye crowd, while Cristina was only a few steps away, surrounded by her knightesses. The Princess was doting on Asiya a bit, who Leon thought looked quite hale and hearty, being a fair few weeks out from her father's death and among friends, but the Princess was still locked in what seemed like intense conversation with her knight.

Meanwhile, Maia was still lost in her book, while Leon and Elise were off by themselves on the balcony, with an almost empty arena behind them.

Almost without missing a beat, the woman briefly nodded in greeting to Leon, and then walked over to Alfonso, Damien, Emilie, and the Tower Lord.

"Queen Isabella, I presume," Elise said. "As far as I know, she's one that will *not* be treating us as warmly as Alfonso."

Isabella spoke a few words to Alfonso, not quite audible to Leon and Elise over the general din of the rest of the guests, but Alfonso's exuberant response was more than clear.

"Ah! To the Underworld with that formality! We're closer than that, are we not?!"

Isabella didn't even blink and shook her head in the negative.

Alfonso didn't seem to care, though, and wrapped his massive arm around Isabella's comparatively tiny frame and pulled her into his conversation with Emilie and the Tower Lord, to her obvious consternation. But, as Leon found rather interesting, despite being of equal tier to Alfonso, she didn't resist that much to the forceful inclusion, and he wondered just what that meant.

With a sigh, Leon turned back to Elise. "Well. Seems everyone's here, now. How much longer is this going to go on before the games begin, do you know?" Leon nodded into the box, but his eyes swept the

arena's empty stands. Not even a single commoner had entered the arena yet, though a few of the private boxes did appear to be inhabited by people waiting for the day's events to start.

"I think there are a few members of the Conclave that haven't arrived, but I believe the games will begin in about three hours. I'm unsure how long they usually take, though."

Leon nodded, though in his heart he was a little dejected. This was looking to be an all-day affair, and he wasn't sure if he had the mental energy for that.

"Make the most of it, husband," Elise chided, her glittering emerald eyes not missing a single faint expression that passed over Leon's face.

Leon just chuckled and replied, "I'll try. I'll try. Shall we go rejoin everyone else, then?" Despite asking the question, Leon knew the answer already, and he was steering Elise back into the room before he'd even finished asking. This was going to be a mentally exhausting day, so he figured he could at least ease into the social aspects by speaking with people he liked. To that end, he steered Elise toward Princess Cristina and Asiya. He caught Valeria's eye on the way over, and she pried herself away from Marcus and Alcander to join the two on their short walk over.

But just a few steps away from the Princess, Valeria whispered to Leon, "There's going to be a public execution as part of these games. No points for guessing who..."

The faint smile on Leon's face froze as he glanced at Valeria.

It seemed that even though he'd handed Santiago over to the Alliance, he wasn't finished with the bandit just yet.

Chapter 643: Blood Sports

"Leon Raime!" Alfonso boomed as everyone filed out onto the balcony, the games set to soon begin. "Please, sit with me!"

The King's request was polite enough, and if taken at face value, there was the choice to refuse. However, Leon knew that even though it was as polite as a seventh-tier speaking to an eighth should be, it was also a request from a King, which meant it wasn't exactly a request, either. As good-naturedly as he could, Leon separated himself from his retainers, with whom he'd been speaking for the past half hour or so, held out his arm for Elise, and then walked over to the seats just beside Alfonso's throne-like seat. With him, too, were Maia and Valeria, whom Leon had silently invited with a look. After all, though Elise was his wife, he didn't want to neglect either of them in this situation.

Leon slid into the seat just to Alfonso's right, which the King had been gesturing to. He felt a few jealous stares from the King's entourage, but he pretended not to notice. Elise then sat to Leon's right, while Maia and Valeria then sat to her right, leaving only the seats behind the front row for the King's entourage—far enough back that Leon was sure a few were insulted at being sat so far from the most powerful people in the Alliance.

To Alfonso's left sat Isabella, and then to her left was Princess Cristina, followed by Emilie, Damien Makedon, and then a couple of the Queen's most important retainers.

"Leon, have you been introduced to Lady Isabella, here?" Alfonso asked as Leon sat down.

"I haven't had the pleasure, no," Leon replied, taking pains to ensure that there wasn't even a hint of resentment in his voice. His eyes flitted over to the Queen, who despite having to be able to hear them so close to her, was staring out into the rapidly-filling stands as thousands of the city's people made their way to their seats. Already, Leon estimated that there were at least twenty-thousand people present, and the stands weren't even halfway full.

"Then allow me the honor of introduction," Alfonso said, and he launched into a much more grandiose list of titles than those he'd used for himself, only after which did Isabella finally deign to look in Leon's direction.

"An honor to meet you, Your Majesty," Leon politely said once Alfonso had finished.

"The honor is mine, Leon Raime," Isabella stated neutrally, her tone indicating that the platitudes were largely empty, and that she was saying the words out of obligation. "It's not often that a mage strong enough to evade my senses passes through Andalus."

"And now there are three!" Alfonso added, his eyes sliding from Leon, to Maia, and then over to Damien for a moment before returning to Leon. "Is the good lady there with you, Leon? May I call you Leon?"

"Call me whatever you please, and yes, Naiad is with me," Leon said, and Elise, listening in, took Leon's right hand and Maia's left, and then brought them together in front of her.

"Ah, I see," Alfonso replied, the faintest light of hope in his eyes dying as he saw Maia's fingers instinctively curl around Leon's palm. "I welcome you two to our little corner of the world. I think you'll be in for a treat today!"

"Blood sports are hardly treats," Isabella responded, providing a hint to the root of at least some of her current profoundly disinterested attitude.

"Nonsense!" Alfonso thundered. "Seeing a little blood is good for the soul! If Great Death is far from us, then how can we ever truly appreciate Greatest Life?"

"I appreciate Life just fine, I have no need to be reminded of Death," Isabella replied, a hint of scorn making its way into her tone.

"Then you won't mind if I make the announcements?" Alfonso asked, giving his counterpart a provocative smirk.

"You'll sit there and look tough," Isabella commanded, though how binding her commands could be, Leon wasn't sure. "That's all you're good for. Keep your mouth shut."

The Queen's killing intent began to rise, and Leon began to feel more than a little awkward. It was like watching a married couple fight—it was their business, and seeing this kind of discord made him deeply uncomfortable. It wasn't his place to interrupt or to offer anything at all, he could only sit there and hope that it would be over soon.

It seemed his feelings were shared, as he awkwardly stole a glance at Elise, and found that not only his wife, but all of his lovers were pointedly *not* looking in the Royals' direction. Even when he glanced back in their direction, he saw on the other side of Isabella that Cristina and Emilie were as uncomfortable as he was.

“Now, now,” Alfonso said without a hint of shame, “what kind of show are we putting on for our guests? Certainly not one that anyone would find enjoyable, that’s for sure.” To counter the dropping temperature around the balcony from the Queen’s killing intent, Alfonso waved his hand and caused the fire within a nearby decorative brazier to double in intensity. “I think we need to warm all of this up, don’t you?”

The King gave the Queen a glowing smile, but it was only after several long seconds of what seemed like terribly fierce thought that Isabella restrained herself.

She clicked her tongue and said, “So be it.” She then turned away from Alfonso to engage Cristina in conversation, which the Bull Princess seemed a little hesitant to reciprocate, but after a minute or so, it was almost as if the conflict between the Cortuban Royals had been completely forgotten.

“I apologize for that,” Alfonso whispered to Leon, leaning over as he did, seemingly without care at all that the hordes of common people filing into their seats or the others in their private boxes could see. “Lady Isabella has never been one for these games. Has a fool notion in her head that blood ought to stay in one’s body. Well, I don’t necessarily disagree, but a little bloodletting is good for the soul, don’t you agree?”

Leon shrugged, not feeling like mincing his words before the King since it seemed the King wasn’t mincing his words with him.

“I generally find that violence for its own sake is counter-productive,” Leon stated as he returned the King’s smile.

Alfonso let out a booming laugh. “Ha! I suppose that’s what this might seem like to foreigners. But gladiators exist all over the civilized world, do they not? Have you never seen blood sports before?”

“I’m well familiar with the arts of the arena,” Leon replied as he briefly recalled his own experience preventing one of Octavius’ gladiators from killing one of August’s. “It’s just rare for them to be referred to as ‘blood sports’, in my experience. Makes me think that things are a little more extreme here.”

“Hmm,” Alfonso murmured. “Are you familiar with our ways, Leon Raime?”

“Can’t say that I am,” Leon replied.

“Then allow me to elucidate them a bit, if you don’t mind...”

Leon signaled his assent with a nod of his head.

“Today, we’ll have a short bloodletting—new gladiators will have their first fights here, and compete to first blood. None will die, though a few may be maimed. All for the glory of Cortusis, the Fierce God, though. After that, our healers will see to them, to ensure that they might honor our gods further.

“But once those fights are over, we’ll move on to our bigger fights. Mages with elemental power will enter the arena, honoring our gods with the blood of beasts. Lions, bears, anything strong that we can find or purchase will be pitted against them. In this, they will bring honor not only to themselves, but to Cormellian, the Wild God.

“To finish the games, our strongest gladiators will face each other down, and show our people the divide between Great Death and Greatest Life, watched over by our gods of each: Cordancis, and Cortubus, respectively. Killing each other is not required by any means, though it’s not exactly uncommon.”

“Is all of this willing?” Leon asked. “Your gladiators consent to spill their blood on these sands?”

“For their honor and glory, yes,” Alfonso replied. “Also for a mountain of coin, but coin is honor in its own right—at least, if the priests of Corcilius, the Wealthy God, are to be believed.”

“I heard something about an execution, though,” Leon said.

Alfonso smiled at him. “Yes, that will come after the games. And I believe you had something to do with it, bringing in traitors that we were still getting ready to deal with. My thanks and congratulations, by the way...”

Leon’s smile tightened, but he nodded in acceptance anyway.

“Normally, such traitors would be beheaded, but since we had games today, I decided to have them thrown to wild animals, instead. Ought to entertain the masses, and bring joy to Cortell, the Commanding God.”

Leon wasn’t quite sure what to say at that point. “Will... they at least be armed?” he asked.

Alfonso gave him a look like he was crazy. “They’re traitors being executed. We can’t take away their magic, but we’re not giving them weapons.”

“I see...” Leon muttered.

“You disapprove?” Alfonso asked.

Leon took a long moment to think things over, turning the problem over in his head. “I... suppose I find the concept distasteful,” he finally said, “but I wouldn’t say I completely disapprove. At least, not until I see what the execution entails. I’m not really one for such drawn out death. Were I in your shoes, I think I would’ve just sent the bandits to the headsman and gotten it over with. Feeding them to wild animals just seems... unnecessary and excessive.”

Alfonso hummed appreciatively, frowning with thought.

“What happens,” Leon inquired, “if they survive? If they kill all of your wild animals? Do you just send in more? Send in gladiators instead? Is there any route for them out of this arena?”

“In all practical senses, no,” Alfonso replied. “I suppose Lady Isabella and I could always commute their sentences if they provide a great enough show, though. Such things have been done before—mercy being shown if those to be executed instead prevail against their monstrous executioners. If Cortusis walks with them and Cortell delivers them from their fate, then who are we to overturn that judgment?”

‘A King,’ Leon whispered silently. ‘*Someone who doesn’t leave things to such chance.*’ He couldn’t say such things out loud, though. Were he a King, never would he allow such possibilities to exist. Those who were to be executed, *would* be, and without hesitation or fanfare.

After several moments of silence between the two, Isabella turned back to Alfonso and whispered into his ear. Leon was able to make out a few words, just enough to understand that it was business they were discussing. And he thought he knew what kind of business, for the stands were almost full, now. Somewhere along the lines of fifty thousand people were in the stands, the sonic weight of even their casual conversations hitting Leon's ears like a stone giant beating upon a drum. And being so prominently seated, Leon could feel a significant number of stares landing upon him, too. He did his best to ignore all of it; to project an air of distance and dignified stoicism that wouldn't signal any kind of weakness.

He wasn't trying to impress anyone, but he was still rather uncomfortable, and he didn't want to show it.

Fortunately, Elise seemed to pick up on it, and she entwined her fingers with his on his armrest, drawing his attention, and giving him a look of radiant joy.

"Smile, husband," she said, leaning into his ear. "You'll terrify the children if you don't."

Leon, glancing around, was somewhat surprised to see kids as young as ten or so in the stands here and there, and he couldn't help but chuckle at his wife's words. He wasn't much concerned with children seeing violence and 'blood sports', as Alfonso had called them—he'd been hunting since he was younger than ten, Artorias having taken pains to ensure that he was comfortable with death.

Still, he supposed Elise had a point; there wasn't much reason for him to be so glum. This was supposed to be an entertaining show, after all, and he shouldn't judge it before it was over.

Isabella and Alfonso continued whispering to each other for a few more minutes as the final stragglers made their way to their seats. And then, when it seemed like the arena had filled completely, or at least as completely as it was going to be filled, Isabella rose from her seat. Instantly, as if someone had simply turned off everyone's vocal cords, all noise within the arena ceased, and all eyes found their way to Isabella.

She didn't speak in the common tongue, so Leon wasn't able to follow any of her speech, but what caught his eye—and his ear—was the fact that her voice echoed throughout the entire arena even though she didn't so much as raise it. There weren't any visible enchantments working their magic, and her aura remained rather subdued, so he knew she wasn't her own magic on this trick, but it got him thinking over how he might accomplish something similar.

'Enchantments in the balcony around us?' Leon wondered, trying to look around and examine their surroundings without being too conspicuous—a Queen was speaking, after all. *'Or maybe some enchanted item she's wearing?'* He hadn't seen her pick anything up or put anything on, but at her power level, with unfettered access to her soul realm, anything was possible.

Finally, she finished, and the crowd erupted in applause. From the other side of the arena, on a small red brick platform built where a private box would've otherwise been, a man walked out, and began to, Leon assumed, announce the fights.

As he was speaking, Alfonso turned back to Leon and asked, "Follow any of that?"

Leon gave him an apologetic look and responded, "I'm sorry, but no."

The King practically physically waved away his apologies. "Don't worry about it. But the games are about to begin, I hope you enjoy yourself..."

Leon smiled and nodded, hoping that it was sufficient to return the sentiment. It seemed it was, for Alfonso then turned to watch the first pair of gladiators walk into the arena, to polite applause from the stands. There wasn't much enthusiasm, but Leon recalled that these were relative rookies, with this fight being their first in the enormous arena.

They didn't seem to be complete novices, though, for they were each of the third-tier, decked out in fairly substantive armor, and played well to the crowd, showing not a single trace of anxiety about being in front of fifty-thousand people.

And then, after what Leon could only assume to be an introduction from the announcer, the two began their fight.

It was over in a matter of minutes, with one getting in a lucky shot that snaked his blade between the steel plates protecting the other's elbow, drawing blood. The loser then collapsed to the ground, his face one of disbelief and extreme disappointment, the winner raising his arms for the crowd, which while not roaring, was still quite loudly expressing their entertainment. After a moment, the loser then picked up a handful of sand, rubbed it into his bleeding wound, and then rose to his feet, shambling out of the arena.

"A glorious win, and a shameful defeat," Alfonso brutally remarked, smiling quite widely and leaning forward slightly as the loser departed, an almost predatory look in his eyes. Isabella, on the other hand, Leon noted seemed to be practically ignoring the fight, absorbing herself in a hushed conversation she was having with Cristina.

To Leon's surprise, the winner stuck around, though he moved to the side as two more gladiators entered hit the sands. These two then fought a blistering battle, which ended when one knocked the other to the ground and delivered a vicious blow against his thigh. The loser then rubbed sand into his wound and hobbled out, while the winner stood by.

Thusly did some forty-eight matches go by in only an hour and a half, leaving the arena with a few streaks of blood, and forty-eight winners standing in the arena. Despite his initial enthusiasm after the first fight, though, Alfonso had leaned back in his chair, his expression growing more and more unsatisfied with every passing fight.

Finally, as the announcer shouted something to the crowd that had them roaring with delight, the King leaned over to Leon and whispered, "So, what are your thoughts so far?"

Leon smiled back at the King and replied, "A lot less bloody than I was expecting. Though, the crowd seems rather..." During the fights, the crowd had been loud enough, but never quite enthusiastic about their new gladiators.

The people in the stands were now going insane as the gladiators assembled into a formation six men across and eight deep, each one far enough from his neighbors that they couldn't touch the others if they both reached out. Whatever the announcer had proclaimed had seemingly energized the crowd.

“Not enough blood has been spilled,” Alfonso said. “These fights have been too clean. Too safe. Do you see the gladiators down there now? How do they seem?”

Leon took a closer look at each of the winners as they stood stock-still, listening to the announcer, who glared down at them like they were not only ants beneath his boots, but ants that had somehow offended him. The words he spoke to the crowd still worked them up, but the gladiators themselves seemed like chastened children.

“The gods demand more from their people,” Alfonso said with anticipation dripping from his tone, and his words were punctuated with the loud clanging sound of several of the steel gates that hadn’t been used by the gladiators unlocking and slowly lowering into the ground. “When the gods don’t get what they demand, then something must be done...”

The crowd’s fervor grew in intensity, but even with all the noise they were making, Leon could still hear the roar of something within the darkness beyond the gates, something strong enough to emit a fifth-tier aura. Something responded from another gate with an ear-piercing shriek, and Leon could feel another fifth-tier aura emanate from the dark.

The third and final gate remained quiet, but Leon could see something large moving about within.

“Is this a punishment?” Leon asked the King. “They didn’t please you, so the wild animals are released early?”

Alfonso grinned at Leon, and said, “Something like that, I suppose.”

From one gate emerged a massive lion, its coat sparkling like silver. Leon recognized it as a snow lion, though one bigger than the one he’d hunted to awaken his Inherited Bloodline, nearly reaching the size of one of the Heaven’s Eye carriages in his caravan.

From the second gate came something much less familiar: some kind of giant ape, its proportions almost looking human, though covered in coarse black fur. It stood about ten feet tall, and its eyes glowed in its skull like orbs of polished gold that had caught the light of the sun.

From the final gate came something almost alien—a black horse-like creature with six legs, four eyes that burned like hot coals, fangs that dipped below its chin, and small fires blazing about its hooves.

“If they survive, then it will be with the favor of the gods,” Alfonso stated with anticipation. “If they have no favor, then from them will the gods take their due.”

As if on cue, the three beasts surged forward, raking and tearing into the ranks of the third-tier gladiators as they broke from formation and scrambled for cover. But in that first instant, five of the ‘winners’ of the previous matches were ripped open, torn apart, burned, frozen, and smashed into the sand.

And all

Chapter 644: Blood in the Arena

The snow lion and the six-legged fire horse-thing were still alive, though both had suffered some injuries. The fifth-tier ape had been brought low by the gladiators; perhaps because it didn’t use any elemental magic, relying entirely on its comparatively titanic strength to tear apart its foes. Such tactics

worked for a time, but, in contrast to what Leon might've thought, the gladiators didn't even hesitate when the beasts entered the arena. As soon as they were allowed, they threw themselves upon the beasts with reckless abandon, killing the ape in the process, but otherwise being wiped out by the other two.

All forty-eight of the 'victorious' gladiators were now lying in the dirt, having been ripped asunder in all manner of ways by the beasts, leaving only the snow lion and the horse-thing. But despite the fall of all the gladiators, the crowd screamed in ecstasy as if their favored champion had won, roaring louder than they had during all forty-eight of the initial bouts.

Next to Leon, Alfonso was leaning forward in his seat, a wild smile upon his face, the King clearly taking greater pleasure in this outcome than he had during nearly all of the previous fights.

"Wonderful..." he murmured before leaning back and then finally giving Leon a look. "Did they not fight beasts where you're from? Was it all man-on-man fighting?"

"For the gladiators? Yes," Leon replied, though Elise was quick to interject.

"There were a few fights against animals, but they were rare and poorly attended."

"A shame," Alfonso replied. "Watching two men bloody each other can get old. But beasts can provide so much more entertainment. They change the game and can bring so many strange and unique powers to the table."

"What will happen to those two?" Leon asked, tilting his head slightly towards the lion and the horse-thing.

"Taken back into custody and kept for other fights," Alfonso explained. "We're not so uncouth as to slaughter them now that the gods have shown them favor."

Leon smiled thinly, the beasts having just gorged themselves on the 'winners' of the previous fights. If those winners were not chosen by the gods, then why did they win? If they *were* chosen by the gods, as their victories might indicate, then why were they thrown against such beasts as reward? Was it the losers of those fights that had been chosen by the gods, or did the gods just demand blood of their followers?

These questions Leon didn't ask, but they lingered in his mind. As far as he could tell, the victorious gladiators had done well, and yet they'd still somehow offended the Cortuban gods enough to be essentially executed. He didn't see anyone around that he would identify as a priest, so he wondered just how exactly it was determined that those gladiators had offended their gods, because it seemed entirely random to him. Or at least, entirely dependent on the mood of the crowd, which he supposed wasn't that bad of a reason, all things considered.

If the people demanded blood, and they weren't getting it, then the Royals giving them what they wanted while simultaneously using it as an excuse to 'honor' the gods was a good way to please both the people and the priesthood—assuming there even were any priests to appreciate it. It also allowed the rulers of the Alliance to please the people without directly bowing to their demands, letting them maintain their power and position without overtly indulging the people, who might then get ideas of challenging the status quo.

Leon didn't particularly agree with the concept of feeding gladiators, especially those who had won their fights, to wild animals, but he had to admit that he respected the mental gymnastics that the Royals were using to justify doing so.

Then again, as Leon glanced at Alfonso, he wondered if they even *were* just justifications, for the King seemed genuinely into what he was saying. Leon wasn't a particularly religious person, but he got the impression that Alfonso was more devout in the Cortuban religion than Leon was in the spirituality of the Bull Kingdom.

As he glanced at the King, he found his eyes sliding off the hulking man and toward his compatriot; Queen Isabella was still quietly speaking with Cristina, and the young Princess was breathing heavily and pointedly *not* looking at the arena. Leon got the sense that Cristina was far more uncomfortable with these events than even he was, though Emilie sitting next to her looked more bored than anything.

"Are you worried about those beasts, Leon?" Alfonso inquired.

Leon pulled himself back to the present conversation and shrugged. "I was interested in that snow lion. One of my proudest moments was hunting a third-tier snow lion when I was only a first-tier mage. I still have my coat that my father made of its hide, and it's one of my most treasured possessions. I suppose I just wanted to know what might happen to the lion..."

"Looking to purchase it?" Alfonso asked.

Leon shook his head. "Not really, though if it was going to be slaughtered, then I might've made a bid for its fur."

Alfonso let loose with a booming laugh. "Ha! While I would normally have such a thing arranged as a gift for you, I can't do so in this case. This beast is now favored by the gods and cannot be touched until its next fight!"

Leon nodded in understanding, not pressing for his desire. It wasn't even a powerful desire, more a passing thought, anyway.

He leaned back in his seat, lost in thought, and he barely noticed the remaining two beasts being wrangled by the Cortuban beastmasters back through the gates they'd come from. He certainly did his best not to pay attention to the enslaved arena cleaners who swarmed the sands and removed the forty-nine corpses, though they blatantly didn't even touch the blood soaking into the arena's sandy floor.

But he *did* notice when the next fights started, for after the announcer was done with his spiel, a fifth-tier gladiator came out of his gate with spectacular fanfare. His steel plate armor glittered like silver, his blade glowed with golden power, and the crowd's cheering practically shook the red and pink brick arena down to its foundations. Leon assumed this handsome man with his helmet tucked under his arm to be one of the more famous gladiators who frequented this arena, though for what reason, he couldn't presently say. He certainly had the face for fame, being more than handsome enough to make many man-lovers in the crowd swoon, but his aura didn't strike Leon as anything special.

When the gate opposite to his opened, the gladiator's opponent was revealed. Three sixth-tier mages came in, keeping a fifth-tier griffin chained up between them. The poor beast was snapping and straining against its bonds, but the sixth-tier mages hardly budged.

Leon frowned, feeling some momentary empathy for the creature, thoughts of Anzu filling his mind. He did his best to push that part of him back down, though it wasn't that easy. This part of the games hadn't even properly started, yet, and he already preferred the 'boring' first part, for at least the inexperienced gladiators had all consented to their battles, whereas the beasts simply couldn't.

The Cortubans may have religious justifications for this, but to Leon, it was looking like it was nothing more than pointless slaughter.

The sixth-tier mages eventually released the griffin with a few tugs of their chains, revealing them to have been enchanted with just such a function. Before the griffin could then launch itself at them, one of the mages conjured a wall of stone that forced it to move closer to the gladiator instead, and the crowd roared its approval.

The gladiator then began to force the griffin's attention to remain upon him by, after donning his helmet, unleashing a barrage of strikes from his blade, sending rays of light rippling at the beast with every swing. The griffin screeched its fury, and charged at the gladiator, but took several bad hits on the way, spilling its blood before it even reached the gladiator.

At that point, Leon was able to see exactly how the fight would end. The gladiator's aura barely shifted, indicating either he had much finer control over his powers than Leon had initially given him credit for, or his blade had been heavily enchanted. Either way, he was going to beat the griffin, which seemed to have had its wings clipped to keep it from flying out of the open-roof arena—also deeply crippling its ability to fight back and to use its magic, if Anzu's fighting style was anything to go by. Leon didn't want to watch something that reminded him greatly of his griffin getting slaughtered for entertainment, so he averted his gaze and turned his attention elsewhere.

The sixth-tier mages that had brought the griffins in were his initial mental landing point. He wondered just how much they were being paid to do such work. A sixth-tier mage wasn't rare by any means, but they were hardly common, too, so the fact that there were three whose job appeared to just be escorting captured beasts was of interest to him.

When Leon turned to glance at Alfonso, he found the King leaning forward again, his eyes alight with amusement as the gladiator used many literally and metaphorically flashy magical attacks in his battle with the griffin, playing to the crowd as much as he was fighting for his life. So, Leon knew he wasn't going to get much out of the King—or at least, he didn't want to disturb the King just to ask his inane questions about the process.

So, without any other outlet for his curiosity, he let his mind wander again.

And a possibility occurred to him: what if the Cortubans weren't just using their religion as a justification? Leon knew that powerful beings existed, and he shivered as he recalled his personal experience with a Primal God. He also knew that there was great power in blood—it was not only a vital fluid for bodily function, but it was also the medium through which magic power flowed. Mana was just

blood that had been properly mixed with magic power, and there was quite a bit of mana now wetting the sands of the arena.

It was easy for him to dismiss their religion as nothing at all, but there was also a strong possibility that they were actually sacrificing people to *something*...

Leon reached out with his magic senses as softly and delicately as he could, examining the brickwork of the arena from the inside, the outside being warded against such inspection. The bricks, however, didn't lead him to believe that there was anything sacrificial going on here; at least, nothing that was worth noting, for there was still quite a lot of magic flowing through the walls, powering the various enchantments that ensured the comfort of those spectators who paid for it. He couldn't sense anything that he might reasonably think was blood magic.

So, he turned his attention back down to the sand, where the gladiator was now playing even more to the crowd, raising his arms and reveling in their cheering as the griffin whimpered in pain, now so heavily injured that it could barely stand, let alone keep furiously attacking the gladiator.

He concentrated on the pools of blood, trying to determine if the power contained within them was flowing anywhere. It wasn't that easy, for up until this point, the only blood that had been spilled onto the sand was that of lower-tiered mages, with not nearly as much magic in their blood as someone like the gladiator, let alone someone like Leon. However, Leon was still able to perceive a kind of ripple in all that blood. The magic wasn't going anywhere, but it was definitely doing *something*, and it was being damned subtle about it.

Leon let his attention then drift to his right, landing upon Maia. He didn't turn to face her, not wanting to seem conspiratorial as his blood began to run cold, the cruel possibilities of what this resonating blood could mean running through his mind, but it only took a moment or two for his attention to attract hers. She didn't turn to face him, either, but he could feel her silent, unspoken question.

[Can you feel what's happening with the blood down there?] Leon asked.

He could sense her narrowing her eyes, pondering his question for a second, before her magic senses projected outward, being only marginally less subtle than his.

After a moment, his river nymph lover whispered back, [... No...?]

[The magic power in the mana... it's vibrating,] Leon responded, hoping he wasn't sounding crazy. But now that he was keyed into it, he could see the same vibrations in just about every pool of blood upon the sand, and he was convinced it wasn't just some kind of trick, some illusion or wish-fulfilling hallucination.

[I can't—] Maia began before falling silent and leaning forward a bit in her seat. [I... think I *can* see what you're talking about, actually...]

[Can you make heads or tails of it?]

Maia scowled and shook her head. [No, I can't...]

Leon silently swore. [Keep an eye on it. You might see something I don't, and vice versa.]

He felt Maia's acceptance, and he devoted all of his attention back to observing the blood. At first, it seemed almost like the magic power within the blood was subtly resonating at random intervals, but after a couple of minutes, he began to see a pattern. The mana closer to the center of the arena vibrated with greater frequency and intensity, though at the scale he was observing, it still wasn't particularly intense. He thusly assumed that whatever was going on was originating from somewhere closer to the center of the arena, and concentrated his magic senses in that area.

Unfortunately, the first fight ended during this time, and the second began. The griffin had been killed before the citizens of Andalus and was then replaced with some kind of large feline about twice the size of an average lion, but with bronze hide—as in hide of actual bronze. Leon found himself momentarily distracted, but after a curious once-over, he tried to turn his attention back to his observations. But the second gladiator and the bronze cat started to clash right there in the center of the arena, directly over, within, or beneath whatever Leon was trying to observe, and the emanations they gave off during their fight obscured nearly all of what Leon was trying to perceive.

To his annoyance, Leon was forced to wait until they either moved or the fight finished. During this time, he decided to cast his attention inward and speak with his passengers. The Thunderbird wasn't around, but Nestor and Xaphan never went anywhere.

"Anyone here know anything useful about blood magic?" Leon shouted as he momentarily opened his eyes upon his throne within his soul realm.

"Hardly," Xaphan responded. "I've told you many times, human, though I suppose I can forgive your pathetic human memory if you've forgotten, but I never took well to blood magic. Unless it's the very basics, I can't answer any questions."

"A shame, truly," Leon drily replied before turning toward the ruby that imprisoned Nestor.

"I have some knowledge of the subject," Nestor coyly stated, his voice tinged with interest and intrigue.

Leon took a deep breath and responded half to himself, "The only surprise I feel is at my lack of surprise. I think I'm sensing some blood magic out in the physical world and could use more perspectives."

"I'll do what I can, but my range of perception is limited," Nestor replied.

Leon nodded, and then returned to his physical body. He began to describe his observations to Nestor as best as he could with the second fight raging all across the sand, but unfortunately, all Nestor could confirm was that there was certainly some blood magic at work here. Without getting close enough for his limited magic senses to examine the arena, the dead man couldn't say more.

With that, Leon could only sigh in temporary defeat, his feeling of vindication being greatly smothered by his feeling of relative powerlessness. But he wasn't going to just let this go. As the fights continued, eventually returning to matches where gladiators faced off against other gladiators, Leon didn't pay any attention at all to the fights, instead choosing to take as much stock of the arena itself as he could.

He only began paying attention again several hours later, when the time came for the final event: the execution. He tuned in sometime during Isabella's speech, though he still couldn't understand a word, and as she spoke, seven men were led out onto the sands of the arena. Leon immediately recognized them all, but the man in front was especially notable: the sixth-tier Santiago, standing proudly before

the people of Andalus even as said people threw their garbage at him and his bandits. All were in chains and surrounded by half a dozen sixth-tier mages and two dozen fifth-tier mages, ensuring that they couldn't escape no matter how hard they might try.

Isabella continued her castigating speech, and three more gates opened, letting the auras of the beasts within spill out into the crowd. Instantly, nearly every commoner in the stands quieted down under the weight of such unrestrained animalistic fury. Nearly all eyes were drawn to the newly opened gates, but Leon's eyes never wavered from the bandits as the Cortuban guards unchained the bandits.

The bandits then quietly closed ranks and faced the open gates as their guards hurried out of the arena, leaving them to face their fate unarmed.

The first beast—a centipede more than twenty feet long, thicker than two men side-by-side, and most disturbingly, with an unsettlingly human-like face nestled within six clicking mandibles—charged into the arena just as Isabella's final damning speech finished and the Queen returned to her seat. The people in the stands reeled as the monstrosity revealed itself, and their disgust only grew as the second beast followed shortly after.

Slinking into the arena came a massive black spider-like thing with ten legs, large enough to eat a man whole, and covered in bright red urticating hairs. It had no eyes, but its face—if it could even be called a face—had three pairs of viciously-fanged chelicera that glowed red with heat.

Finally, the third and final creature came stomping in, moving surprisingly quickly for how tortoise-like it initially appeared. It had a thick green shell, with four stout legs, each one more than six feet thick in order to prop up its enormous body. Its head, however, had more in common with a dragon, with a long serpentine neck covered in shining dark green scales, while its angular head had a pair of horns that curved out and then around its face almost like ribs. It couldn't retract its head back into its shell, but from the way its blood-red eyes gleamed with malice, and how fire danced across its horns, Leon didn't get the impression that such defensive tactics were something it was predisposed to.

All three beasts were sixth-tier, making Santiago's death effectively guaranteed, but when Leon turned his head back in the bandit's direction, he saw no fear: only resignation and determination. He had the distinct feeling that Santiago wasn't going to die just yet, and for the first time that day, he started to lean forward, the blood magic in the arena momentarily forgotten, and watched the fight unfold before him.

Chapter 645: The Lion's Mercy

Santiago's group was surrounded by three sixth-tier beasts, but instead of looking at them, Santiago's eyes were instead trained upon the Royal box. More specifically, they were first locked upon Isabella, who had presumably just announced his death by beast, and then they slid over to the spectating Alfonso, who was leaning forward in his seat with an almost maniacal grin on his face.

Then, they went a little further and landed upon Leon, narrowing slightly. Leon didn't shy away from Santiago's glare, quietly staring back. The bandit had made his choices, and in the Alliance, these were the consequences, as generally distasteful as Leon might've found them.

And then the dragon-turtle roared and charged, lumbering forward with greater speed than its massive body suggested it was capable of. Its maw never closed, but instead widened, giving just about the

entire arena a view of its rows of vicious fangs just before Leon felt its aura spike. A moment later, accompanied by a warbling wail from deep within the turtle's throat, a jet of steam erupted from the turtle's jaws. It almost bathed Santiago's entire group and would've surely injured them gravely, but just before the wave of steam hit them, a shimmering white barrier sprang into place—Santiago had moved so fast that Leon had to channel some of his lightning magic into his eyes to track him.

The steam harmlessly washed over the barrier, but before the bandits could celebrate, the chittering human-faced centipede screeched and lunged forward, its body undulating and whipping back and forth before it sank its mandibles into the leg of one of the bandits. He was a fifth-tier mage, though, and so even though he screamed in pain, he started to blast the centipede's face with fire as two more of his comrades ran forward to help, hitting the centipede with rock spikes and, to Leon's surprise, a few small blasts of lightning.

This magic seemed to have a good effect on the creature, for it released its victim a moment later and pulled back.

"On your feet!" Santiago shouted, and his injured compatriot's leg glowed with white light, sealing the injury.

"Thanks!" the man shouted back as he struggled back to his feet.

But now the spider made its move. It skittered forth, moving with a confidence that Leon didn't expect given its lack of eyes. It moved quickly, but not so much that three of the bandits couldn't conjure two spiked stone walls in its way and fire off another blast of lightning to slow it down. Santiago then turned and raised his hand, creating a blade of light more than thirty feet long, and brought it down upon the spider with savage force when it came too close.

His magic blade split the creature's carapace open, but it continued to surge forward with a ferocity that Leon found rather strange. Despite having suffered Santiago's strike, a blast of lightning, and having to crash through two spiked walls, the spider's will to fight hadn't even wavered. Instead, it lunged as it drew close, spearing one pair of its chelicera through the chest of one of the bandits' earth mages. The man screamed in pain as the burning fangs tore through him, but his scream was soon silenced when the spider pulled his body into its abyssal mouth and closed it around the top of his body.

A moment later, the bottom half of his body fell to the ground in a bloody heap, sans everything above his hips.

And the crowd roared in approval, the tremor of their elation not wavering even slightly as Santiago gutturally screamed in rage and loss and fired a ray of white light into the spider's 'face'. The spider was thrown back by the force, stone dead.

One of the bandits was dead, but they'd also killed one of the beasts harrying them. A good exchange on an objective level, but Leon could see that the bandits were shaken by the loss of their friend, and none more so than Santiago, who fell to his knees over the remains of his fallen friend.

The bandits closed ranks again, and the centipede and the dragon turtle circled the group of bandits warily, not charging in nearly as recklessly as the spider had, giving Leon more than enough time to lean over to Alfonso and say, "That spider acted strangely; I've rarely seen wild beasts charge so suicidally before..."

Sensing the question in Leon's statement, Alfonso replied, "Ah, well it would bring great shame upon us if the sacrifices we bring to these hallowed grounds don't cooperate, so we ensure cooperation to the best of our ability. Some are more amenable than others—the urge to live can be a difficult thing to overpower, even when presented with such an honorable and glorious death."

Leon grimly smiled. "How exactly do you ensure cooperation?"

"Certain compounds within the beast's food can increase aggression. Some, however, react more appropriately if given *less* food; some might require a beating or two until their blood gets hot. These stronger animals are much harder to control, as you can plainly see..." The King nodded to the centipede and the dragon turtle.

The centipede had been injured by Santiago's people, so Leon could understand the pain lessening the aggression that the Cortubans had tried to bring out, but the dragon turtle seemed far more intelligent than its relatively low tier implied. For all its obvious strength and power, it could recognize that Santiago's group was more than powerful enough to injure it, and so it was keeping its distance, not wanting to risk injury to itself getting too close.

"Out of curiosity," Leon asked as he heard the shouting of the crowd start to change as the lull in fighting started to grow too long, "how much can the audience interact with the fight?"

Alfonso finally turned his eyes toward Leon. "Why do you ask?"

"Just a curiosity," Leon repeated, though that wasn't the whole truth. He supposed he wasn't quite over his decision to not try and recruit Santiago, and from the way that the man had reacted when his man had been killed, then perhaps his talk of loyalty being worthless was just that: talk. It was because of Leon that he was now facing a potentially slow and agonizing death to a vicious monster rather than the quick death that Leon would've offered, and he supposed if there was a way to help him out a bit, then Leon might take it.

Alfonso studied him closely for a moment before answering, "That depends on the person. We don't want the mob to get too many ideas, but if it's someone of standing, then they may, *may*, have mercy enough to show those down in the arena favor—possibly going so far as to offer them some kind of patronage. Direct intervention can sometimes be a part of that."

"And your gods are fine with that?" Leon innocently inquired.

"So long as sufficient blood is spilled and the gods get their due, then they have no problems with us," Alfonso replied with a knowing smile as he turned back to the arena.

As they were speaking, so too was Santiago whispering desperately with his men while doing his best to keep his attention on the dragon turtle, ensuring that the monster knew that he was still threat enough that charging his people would be dangerous. But only a couple seconds after Leon finished his short exchange with Alfonso, Santiago finished with his men, and they sprang into action.

Santiago's remaining five bandits charged at the centipede, summoning their fifth-tier powers. Santiago himself charged at the dragon turtle as his hands glowed with white light. The dragon turtle snarled and swiftly swiped forward with one of its massive, webbed feet, blade-like claws on the end of each digit, but Santiago was fast enough to dodge. He soared over the monster, landing on its back, but was forced

to immediately leap off again when tiny cracks in the creature's shell spewed intense steam and the creature itself started to violently shake and slam itself into the walls of the arena.

Leon was surprised that the creature didn't even dent the enchanted walls of the arena, but he supposed that such violence was expected, and the design of the arena accounted for it. But as Santiago fought his opponent, dodging an attempt by the dragon turtle to snap him into its jaws, Leon was reaching into the sky with his power. He wasn't being overly subtle with it, but he wasn't going so fast as to attract much attention. He only detected a brief glance apiece from Alfonso, Isabella, Damien, and Emilie.

The sky above was quite clear of clouds, but as Leon's magic power suffused the area and he put his training with the Thunderbird to the test, he began to seize control of what little water magic was there and augmenting it with some of his own. Over the course of about half a minute, clouds began gathering over the arena, blocking out the sun from the open roof. Clouds being blown in by the wind was hardly anything special, though, and as far as Leon could tell, no one out in the stands or in the private boxes gave the clouds anything more than a cursory glance.

Once the clouds had gathered, he began to swirl them around a bit, almost like he was stirring cake batter, and he could feel lightning magic begin to build within. He could summon lightning from the clouds right now if he wanted, but for the bolt to have any power at all, then he needed to give it more time to build. So, devoting some of his attention to keep generating lightning magic, he let his eyes drift back down to the fight.

By this point, another of Santiago's bandits had been killed, and a third had been lifted into the air within the monster's mandibles as it reared up onto its innumerable hind legs. It writhed with the bandit in its grasp, the magic attacks that splashed across its hard carapace causing it obvious pain. It squeezed the bandit with its mandibles, slicing him in half even as the rest of the bandits blasted a hole in its carapace and began tearing out its insides. But in its death throes, the centipede thrashed about, the sharp ends of its legs acting as deadly spears. All three of Santiago's remaining bandits found themselves impaled upon the dying monster's limbs, tossed about like stringless puppets as it writhed in pain, and finally crushed beneath the centipede's massive weight as it finally fell to the sand, dead.

Santiago, meanwhile, was being pressed back by the dragon turtle. Its hide was proving resistant to his damaging light, while its shell seemed out and out immune. The bandit was doing little more than annoying it as he let loose with spear-like rays and massive blades of sparkling white light. He was putting his all into his attacks, but the monster barely seemed fazed. Instead, it roared, stomped on the ground, and shook the earth. Leon felt the entire arena shake, and that was after the dragon turtle's strength managed to get past the arena's enchantments—Santiago, being only a few dozen feet away, was knocked right over, and the rhythm of his attacks was disrupted. The dragon turtle loomed over him, and Leon could feel its magic spiking once again.

It was preparing to blast the bandit with its steam breath once again, and at point-blank range, Leon doubted that he'd be able to survive.

Leon had been letting the clouds above build up lightning magic for about a minute or so, and he judged that would have to be enough. He reached back up into the clouds, seized control of the lightning magic, and got it into position, just as the Thunderbird had taught him to do.

He could feel the charge above now, building up on the bottom of the cloud, and likewise, he could feel a subtle charge down on the ground gathering. Once more, he used his magic to direct it, having it coalesce on the dragon turtle's head, causing the monster to pause for a moment in confusion as it sensed his magic crawling over its scalp.

He kept building both charges, his eighth-tier power allowing him to do so with terrific speed. And then, in one violent moment that took even Leon by surprise with how bright, loud, and sudden it was, all of that magic build-up finally paid off. Just before it unleashes its steam breath, a bolt of golden lightning struck the turtle with greater power than nearly any bolt of lightning that Leon had ever thrown in his life, almost blinding and deafening the entire arena.

The dragon turtle was killed instantly, the top of its head almost exploding from the concentrated and directed bolt that Leon had summoned.

A wide smile spread across Leon's face. He was incredibly pleased with this result, having hardly used a fraction of his power to bring forth such a terrific lightning bolt. The Thunderbird, during their training, had often said that making use of the power around him was far more efficient, but seeing was believing.

Using this technique in battle wasn't yet a real option, unfortunately. It took too much concentration and too much fine magic control. The disturbances in the magic power within the environment during an army-scale battle might even be too much for him to control. But if he had a minute or two to prepare himself, and the fighting hadn't started yet, then things might be different.

Leon's smile widened even further, and only started to fade when he finally checked back in with his surroundings and found that not only was Alfonso staring at him, but Isabella, Emilie, and even Santiago down in the arena were, as well. In fact, as the immediate shock and awe of what had just happened wore off, everyone in the Royal box turned their eyes in his direction.

"What?" he lightly inquired, acting as if the lightning bolt had been an act of nature, or of the Cortuban gods.

Alfonso started to roar with laughter while Isabella's face contorted in something that looked far more like rage.

"You dare... to interfere..." she whispered, barely audible to Leon's eighth-tier ears with Alfonso losing his mind right next to him.

"Inter...**fere**?!!" the King croaked between great guffaws. "No such... not possible!!"

The King slapped the arm rest of seat as he turned his attention back to the sands, where Santiago was pulling himself back to his feet, his eyes still locked upon Leon, a complex look on his face.

Leon did likewise, meeting Santiago's gaze unashamedly, smiling down at the silver-eyed bandit like he was in complete control of the man's life. Which wasn't entirely the truth, but neither was the truth that far away.

His attention only wavered when he felt Elise slide her fingers into his and whisper into his ear, "Does that mean you're recruiting him?"

Leon simply replied, “No.” His tone indicated that he wasn’t of a mind to elaborate, so Elise just nodded, but she kept her hand entwined with his—a clear show of support that had him squeezing her hand back in appreciation.

Isabella glared at Leon, only turning away from him when Alfonso finally managed to suck in a deep enough breath to stop laughing.

“Leon has done nothing wrong,” Alfonso said, punctuating his statement with a few last low chuckles. “The gods have taken their price of blood, and the traitor still lives. The gods have acted through Leon, thusly saving the man from certain death.”

“The gods have nothing to do with this,” Isabella retorted furiously, and Leon started to feel more than a little awkward about the whole thing. “This was to be an execution, we can’t simply let a traitor-turned-bandit walk free just because of some archaic rules that priests two thousand years ago made up!”

Alfonso’s expression hardened, and he turned from gleefully watching the arena to stare at Isabella. “Mocking our oldest and most sacred traditions is unbecoming,” he growled. “But we can save our words on that for later. Regardless, the rules are clear. The beasts are dead. The traitor is alive. Santiago will walk free. Leon has done nothing wrong.”

The tension between the two pentarchs grew more intense, but after Isabella glanced around at the arena and saw that every eye in the stands was watching the two bicker, she held her tongue and rose from her seat. She walked to the edge of the box and began speaking, though Leon couldn’t follow what she was saying. So, instead, he threw a few apologetic looks in Cristina and Emilie’s directions since both were staring at him with similar looks of resignation and reproachment.

When Isabella finished speaking, the entire arena practically exploded with how loudly the crowd cheered. Their excitement shook the massive structure harder than even the dragon turtle had, and Leon watched as Santiago reeled from whatever had been announced. The silver-eyed bandit staggered backward, a look of utter disbelief on his face.

It was only when he turned around and saw the corpses of his fellows that he collapsed to his hands and knees. Several Cortuban guards then walked out of the nearest gate and pulled the man to his feet. They didn’t clap him in irons, but they did rather forcefully escort him off the sands, allowing him only one last glance toward the Royal box—to *Leon*, and give him a look of mixed hatred and gratitude.

Leon nodded in recognition, but he wasn’t going to go looking for the bandit. Santiago had impressed him once again with his obvious, if rather subdued, concern for his people. Leon hadn’t saved the man for any other reason. But he had a feeling that even though he wasn’t going to go and recruit Santiago, that they would meet again in the future. And when they did, maybe things would be different. Maybe Santiago would be more willing to trust him, or maybe Leon would be more willing to trust Santiago.

He couldn’t predict the future. But as those in the Royal box began to rise and file back into the main room to continue their party, Leon stayed for just a few extra moments, his eyes drifting down to the arena’s sands. Santiago, he could forget about for now. But the blood magic he’d detected, he had to investigate.

Chapter 646: Infiltrating the Cortuban Arena

There was some fallout from Leon's killing of the dragon turtle, but it was brief. Isabella wanted nothing to do with him, and so avoided him for the rest of the day. Cristina did likewise, though at least came by and exchanged a few words with him—enough for him to understand that she was following Isabella's lead and didn't mean anything personal by it.

The more important reactions were from Alfonso, Emilie, and Leon's retinue. Anshu was delighted that Leon had rescued Santiago, but the others were more apprehensive, thinking that he'd changed his mind about recruiting the bandit. Emilie was more upset, and she didn't stop lecturing Leon about his responsibilities as a de facto representative of Heaven's Eye until Alfonso himself joined them and once more argued on Leon's behalf—Leon hadn't done anything wrong and had even honored their gods. The reaction of the King and the delight of the crowd ensured that, after a couple of hours, no one seemed to care anymore about what Leon had done. In fact, he thought he detected a few rather admiring and respectful looks from many of the Cortubans in Alfonso and Isabella's entourages.

His retinue was a little more subdued, but he was able to calm their worries with a reaffirmation that he wasn't going to try and recruit Santiago. The man himself had probably been thrown out onto the street already, Leon had no idea where to even find him. He was tempted to ask Alfonso about him, but in the interest of remaining detached, and letting this simply be an act of mercy and no more, Leon refrained from looking into the man any further.

Rather, he let his attention fall back to the arena itself, and the blood magic he'd sensed during each match. He'd watched as a great many people and beasts were slaughtered today, but the blood magic he'd sensed had still been so incredibly subtle that it took Maia quite a bit of dedicated investigation to see what he had.

He wanted to know what was going on. That blood magic had to be doing something, funneling power *somewhere*.

'*Are they demon worshippers?*' Leon wondered as his eyes found a brilliantly colored mural that spanned nearly the entirety of the wall opposite the entrances to the Royal box. It depicted figures that he could only surmise were the Cortuban gods, and the fights this day were dedicated to them.

Leon did his best not to jump to any conclusions. Demons made great use of blood magic, but it was hardly solely their purview—Heaven's Eye and just about everyone else on the plane used blood magic to verify identities, as far as he was aware, and he, himself, had used blood magic when awakening his Inherited Bloodline.

After mulling the problem over and consulting with Nestor a little more, though, Leon's thoughts couldn't help but turn to more sinister sources of that magic. He was certain that the blood spilled in the arena had been used to channel magic power somewhere, for some purpose, and he found himself less and less able to relax without knowing exactly what that purpose was for.

So, after making a few discreet inquiries with Elise and Emilie to figure out when the arena might empty, he decided to infiltrate the place later and see what he could see.

Until then, though, he had to mingle with the higher-ups in the Cortuban Alliance. He was impatient and extraordinarily curious, but the task in front of him had to come first.

Once back in the Heaven's Eye guest house, Leon let his family and retinue in on his plans. He had to explain quite a bit, but once he did, all plans for heading out into the city for recreation were put on hold, to the mild consternation of many of Leon's people. Elise, especially, had been looking forward to heading out into the city with Leon, Maia, Valeria, and all of Cristina's knights, but she understood why Leon wanted to look into this.

She only extracted from him a promise not to go too far, in the broadest sense she could. She wanted him back home by morning. Leon, understanding that with his entire retinue and Maia accompanying him, she would be left alone, readily made that promise.

It was already fairly late in the afternoon, and Leon wanted to infiltrate the arena around midnight, so they had some planning and resting to do before then. And Leon came up with a plan that he hoped would work, one that even Elise could participate in, helping her to not feel quite so alone there in the guest house, doing nothing more than waiting for her family to return...

—

The walls of the arena imposed upon the district around it. It was a massive building, with its outer walls rising more than ten stories, whereas there wasn't a building around it for more than half a mile that was taller than four. Its red brick façade, interspersed with rows of slightly smaller pink bricks, gave off a feeling of extreme affluence, which was only strengthened by the aura of magic that Leon could sense flowing through every brick—the entire arena had been infused with so much magic that it was comparable to the city's citadel, and even to the Bull's Horns.

This, of course, only raised Leon's expectations of what he might find. He hadn't sensed even an iota of demonic magic when in the arena, but such a place like this couldn't possibly be so well enchanted just to host a few games. No, there was something else here, he could feel that in his bones.

The beginning of his plan was simple: he led his entourage out to a nearby club, looking for all the world like he, his friends, and his family were only going on to experience the joys of Andalusian night life. Elise was there with him, as was Anzu, the albino griffin seeming to pick up on the undercurrent of anxiety within Leon and keeping himself fairly low and as inconspicuous as he could possibly be.

Fortunately, they left the guest house late enough that there weren't many people out on the streets until they reached their destination: a club that Elise had managed to learn about from some of the local Heaven's Eye bureaucrats that was entirely open-air. It was essentially four walls around a huge square, with several shallow marble terraces closer to the walls where the more club's more important visitors could spend their time, while the center of the club was one large dance floor surrounded by a bar. Multicolored magical lights flashed above the dance floor, while the rest of the club was lit only by the moon and the stars, and at one end of the club was a long, narrow stage, upon which was located a large band playing some high tempo up-beat tune that had everyone on the dance floor writhing in what Leon supposed was dancing if he squinted at it hard enough.

Leon curled his lips in distaste at the atmosphere, and even more so at the stench of sweat and extremely overpriced alcohol, but he banished the look after a moment and entered the club with his people—the bouncers at the door not even daring to stop them, especially with how finely they were dressed, how obviously powerful they were, and particularly when they noticed that Elise's clothes had

been prominently embroidered in many places with the sigil of Heaven's Eye. With all of that, not even Anzu was denied entry.

As soon as they walked in, Leon had his retinue find a place to post up, sending Anzu with them. He then consented to Elise dragging him over to the dance floor for a few songs before his investigation could begin, extracting at least a little bit of fun here while she could. Valeria and Maia both snuck in for a dance, too, though Leon could tell their enthusiasm was a little more forced; both wanted the experience, but this was hardly the place any of them would've chosen to spend their time otherwise.

Then, Elise returned to Leon's retinue and curled up with Anzu on a large sofa. Leon's retinue would stay here, only a few blocks away from the arena that dominated the horizon, both protecting Elise and lending her authority by mere virtue of having an entourage. Here, Elise would be able to escape at a moment's notice on the back of Anzu, while Leon's retinue would only be a couple of minutes away if he needed them for anything.

And with that, safe in the knowledge that he had back-up and that Elise was neither being left behind nor being put in danger, Leon, Valeria, and Maia launched into their part of the plan—they made no attempts to hide their affection, kissing and grinding against each other on the dance floor for a minute or two, in front of everyone. And they attracted quite a few looks, given their entrance, looks, power, and sheer audacity. But once those couple of minutes were over, Valeria took one of Leon's hand and began dragging him off the dance floor, Leon's other hand dragging Maia in turn, looking for all the world like they were just going off to the bathroom or some other quiet dark corner where they could hook up.

As soon as they were out of the limelight, though, all three seemingly vanished into thin air, with Leon and Maia's rings flashing with emerald light, and the sapphire amulet around Valeria's neck glowing bright blue. Concurrently, their attire changed from something more appropriate for going out partying to all-black ensembles complete with face-obscuring masks, just in case their invisibility failed them. Valeria's only covered her lower face, but since they had magic senses, Leon and Maia's masks could cover their entire faces if so needed, though they kept their eyes unobscured for the moment.

Without further ado, the three quickly leaped over the walls of the club and began running for the arena. They were still hand-in-hand to prevent themselves from losing the others, which made things a little more awkward and slowed them down, but in Leon's mind, that was a small price to pay for stealth.

They made their way through the streets as swiftly as they were able, arriving at the streets directly adjacent to the arena in only a matter of a minute or two. From there, they had to stop and search for a way in, for while the arena didn't seem to have much active security, the building itself had been completely secured—all the doors and windows were closed and magically locked, as they realized to their dismay after making one full circuit of the arena's outer wall.

But after a moment, Leon just sighed and pulled his lovers into the nearest ally and deactivated his invisibility. They followed suit a moment later, and the three were left huddled together as inconspicuously as possible. Fortunately, the area around the arena was quite deserted at this time of night.

“Get to the roof,” Leon murmured, and neither Maia nor Valeria needed much more than that. In a flash of light, both were clad in their flight suits, and they swiftly shot into the air, leaving nothing more than a cloud of dust for Leon to squint through. He made good use of the cover, though, and pulled his clothing into his soul realm and transformed into his Thunderbird form. He was glad it was dark and that his feathers were primarily a relatively dark shade of brown, because otherwise, he wouldn’t be doing this at all.

He comforted himself with the idea that it was far less risky than blasting one of the arena’s doors off its hinges or trying to undo their defensive enchantments from the outside, but he still took great care to examine his surroundings with his magic senses for anyone who might notice him before taking off. He flew with all due haste, and as far as he was aware, went right over the arena’s wall completely undetected, with Valeria and Maia just behind him.

The three landed on some of the arena’s thick cloth covers that shielded those in the stands from the hot sun, which, while retracted, were still far enough away from the outer wall that anyone who might’ve wanted to see them would either have to actively use magic senses or get to a high vantage point. Given that the arena was the tallest structure in the district, Leon was confident that they couldn’t be seen.

Unfortunately, now that he was past the outer wall, he was able to see that the arena wasn’t relying entirely upon passive defenses, for there were a few rather bored and lazy-looking guards patrolling through the stands.

Leon slid back into his human form and dressed himself in his feature-obscuring outfit. Valeria gave him a pouting look as his body was covered, eliciting a smirk and a wink from him, and then the two were back to all-business. A few minutes later, the three were fading back into invisibility, but while they were waiting for their various accessories of invisibility to reset, Leon inspected the arena from above. He bathed the place in his magic senses, searching for any sign of the power that he’d sensed during the fights.

He wasn’t able to sense so much as a spark of magic power down on the sandy arena floor, but he wasn’t deterred.

The patrols through the stands lasted just long enough for Leon to start contemplating knocking the guards unconscious, but then the guards proceeded into the arena itself, and Leon and the ladies were safe to drop down into the stands, which they quickly did. Then, with their senses tuned as finely as they could for any alarms, the three made their way down into the sands.

[Well, Nestor?] Leon asked as they walked out into the middle of the arena, giving the dead man as much ground to inspect as was feasible.

[I can’t sense anything of interest,] Nestor replied, and Leon felt the man’s focus intensify.

“They clean up quickly around here,” Valeria quietly observed, her voice seeming to come out of thin air not too far away from Leon.

“For an earth mage, I’d bet sand is quite easy to clean,” Leon replied. “But keep your eyes open. Whatever blood magic was at work here is probably still here. I can’t imagine something like that

happening under the eyes of the local Royalty without *someone* knowing and giving their assent. I'd even say it's probably a part of the arena."

[Below us, then?] Maia wondered.

"I was thinking the same thing," Leon said as he crouched down and ran his invisible fingers through the sand. He couldn't sense anything more than the usual ambient magic, but as his fingers brushed against the stone floor only a couple inches below the sand, his invisibility was instantly disrupted, and his form resolved into the air.

Leon froze for just a moment in surprise, and then without a word, he began sprinting for the stands and the nearest alcove to dive into. Valeria and Maia followed closely behind, but neither of them were forced back into visibility.

When they finally found some cover in a doorway in the stands, Leon crouched down and let his dark clothing render him almost as invisible as he just was against the dark building.

"There's definitely something going on, here," he whispered as he heard and almost felt Valeria and Maia crouching down beside him. "There's far more magic running through the floor of that arena than there should be..."

Leon's eyes turned toward where he could sense Maia was crouched, their connection drawing his eyes to her through the invisibility with ease.

"There's probably something powerful beneath the arena."

Nestor then added for Leon's benefit, [That would make sense. The less ground that the channeled power has to cover, the less power will be lost on the journey. And if the whole point of the blood magic present here is to channel power out of sacrificed mana, then they want every spark of magic power to flow to its destination as possible.]

Leon slightly nodded, and taking advantage of his ring's reset timer, he pushed a little deeper into the doorway and then slipped inside the arena, holding the door open for Valeria and Maia. If they were going to find anything, then it would be inside, not out in the sand. Once inside, they waited just another minute or so for Leon's ring to flash, and then he faded back into invisibility, letting the three continue to explore the arena with little worry.

What they found was largely disappointing. The interior of the arena was essentially just a series of large chambers and halls, most of which ensured that those who attended the arena's games didn't have to go far to reach their seat, and that the arena could be quickly emptied of all spectators. Along with a few larger areas where certain authorized vendors could set up shop, the arena was of an almost brutally simple design. There at least weren't many guards around for them to worry about, but that also came with the logical reason that there simply wasn't much around to be guarded. Leon guessed that the main reason the guards patrolled these bigger areas was to scare off potential vandals, for there seemed to not be too many other reasons save for the blood magic.

Despite the arena's size, it took Leon's small group only about half an hour to find something promising: a gate on the north side watched over by two rather inattentive guards that sealed off a set of stairs that led down below the arena's ground floor, and down below the arena was exactly where they wanted to

go. Unlike the walls or the floors, Leon could sense the magic flowing through this gate, and knew that he wasn't going to be able to get it open without immediately ruining any attempts to remain stealthy.

Interestingly, on the other side of the gate was a large shrine built into the wall. It wasn't that complex, but Leon counted more than a dozen idols decorating the mural just above it, and he guessed that these represented the Cortuban gods. He wasn't nearly familiar enough with any to guess their identities, given the abstracted style that they were depicted in, but he found it quite interesting that their gods were placed here, right next to the gate.

[How should we play this?] Maia asked him.

Leon sighed. If they couldn't do this stealthily, then he was going to order them to retreat, perhaps to come back later when they were a little more prepared. But this scouting mission wasn't over, yet—there was a slight possibility that the guards had the key to open the gate. If they subdued the guards and searched them, they might be able to get the gate open.

"Take out the guards quickly and nonlethally, if any alarms go off then we get out of here as quickly as possible," Leon whispered just loud enough for both ladies to hear, and they moved in tandem. Only seconds later, one of the guards was lifted bodily off his feet and slammed against the wall behind him, with Maia appearing barely a moment later, holding him by his neck as watery tendrils snaked out from beneath her sleeve to wrap themselves around the hapless guard and immobilize him completely. At only the third-tier, the guard was unable to do anything at all within Maia's grasp, not even scream in shock and panic.

At the same time, Valeria appeared as the butt of her short glaive slammed into the other guard's solar plexus, driving all the air out of his lungs and lifting him a foot off his feet. The guard hit the ground hard, gasping for breath. In an instant, Leon appeared above him and he gave the second-tier guard a powerful, but nonlethal, blast of lightning, knocking him out for hours at least.

"Now," he muttered as Maia slammed the final guard face down into the floor, "tell me how this door opens, and we'll let you go." Just before making his move, Leon had pulled his mask up to hide his notably golden eyes, but even still, the guard wasn't able to lift his head enough to look Leon in the eye anyway.

After this display of power, the guard didn't even resist slightly. He told Leon that the gate only blocked access to the gladiator waiting rooms, and when pressed, also revealed another, larger, entrance a block or two to the north where the beasts used in the games were escorted in and out.

"Can you open these doors?" Leon asked, letting his killing intent spill forth, causing the floor to grow cold and the guard to be pressed into the floor by the pressure of his aura as well as Maia's water magic.

"Right... pocket..." the guard croaked, and a second later, one of Maia's water tentacles rose from his body, a key submerged within. The tentacle dropped the key into Leon's hand, and he turned and opened the door, only taking as much time as he needed to

Chapter 647: Channeler

The stairway that led down into the arena's basement was extremely simple, with no adornments or anything else of the sort. The large room that it opened into, however, was the exact opposite, with the

red brick walls elaborately painted with icons of the Cortuban gods, small alcoves placed around the large room with golden statues, and at least a hundred plush seats—presumably for the gladiators to rest in before and after their fights.

Branching out to the north and south were huge tunnels that followed the curve of the arena's outer wall, and as Leon sent his magic senses rolling through them, he saw that they were the backbone of a large tunnel network that connected this waiting room with several other, smaller waiting rooms, bare brick chambers filled with either nothing or a few empty cages of various size, and the tunnels that led to the locked gates that opened directly onto the sands of the arena. He also saw not too far away another huge tunnel that led further west—the entrance through which the beasts were brought through, he assumed. What he didn't see were any additional guards or overnight staff working down below the arena, which he found rather curious, but he supposed the place didn't exactly look like it needed that much seeing to, being clean and with its entrances already guarded.

"Leave the guards here," Leon ordered, and Valeria and Maia rather unceremoniously dropped the guards into armchairs in the corner of the dark room. Leon estimated that they would be out of commission for several hours at least, but someone else might stumble upon them, or their absence might be noticed, so he led Valeria and Maia further into the underground tunnels, wasting no time as they delved deeper into the arena in search of its secrets.

There weren't many doors blocking his magic senses, so Leon had already scoured the tunnels and rooms that he could see for any clues to the blood magic he found, finding nothing of note. However, here and there was a door that did block his magic senses, and he led his small group toward the nearest of these doors, which branched off from the main tunnel rather than from any of the waiting or holding rooms.

To his surprise and muted disappointment, he found that the door was unlocked and easily opened. Within, he found nothing but cleaning supplies.

With a sigh, he shut the door and said, "I think we're going to find a lot of storage closets down here..."

"Then where to now?" Valeria asked. "I don't think we're going to find a secret blood magic enchantment array hidden among mops and brooms."

Leon nodded his head, but when he glanced around with his magic senses, he noticed that nearly all the rest of the doors he couldn't see through were identical to this one: fairly small, innocuous, and branching off the main tunnels. They all looked like more storage closets, and while he didn't discount the possibility that what he was looking for might be found behind one, he decided to give them a pass for the moment.

Widening the scope of his search, after a few seconds, something caught his eye: a room filled with small idols and altars—what clearly was a small temple. Given how often King Alfonso had repeated his belief that every drop of blood spilled in the arena was a sacrifice to his people's gods, Leon figured whatever was going on might be connected with that small temple.

"This way..." Leon said, explaining his reasoning as he led the other two onward. He kept his eyes open for any traps or alarms that he might notice, but, to his continued bafflement, after making it past those

couple of guards and the locked gate, the arena was essentially undefended. He was grateful for the lack of exertion, but his lack of knowledge of what was going on here had him on edge.

Fortunately, they reached the temple without a single sign that anything was wrong. No tripped alarms, no unusual magic flowing through the walls or tunnels, and certainly no sign of blood or demonic magic.

[Am I missing anything?] Leon asked his soul realm's residents.

[Nothing that I can sense,] Nestor responded.

[There's fuck all there,] Xaphan added.

Leon's remained uneasy and cautiously entered the temple. It wasn't that large, but it was the most opulently appointed room that Leon had seen in the arena aside from the Royal box. A thick blood-red rug covered most of the hardwood floor, and about fifty kneeling pillows were arranged in several lines before the central altar. The altars themselves looked to be made of ivory and maple wood, mostly covered by sheets of fine white linen, with idols of the gods reverently placed upon them, each idol roughly one-quarter to one-third the size of a full grown man.

Each idol was different, too, with one standing like he was lording over all he surveyed, his head turned slightly upward to look down his nose properly, a furled scroll in his left hand; the base of his idol was inscribed with the name 'Cortell'. Another depicted a man dressed in ragged hides riding a lion, with the name 'Cormellian' inscribed upon the base of his idol. A third was adorned in silver armor, a spear clutched in his right hand; 'Cortusis' was his name.

Leon recognized each of those three, but the two altars that stood out the most to him were the largest one opposite the door, and the smallest one tucked away in the corner. The former showed a man with a great smile and his arms spread in welcome, identified as Cortubus. The latter showed an indistinct person shrouded by a great cloak, their face obscured by the darkness of their hood—Cordancis was inscribed upon the base of their idol. 'Greatest Life' and 'Greatest Death', Leon remembered their titles were.

The altars of Cortubus and Cordancis were his two most attractive options, but Leon first went over to Cortusis, the Fierce God, in whose name the first fights were fought. The altar was luxurious, the idol rendered extraordinarily lifelike, but other than that, Leon couldn't sense a thing about it that he found suspicious. He moved on to Cormellian, the Wild God, in whose name the gladiators fought the captured wild beasts, but again, he found nothing. Finally, he came to the altar of Cortell, the Commanding God, who observed all the fights and granted his aid to whomever pleased him, but for a third time, his search was fruitless.

There were several other altars in the room aside from Greatest Life and Greatest Death, but since Alfonso hadn't told him anything about those gods, Leon ignored them for the moment, moving instead to Cordancis, Greatest Death.

As with all the others, Cordancis' altar was beautiful and clearly crafted with great reverence, but Leon found it rather telling that their altar was the smallest and placed so out of focus as to be rather conspicuous to an outsider like him. Though, he supposed he understood—death was not a thing that most people enjoyed thinking about, and so the relative marginalization of a death god was only to be expected. Still, he found nothing about that altar that spoke of demonic magic.

He sighed as he stepped away from that altar and began to take a few steps toward the altar of Greatest Life, Cortubus, now on to his last suspicion. If nothing came of this, then he supposed he'd start entertaining the idea of just leaving. This wasn't his problem, he was making this investigation entirely out of curiosity. If the Cortubans were making fanatical blood sacrifices to their gods with the full consent of their people, then Leon had to ask himself how much of that he cared to interfere with, even with his antipathy toward blood sacrifice.

These musings vanished from his mind as he stepped up to Cortubus' altar and focused his magic senses upon the idol. Almost immediately, he sensed a hint of magic power flowing through the idol, unlike all the others, and his eyes went wide with excitement.

"I think this might be something," Leon murmured, just barely holding himself back from reaching out to touch the idol. Instead, he bathed the entire altar in his magic senses, looking it over from top to bottom. And he sensed a thin strand of magic power, almost like fishing twine tying the idol to the altar, twine so fine that it was nearly imperceptible. If he weren't an eighth-tier mage and relatively skilled in the art of enchanting, he didn't think he would've been able to sense it otherwise.

But as he examined it, he found that he had to alter his initial response—it wasn't like fishing twine, it was like the string on an instrument...

[Hey, there's a—] Nestor began, but Leon cut him off.

[I see it. There's an ancient rune here...]

Leon stood up straight and stared at the idol.

'What's an ancient rune doing here?' he wondered. As far as he was aware, the use of ancient runes had died out on Aeterna long ago, in favor of the far more versatile modern runes. And yet, here he found a string of magic power that was clear evidence of an ancient rune. And he just had to pluck at that string to see what it did...

[Can you tell what it does?] Leon asked Nestor, not wanting to do something quite so foolish as to activate an unknown ancient rune.

[I'm afraid not,] Nestor replied. [My magic senses in my current state aren't fine enough to immediately—]

[It's a variation of the 'open' rune,] Xaphan interjected. [My guess is that it's essentially a door handle.]

Leon's eyes went wide, and once again, he had to fight his immediate impulse to activate it. He didn't know what it might open or what else he might trip. He was still someplace he wasn't technically supposed to be, probing into secrets that could have deep repercussions for the Cortuban Alliance. Blindly charging into wherever this might lead could only end badly for him; he needed to use more caution.

"Help me out, here," Leon said aloud for everyone to hear. "This altar is concealing something, and I need to make sure it hasn't been warded."

"I can't sense anything coming from it..." Valeria stated as she walked over.

"It's incredibly faint, but it's there..." Leon explained.

“There aren’t any runes inscribed upon the altar...” Valeria said as she examined the object in question from every possible angle.

[Nothing in the walls, either,] Maia added as she held her hand out to only an inch or so from the bricks behind the altar.

[It seems safe to me,] Xaphan whispered, his tone hesitant enough to bring a scowl to Leon’s face.

[It *is* safe,] Nestor asserted with significantly more confidence.

[Are you sure?] Leon asked, even though his own senses were telling him the same thing.

[It’s defense through discretion,] Nestor explained. [There aren’t any more significant defenses because they would only give away the presence of that rune. It’s meant to be subtle and unnoticeable, not defended like a vault.]

[I’d imagine that anything here would be defended like a vault,] Leon said, but despite that, he reached out with his magic power and plucked the string, placing his trust in those with greater experience.

Almost immediately, the idol of Cortubus glowed like a star, and then the altar began to slide backwards, vanishing into the wall as if the wall itself were nothing more than an illusion. The bricks that were beneath the altar then rippled like they were liquid, and then pulled back like they were an organic membrane to reveal a long and deep set of stairs.

Leon made a noise of disgust, but didn’t let his attention slip for a second. His magic senses were kept projected to monitor any potential changes in the flow of magic around them, while simultaneously being sent in as subtle a wave as he could manage down the stairs.

The stairs went deep, descending hundreds of feet below the arena—directly below the sands, if Leon’s sense of spatial awareness wasn’t wrong—before his magic senses were scattered by defensive wards.

“It’s deep,” Leon stated with immense trepidation, remembering the last couple of times he’d descended that deep beneath the earth. “There’re also more active defenses down there; my magic senses were scattered.”

“Are we going down there?” Valeria asked, her voice dripping with understandable hesitance.

“I won’t force you, but I am,” Leon replied, not wanting to in the slightest but also knowing that his curiosity would never allow him to turn away at this point. “At the first sign of trouble, though, I’ll be turning around and getting the hells out of here...”

Valeria took a deep breath and then nodded. Maia, on the other hand, had gone somewhat pale, but she gave Leon a nod of solidarity—she would go with them, too.

With as much determination as he could muster, Leon began to slowly descend the stairs while keeping an eye on the opening above, wanting to ensure that it didn’t close behind them. The staircase was wide enough that the three could walk side-by-side, but without even a single word, they staggered themselves out, heading down with several steps between each. Leon kept his eyes open for anything out of the ordinary, any signs of defensive wards, any sign that the ambient magic was being disturbed by the hand of man. But he descended several hundred steps into the dark tunnel and past the anti-magic sense ward before he noticed anything.

The staircase was bare stone, without even a light source, which he found odd, but which also made it almost obvious when they encountered the first active defense: an alarm subtly painted onto the ceiling. If they passed beneath it without noticing it—which would've been easy in the dark if Leon hadn't been paying attention—then *someone* would've been alerted. As it was, Leon was easily able to see, parse, and disable the enchantment, allowing them to proceed unimpeded and undetected.

But after that, they encountered more and more defenses, from small earth runes that would cause them to be impaled upon spikes if activated, to water traps designed to flood the stairs, to additional alarms. Fire, cages of light, walls of stone, it didn't matter, Leon found them all and disabled them. They were painted onto or carved into the bare stone, leading Leon to almost scoff in derision. Some of them were cleverly placed, hidden within larger enchantments, or using larger enchantments to draw the eye away from the *real* ward, but Leon still found them all and disabled them. If anything, he almost found it patronizingly easy. If there had been light sources or if the stairs had been more thoroughly imbued with standard comfort enchantments, then it might've been harder; the magical disturbances that those enchantments would've created might've obscured the wards better than the darkness did.

Still, they were complex enough enchantments that their progress was rather slow, and Leon guessed that if he didn't have Nestor to consult, their progress would've either been agonizingly slow, or it would've arrested entirely. As it was, he was just happy that he didn't need Nestor's assistance too often to progress.

Soon enough, though, Leon and his companions reached the end of the stairs about a thousand feet beneath the ground by his estimation. They were confronted with a short landing and a door, though this one was more ceremonial than anything, being made of gilded wood and lacking even a hint of magic within it. It didn't have a conventional lock, as far as Leon could tell. But when he scanned the door, he almost reeled backward into Valeria, for he could sense a tremendous amount of demonic magic on the other side of the door.

He told the other two what he could sense, and all three prepared themselves for battle, just in case. Then, Leon slowly pressed against the door, quietly pushing it open.

They were immediately confronted with an intense dark red glow and a bare circular chamber beyond the door. The chamber had been terraced further down like seats in a theater, and down in the center of the chamber, at the bottom of the terraces, was dark red demonfire burning like a bonfire.

[Leon...] Xaphan muttered. [I think... I recognize this power...]

Leon froze as he responded, [Should I continue?]

He waited several long seconds before Xaphan hesitantly said, [Yes...]

Leon cautiously slipped into the chamber and recognized more details. The ceiling was a shallow dome and was covered in long vein-like markings that extended down to the walls, then the floor, and then down into the terraced pit. Leon guessed they were channels for the magic power from the arena above would flow, feeding whatever was in the demonfire. He couldn't see any runes, but he could sense several more strings of magic power, indicating the presence of additional ancient runes.

These runes, Leon didn't think he wanted to mess with.

Edging forward, Leon slid to the edge of the top terrace and looked down into the pit. He wanted to get a better look at the demonfire, and what he saw down there had him grimacing in empathy and disgust.

There was a human figure within the demonfire, lying down on the bare stone of the pit floor, secured in a spreadeagle pose by great steel chains attached at their wrists, elbows, ankles, knees, waist, and neck. They were so thin and so obscured by demonfire that Leon couldn't tell if they were male or female, but he could at least tell that they weren't an actual fire demon, for their flesh wasn't the same glittering obsidian as Xaphan's was.

[A channeler...] Xaphan murmured in concern. A moment later, as if sensing Leon's unspoken question, Xaphan explained, [Like a more extreme version of a vampire, but this human's entire existence is to be hollowed out and act as one end of a channel that leads directly back to their contracted demon. They act like a siphon, absorbing and channeling every tiny speck of magic power that they're given to their master. This becomes their only remaining purpose in life, and the harm that being so used wreaks upon their body cannot be understated.]

Leon was about to express his disgust, but then the figure within the fire moved, and he stopped. Their head turned slowly in his direction, and while he couldn't see the specifics of their features through the obscuring fire, he could see their mouth opening wider and wider...

And then they began to scream, a discordant and unspeakably unsettling wail that shook the chamber itself and pierced all of their ears like needles.

Without so much as a word, Leon, Valeria, and Maia, acting in sync, turned around and ran for the door and the stairs as fast as their legs could carry them, even as the chamber around them shook like a powerful earthquake had hit Andalus. The door snapped off its hinges and cracks opened on the walls of the staircase, and Leon only had one thought in his head: they had to get out of there as swiftly as humanly possible.

Chapter 648: Rapid Retreat

The arena around them shook like there was some titanic being shaking their toy. Given what they had discovered below the arena, Leon thought that that might not be the least appropriate comparison, and as the inhuman screech of the burning figure below them echoed through the entire building, he redoubled his efforts to get the hells out.

He, Maia, and Valeria fled from the underground chamber with all due haste, knowing that not only was this burning figure an extreme danger to themselves, but would also alert others to their presence. Already, Leon could hear the rumbling from the burning figure's exertion of power setting off alarms all over the arena above them.

"Get to the sand!" Leon shouted as they emerged into the temple. Fortunately, it didn't seem like there were any guards they'd missed in the building that might've been able to respond to this event, but he didn't take that for granted. "Go invisible!" he ordered as he kicked the temple door open.

He, Valeria, and Maia grasped each other's hands so as to not lose each other and quickly faded from view as their respective invisibility accessories activated, and from there, they began running for the stairs. They passed the stirring guards they'd knocked out earlier as the arena shook again with another deafening screech of the burning figure, though Leon took some comfort in the fact that it was a little

more muffled than it was before. What wasn't muffled were the shrill alarms echoing throughout the building, which he guessed would've been beyond deafening if any mortal had been around to hear them.

They barreled up the final set of stairs and through the unlocked gate. Leon could hear some confused screaming from outside in nearby buildings, but more importantly, he could now hear the approach of *many* hurried footsteps, all of which sounded like they were in lockstep, implying local military forces.

Leon urged the other two onward, finally bursting out into the arena stands. Leon had told them to get to the sand, but this was far enough as far as he was concerned. But this was where he faced his first real problem, for they had flown in, and with the waves of magic senses he could feel hitting the arena with every shudder and scream from the burning figure, they weren't going to be able to fly out, again. They'd have to turn off their invisibility at least for a few minutes if they were to try, and that would only get them seen.

But they had other solutions. Leon pulled Valeria and Maia away from the sands, whispering, "We'll have to climb; flying is our last resort."

"Got it," Valeria replied, and Maia squeezed his hand in agreement.

The stands went quite high, certainly high enough for Leon and Maia to jump up to the roof if they needed to. Valeria was more of a gamble, but at the fifth-tier, Leon didn't think she had much to worry about.

They reached the top of the stands and jumped in unison, reaching the roof with ease, and even more fortunately, with their invisibility still intact. From there, Leon was able to see with his own eyes what his ears and magic senses had already told him: the arena was already, only a couple of minutes after they found the burning figure beneath the arena's temple, nearly surrounded by Cortuban soldiers.

The soldiers were about what Leon would've expected from the Bull Kingdom in terms of quality. Standardized gear centering around mail and cloth armor, simple open-faced helmets, the same small shields that Santiago's bandits had used, and spears as a primary weapon, with many of the stronger mages having swords at their waists. In the distance, though, Leon could see that many more opulently-armored mages were on the move, and he could even see Alfonso himself already riding out of the central citadel on the back of a huge black wolf with a band of several dozen powerful horsemen at his back.

More notably, however, was that Leon's retinue had left the club and rushed over to the arena and were even helping the Cortuban soldiers lock the place down, though their eyes were wide and searching, clearly looking for his group.

"Let's go!" Leon urgently whispered, and he pulled Valeria and Maia to the edge of the roof, where the three then dropped to the ground with the grace that came almost naturally to powerful mages. From there, it was easy enough to slip through one of the shrinking holes in the cordon before reinforcements from elsewhere in the city could show up, and finally reappeared in an alleyway not too far away from the rest of the retinue.

Anshu was the first to notice their reappearance, having been looking back just as they crept out of the alley.

“Leon!” Anshu called out, waving to them and calling attention to their presence. The rest of Leon’s retinue and many of the nearby Cortuban soldiers then took notice of him, too.

“Finally!” Alix shouted. She looked like there was more she wanted to say, but then the arena shook again, and the screech that Leon knew to be the burning figure came from the arena, now so muffled and distant that it was almost unrecognizable save for the power it projected, blanketing over the entirety of Andalus and much of its hinterland.

Whatever that thing was connected to, Leon could tell it was powerful if an immobile ‘channeler’ that was sealed far below the ground and behind many layers of stone and magic could so impact a city the size of Andalus.

Leon waved to his retinue, giving them an expression that clearly told them to save their questions for later as he, Valeria, and Maia walked over to join them.

“Elise and Anzu?” Leon asked as he joined the others.

“Should be on their way back to the Heaven’s Eye Tower,” Marcus responded.

“Neither wanted to leave,” Alix added. “We had to insist.”

Leon projected his magic senses again, and he saw Elise and Anzu flying much slower than he knew Anzu was capable of back toward the Tower, both casting frequent looks back toward the arena with worried expressions.

He sighed, unable to do much about that for the moment. Fortunately, additional soldiers arrived from other parts of the city, closing up the remaining holes in their cordon and letting Leon’s retinue fall back, their assistance no longer necessary now that the officials had arrived. With that done, Leon sent Alix running back to the Tower to make sure that Elise knew he, Valeria, and Maia were fine. Alix protested some, but Leon insisted, and she reluctantly followed his order.

Leon then pulled his retinue back a little farther, getting some more space between them and the Cortuban guards that were still massing, and once they’d gotten that distance, he started getting more insistent questioning looks from the rest of his retinue. However, when he glanced over his shoulder and found that King Alfonso was going to be riding close to where his retinue was, he just shook his head.

As he expected, the King’s route took him along the large boulevard adjacent to the smaller street that Leon and his retinue were at, and he almost felt it when Alfonso noticed his presence. The King’s eyes locked in his direction, seeing him with his magic senses despite the buildings in the way. He altered his course slightly and instead of riding directly to the arena, he soon rode up to Leon’s side.

“Leon Raime!” Alfonso called out, his grave expression lightening for just a moment. “What brings you out here?”

“I was partying with my friends when all of this—” Leon paused a moment just as another screech from the burning figure shook the arena and the surrounding buildings. “—happened. We didn’t know what was going on, but we figured we might be able to help out, in any event.”

Alfonso slowly nodded. “Your offer of assistance is appreciated, but this is an issue for us to deal with, first. Please, return to Heaven’s Eye. If we require the assistance of the Guild, we’ll put in a formal request.”

Leon smiled in acceptance, and he nodded to his retinue, leading them away from the arena and any issues that might come with his presence. But he kept his eyes on Alfonso, and he got the impression that Alfonso knew *exactly* what was going on below the arena, or at least had some inkling of it. All traces of the energetic and joyous King that Leon had seen earlier in the day was gone, leaving nothing but a hardened war leader confronted with a threat to his city. And as he led his retinue back to the Heaven’s Eye enclave, he noticed another group of soldiers leave the citadel on a course for the arena, this one much larger and led by an armed and armored Isabella.

In total, by the time they arrived at the arena, he estimated that there would be at least five thousand Cortuban soldiers locking the arena down.

Whether or not that would be enough to secure the place was another thing entirely. He didn’t know how much they knew about the burning figure, or about its connection to the arena. He didn’t know much about its power other than that it was connected to a tremendously powerful demon. As it was, he could only hope that he didn’t accidentally doom thousands of people to their deaths by waking that thing up.

And he figured it was time to get some answers, if only so that he could relax and not let his guilt eat away at him for hours until the arena stopped shaking.

[Xaphan,] Leon whispered to his demonic partner, [let’s talk.]

The demon of flame didn’t verbally respond, but Leon felt his attention.

[What in the hells did we just see down there?] he demanded to know.

[A channeler,] Xaphan repeated.

[Right, you said like a vampire?]

[Yes, but only on the surface. A vampire is human that has made blood sacrifices to their contracted demon by consuming blood, with their body eventually adapting to the consummation of blood until it requires blood for sustenance. The magic power locked in that blood would flow through the human to the demon, strengthening the demon. The demon would then reciprocate by providing some of its power to the human.

[A channeler is different in that it’s more of a sacrifice to the demon, acting as a permanent one-way channel to funnel power to the demon. They have no agency, no will. They’re little more than a shell, more an extension of the demon they’re connected to than an independent creature unto itself.]

[And it was the source of the blood magic I noticed earlier?] Leon asked.

[The likelihood that it wasn’t at least involved is so remote that it’s not worth considering,] Xaphan replied, confirming Leon’s own suspicions.

[So, that makes it clear that the power absorbed from the fights—the sacrifices that the Cortubans made to their gods—was instead channeled into this creature, and then to the demon at the other end?]

[Yes.]

Leon scowled. [I suppose, then, that that only leaves the question of who knows what. Actually, there's another question that leaves: you said you recognized that power.]

Leon didn't continue, but let the conversation fall into several seconds of awkward silence before Xaphan finally explained, [I believe that was a channeler left there by Amon. Or created at his behest. Something like that.]

[Amon? Your old enemy who competed with you for the title of Lord of Flame?]

[The very same.]

[The one who sent vampires to attack my home? The one who infiltrated the Bull Kingdom with his servants and—]

[Yes,] Xaphan interrupted. [Do you know any other Amons?]

[Not yet. I suppose it makes a degree of sense that we found some evidence of Amon's presence, though. I mean, even Jormun admitted to having some dealings with vampires of a fire demon...]

[When did he say that?] Xaphan demanded to know, to Leon's surprise, which lasted until he remembered that Xaphan had already left his soul realm by the time Jormun had revealed all of that.

Leon then explained to him the few stories that Jormun told him. He told Xaphan of the strange stone that Jormun had stolen that gave him a vision of eyes wreathed in flame, of how that fiery being entered his mind with ease and stole information it wanted, and of his dealings with the vampire who approached him years later.

[Would've been nice to pass this information along months ago,] Xaphan grumbled.

[I had a lot on my mind at the time,] Leon protested. [It just kind of slipped through the cracks.]

Xaphan grunted in apathetic acceptance, then quietly elucidated, [That stone that the pirate found was likely a ritual beacon. It carries traces of a demon's power and allows even those with no knowledge of demons to contact the demon connected to the beacon. It also allows the demon to connect with the one holding the beacon if they're not careful. Sounds like that's what happened with the garden snake.]

[Mm. But I'm surprised to find evidence of Amon all the way out here, I'd figured that with everything that Jormun told me, that we'd not be encountering any of his lackeys until we reached Imperial territory, at the very least.]

[Amon had vampires in the Bull Kingdom. Powerful vampires. Expect him to be everywhere.]

Leon subtly nodded. If he were to really think about it, though, he was surprised that Amon hadn't made any more moves against them since the attack on his villa years ago. He would've expected another powerful vampire or two to have come knocking at his door in the time since.

[Maybe... maybe things are going to be different...] Leon muttered half to himself. [If Amon knows that we're on the move, then maybe he'll start becoming more active again?]

[Possibly,] Xaphan responded. [If the pigeon is correct and he's replaced me as a Lord of Flame, then he also likely has many other things vying for his attention. Finding and killing me is undoubtedly a priority—I threaten him too much for him to ignore me—but being one of the most seven most powerful beings that rule over the Elemental Plane of Fire is not a position that leaves much free time to pursue personal vendettas.]

[That's something, I guess,] Leon said. [I think our days of not running into his vampires might be over, though...] He cast his gaze back and noticed that Isabella had reached the cordon, and with her reinforcement of the soldiers already locking the arena down, Alfonso was gearing up with a hundred of the most powerful mages there and clearly getting ready to storm the arena. Other groups of Cortuban warriors were doing likewise all around the arena.

'To be a fly on the wall when Alfonso finds the temple...' Leon thought to himself with more than a little regret. He dearly wished to know if the man's piety was true, or if he was a secret demon-worshipper.

If he were the former, then it would hardly change much. This whole event would only serve to expose a subversion of the Cortuban religion, and Alfonso would likely stop at nothing to stamp it out. If he were secretly worshipping Amon, though, then Leon might have more of a problem with him.

Of course, were this just a regular demon, then Leon might not even bother himself over it. But since this was Xaphan's avowed enemy, then he couldn't just turn a blind eye. If Alfonso were in league with Amon, then Leon would feel honor-bound to kill him.

He wasn't going to make any moves unless he knew for sure, though. He wasn't in the business of killing Kings unless he knew for sure that they were his enemies. Moreover, while he didn't think that he and Alfonso could be friends, he had a good impression of the man, and hoped that they wouldn't have to come to blows.

The arena shook again as Alfonso took the lead and stormed into the massive building. By Leon's estimation, with the number of Cortuban soldiers at his back and storming the other entrances, Alfonso would reach the temple in only a few minutes.

He slowed slightly as his attention focused upon the arena, desperately searching for any sign that might indicate Alfonso's allegiance one way or the other.

Unfortunately, he and his retinue reached the Heaven's Eye enclave before anything else of note happened. Leon had his retinue come to his guest house, however, and once there, he took a few minutes to reconnect with Elise, and then filled everyone in on all that he, Valeria, and Maia had discovered.

It was a long discussion, for while his retinue had known about Xaphan for some time, and were by and large accepting of the demon, Leon hadn't told any of them about Amon.

As Leon spoke, he noticed that at some point, the arena had stopped shaking, so he projected his magic senses once again as delicately as he could. He couldn't see within the arena, but he saw Alfonso meeting with Isabella out in the middle of the sands, the two speaking softly enough to each other that

if Leon wanted to know what they were saying, he'd have to strengthen his magic senses enough that they wouldn't remain undetected.

But Alfonso looked livid. He was controlling himself, but Leon could tell that the arena was being bathed in the King's killing intent. Isabella weathered it with what looked like no effort at all, but many of the other mages around were clearly struggling under the weight of their King's aura.

Leon wasn't sure how to take that anger. Was Alfonso furious that someone found the secret demon temple, or was he furious that his religion was being subverted? Leon had no answer, and so was forced to turn his attention back to his retinue.

At the very least, it seemed that whatever Amon's channeler had been doing was halted.

"... So," Leon said as he finished his explanation, his eyes flitting between his retainers, "do any of you have any questions?" He didn't look to any of his lovers, for he had no more secrets he kept from Elise, Maia, or Valeria. All three already knew of Amon, and the only new information he'd provided them was what Xaphan had only just provided to him, in turn.

"If I get this right," Alix spoke up, her eyes wide with realization, "those vampires that attacked your villa during the welcoming party, nearly killing us, were all sent by this Amon fucker?"

Leon nodded in confirmation.

"Fucking hells," Alix muttered, not saying anything more, but clearly clenching her teeth in fury.

The others in Leon's retinue didn't blink that much, either.

"After what we saw with Jormun, this isn't that surprising," Marcus drily stated.

"Just another enemy to kill," Alcander added, his voice dripping with what Leon thought to be an almost perverse degree of anticipation.

Anshu merely nodded, saying, "You expect me to kill your enemies, no matter what they may be. I expect the same from you."

Leon nodded again, tacitly accepting Anshu's promise and expectation.

Gaius remained quiet, though, and when Leon turned his eyes to him, the golden-haired nobleman stared back for several long seconds.

Eventually, he said, "This demon stuff really rubs me the wrong way..."

"You're not the only one," Leon responded.

"You have one inside of you," Gaius countered. "I think your judgment might be a bit impaired."

Gaius' voice had a few hints of hostility within them, and Leon fell silent for a moment.

"Let's talk more about this later," Leon eventually said. "Tomorrow. For now, let's all just get some rest, it's been a long day. Stay armored and keep your weapons in reach, just in case. If nothing happens by morning, then I think we can all relax. Until then, be ready to drop everything and fight."

Everyone nodded and began filing out of the room. Gaius paused a moment at the door, casting a look back at Leon, a frown gracing his handsome features for a moment; just long enough for Leon to know that their talk tomorrow was going to have to be a heavy priority.

But for now, he was tired, and he just wanted to go to sleep for a few hours. He also wanted to stay awake and stare at the arena, hoping that any information might be gleaned about this whole situation from the Heaven's Eye enclave, but in the end, Elise convinced him to get some rest. Here, they were under the protection of Heaven's Eye, and if Alfonso was his enemy, it would be difficult for either of them to strike at each other. Besides, she'd be able to get more information about what was going on in the morning.

With a sigh, Leon agreed, and he and his family settled in for the night.

Chapter 649: Skirting the Desert's Edge

When the morning after Leon's infiltration of the arena came, Elise left the guest house to hunt down any information of what had happened that she could find. Unfortunately, she wasn't able to find much, with the official statements from the two Royals in the city merely being that the situation was contained and that no one should worry. They were being incredibly hush-hush about the details, and Leon could understand that, but it also left him in the dark, without answers to many of the questions that seeing that channeler had left him with.

However, Leon noticed a huge increase in Cortuban patrols in the city following the previous night's excitement, and he chose to remain in the guest house for at least the remainder of the day. He took some comfort in the fact that it seemed like he, Valeria, and Maia all got away without being seen, for there weren't Cortuban authorities seeking to put them in chains, but just for his own peace of mind, he didn't want to leave the Heaven's Eye enclave until he absolutely had to.

Fortunately, that gave him plenty of time to spend with his lovers, and he made good use of it. He chatted with Elise, sparred with Valeria, and meditated with Maia, enjoying their company immensely. His own training was time-consuming enough that he felt like he didn't get enough of these moments, so he savored each and every second that he was with them.

But, of course, he had other business to attend to. After the information he'd passed along to everyone the night before, he knew that while most of his retinue was still behind him despite learning about Amon, Gaius was having some trouble with the information.

So, after dinner, Leon tracked his retainer down to have a chat about the issue, with it being hopefully easier to discuss now that Gaius had a whole night and most of a day to process the information.

—

"So," Leon said as he and Gaius took a seat in a small private meeting room in the guest house, "let's talk."

Gaius grimaced and remained quiet for a long moment, but Leon was determined to wait him out. As far as he was concerned, Gaius needed to give voice to his problems before Leon could start working with him to solve them.

Eventually, Gaius said with slow deliberation, “I... I don’t think that I have much to say... Not after having had some time to think.”

“‘Not much’ isn’t ‘nothing’,” Leon observed.

“No, it isn’t,” Gaius agreed. “When you first told us about your... *contract*... with this Xaphan, I have to admit that I considered abandoning you.”

Leon nodded in understanding, though he was a little disappointed. He’d told his retinue about Xaphan while they were still in the Bull Kingdom, and Gaius hadn’t even been his retainer for an entire month, yet.

Gaius continued, “I couldn’t help but think that I’d made a terrible mistake in signing on with you, knowing that you’re connected with a demon.” Leon noted his use of ‘connected to’, rather than ‘worship of’, and he started to relax, picking up on the fact that Gaius was, perhaps, not as hostile to his demonic partner as he’d feared. “But I suppose I can’t really say much, can I? I never knew you before you possessed that contract. I can’t say if it changed you or not. I don’t know you well enough to say if that demon has had a detrimental influence on you. I just... *don’t know*.”

Leon nodded again. “I can understand that,” he stated. Gaius was nervous because he didn’t know how to handle this, it was an unknown.

“I trust you, the you that’s here now, the one that’s contracted to that demon,” Gaius insisted. “I do. I wouldn’t have stayed with you after that particular revelation if I didn’t. If you say that you’ve got this in hand... then I think that I can accept that...”

“... But?”

“*But*... my entire life I’ve been taught to hate and despise those associated with demons. I have to admit that knowing everything that I do now makes me nervous. It’s one thing to know that the man I’m following is contracted with a demon. It’s another thing entirely to know that because of that contract, I now have to worry about vampires and their insanely powerful demonic Lord coming after us. I wish that you’d told us about this sooner.”

Leon grimaced. “I know, and I wish I did, too. It’s always better if allies understand the situation and its risks. Safer for us all. And for not telling you about Amon before now, I’m sorry. That was an oversight on my part, and I’ll do my best to ensure it doesn’t happen again.”

“Thanks,” Gaius responded. “Just hearing you say that means a lot.”

“And, hey,” Leon continued, “if you see me going off the deep end to all these demon shenanigans, I can trust that you’ll do something about it, right?”

“Of course,” Gaius replied with a smile. “Now, what say we get out of here and get some training done?”

“Sounds like a plan.”

—

Ten more days passed within the Cortuban Alliance. There weren’t any more big engagements like the games that Leon and the rest of the visiting Heaven’s Eye leadership had been invited to, and for that,

Leon was grateful. It gave him even more freedom to spend time with his lovers, and after everything calmed down after the events at the arena, he was able to relax enough to enjoy himself.

In the days following the events at the arena, Andalus went into a state of extremely heightened security. The guard patrols were tripled, and the arena was locked down, leading Leon to believe that Alfonso and Isabella *weren't* in on the demon worship going on under their noses. He wasn't sure what happened when Alfonso raided the arena since that was being kept well out of the public eye, and he didn't have the position or the level of trust to just ask. Still, it was enough to know that the King and Queen were reacting as Leon expected them to if they had been attacked, rather than if they were simply trying to keep a secret.

Still, this kept Alfonso busy, and with Isabella having a rather low opinion of him, that meant that no one in the Alliance came to bother Leon at all during these ten days. The next time he saw either Alfonso or Isabella was at a small party that Heaven's Eye threw the night before their convoy was set to leave, and even then, the Royals only stayed for a few minutes, just long enough to politely say their goodbyes in person.

But all of this was coinciding with a few rather curious events: some members of prominent merchant clans had been arrested, several high-ranking bureaucrats had been fired, and word was that the fourth of the Cortuban pentarchs was returning to Andalus from the east, where he and the other two pentarchs had been monitoring the war with Asturias. These details were spread out enough that it wasn't immediately apparent, but to Leon, who'd been paying very close attention to everything happening in Andalus during this week and half, it seemed that he'd started something within the Alliance that Alfonso and Isabella were determined to finish.

He considered himself fortunate that it didn't seem they suspected him of anything. Or, at least, they hadn't tried to get in contact with him, which he supposed didn't mean as much as he wanted it to. Regardless, it seemed to him that he was free and clear, no one the wiser that it was him and his retinue that had infiltrated the arena that night. He supposed if he were in Alfonso and Isabella's place, though, he might be a little more focused on the demon-worshippers than the people who broke in, too.

Leon had to admit as he climbed into his family's carriage that the stay in the Cortuban Alliance hadn't been at all what he'd been expecting. Some political dealings and heading out into Andalus for a while, sure, but dealing with bandits, the business with Santiago, and then finding that Amon had a presence in the Alliance's capital all practically came out of nowhere. The latter, especially, was something that had knocked him off-kilter a bit. What had been supposed to be just a simple, relatively risk-free recon mission had become something so much more, and Leon was enormously relieved that he, Maia, and Valeria had been able to get away.

Perhaps he might've been able to do something more concrete about the burning figure down below the arena, he couldn't say. He'd replayed that scene many times in his head in the week and half since, half-heartedly wishing that he'd done something before running away, even if all he did was throw a single lightning bolt. But there was no way to know if anything he could've done would've killed the channeler or done anything else of value, and his priority had been to ensure that he and his lovers escaped unharmed.

He didn't regret leaving so quickly, but he knew that Amon needed to be dealt with at some point, and he wouldn't be able to just run away every time he encountered the demon's acolytes. At the very least, Xaphan didn't seem that disturbed, and he all-but said that there would be better times to strike at his rival demon. This demon business in the Alliance was something he was content to let be, at least for now.

So, Leon put all of that out of his mind, for the time being. He'd act when he had more information, and right now, he just didn't, and his current position as a de facto representative for Heaven's Eye made seeking that information problematic. For now, it was all he could do to just watch out for any signs that Amon's forces were coming after them after revealing the channeler below the arena and exposing their cult to the Cortuban authorities.

With four eighth-tier equivalent beings in the convoy, though, he doubted that even Amon's vampires would be so bold as to attack them, even if he'd been identified by the channeler and followed out of Andalus. So, for now, he focused on his training as the convoy slowly made its way first out of the city, and then further and further toward the southern border zone that the Cortuban Alliance had with the Ilumerian Wetlands.

The Ilumerian Wetlands were sparsely populated, so it wasn't like there were going to be many human threats coming from there, but that lack of human habitation itself made some risks. Since the Wetlands had no people, that meant that the local wildlife was free to grow without human interference. That, in turn, meant that there were greater numbers of powerful beasts that could make trouble for what few human settlements existed in the Wetlands, and which might migrate out of the Wetlands and into more densely populated regions.

For his part, though, Leon was quite interested in seeing the Wetlands. From what he'd heard, they were swampy and disgusting, but it had been a long time since he'd gotten much of a chance to practice his hunting skills, and he feared that he was growing rusty. Training was all well and good, but he felt like he needed to get out and do something a little more practical, and hunting some strange, powerful creature in the Wetlands seemed like a promising thing to do.

To that end, he'd asked Emilie if there were any real regulations or policies for such expeditions. He didn't want to just venture out into the Wetlands as they were passing through on the off chance that he'd find something worth hunting, after all. She then informed him that Heaven's Eye would often handle bounties that the local city-states would put out for dealing with dangerous beasts that threatened trade through the Wetlands' rivers and swamps. If Leon wanted something to hunt, then accepting a bounty would be a good place to start.

After a week of travel, they'd fully left the Cortuban Alliance behind, and moved from the warm and dry, but still productive land of the Alliance's heartland, into regions that were bordering the Screeching Desert to the northeast, the Ilumerian Wetlands to the south, and the Halcyon Federation to the west. The land was still rich enough to sustain life, but it was clear from the lack of forests and large farms that they were slowly leaving the world of humanity. The land of large cities and populated hinterlands was behind them, and they wouldn't reach a heavily populated or urbanized region until they'd passed through the Ilumerian Wetlands and reached the edge of the Ilian Empire.

Fortunately, this lack of humanity had its perks, the biggest one that Leon found was that he didn't have to worry too much about the convoy being attacked again. The people in this region weren't wealthy by any means, but their lack of numbers made the Heaven's Eye convoy more than intimidating enough to ward off anyone with eyes bigger than their stomachs—not to mention this route being the key to trade coming through the Wetlands made it fairly heavily patrolled by the Cortuban authorities. They passed by a Cortuban patrol at least twice a day, and while they weren't particularly large patrols, they were enough to keep the peace.

Leon supposed this was what passing through the Alliance's northern regions should've been—*would've* been—if Santiago's people hadn't gone rogue.

For the most part, there weren't any cities around large enough to have Heaven's Eye enclaves that their convoy could stay with, so the second day after they left Andalus was the last time they slept in proper beds. After that, everyone in the convoy slept in their carriages. There were a few invitations given out by the important people of these more sparsely populated regions, but as far as Leon was aware, no one actually accepted any of those.

One day, though, Leon found himself rather bored, unable to focus on his training, and mildly curious about the regions to the northeast. He'd heard of the Screeching Desert before, but he knew precious little about it. Apparently, it had gotten its name from the desert's constantly shifting sand making almost musical sounds. Often deep, but sometimes shrill and high-pitched. Naturally, there were many stories told about the many ghosts and phantoms that haunted the place, but Leon was assured most of those stories were pure fiction.

However, these stories were joined by more verifiable stories of the actual desert monsters that lived out there, and Leon thought that they sounded more fascinating than terrifying. There were more standard creatures that skirted the edges of the sandy wastes like foxes, sheep, camels, and others, but those didn't interest Leon as much—they were familiar and had familiar needs. Rather, it was the creatures that lived deep within the desert that caught his interest, such as massive dragonflies large enough to crush one of the convoy's carriages with its weight alone; desert owls that could deafen a third-tier mage with a beat of their wind magic-assisted wings; huge lizards like overgrown geckos with twelve eyes that breathed lightning; enormous blood red sandworms with gaping maws larger than the gates of the Bull's Horns, filled with teeth twice as long as a full grown man's legs, and that made burrows in the sand the size of palaces; mantises that traveled in packs that numbered in the millions, bringing great clouds of sand with them wherever they went; and more kinds of horrific desert-dwelling insects that he could keep track of.

In short, while the Screeching Desert was utterly inhospitable for any but small groups of hard men and women, it was hardly devoid of life. Leon, in his boredom, decided to take a day off from training and transformed into his avian form, letting him properly stretch his wings for the first time in a while. Accompanied by Elise and Maia on Anzu, and reluctantly carrying an ecstatic Valeria—who was hanging onto not his feathers, but leather straps tied around his chest that Leon insisted *wasn't* a harness or saddle—Leon left the convoy to continue on. They didn't go so far that Leon couldn't watch the convoy's progress with his magic senses, but it was enough to satisfy his curiosity.

About a hundred miles into the desert, Leon and the others touched down on a small rocky plateau surrounded on all sides by an endless expanse of sand. They didn't stay on the plateau long, what with

the heat and the vicious sun pounding down with an almost physical pressure on every square inch of exposed skin, but they stayed long enough to appreciate the serene beauty of the desert and to listen for a while to the distant wailing sounds of shifting sand dunes.

“Beautiful,” Elise had said, summing up their collective feelings about the desert, “but not really something I’d want to visit again.”

She didn’t get her desire, though, for once they returned to the convoy, she and Valeria spent the rest of the day with Asiya and Cristina talking about their sightseeing trip, and once she heard about what was supposedly out in the Screeching Desert, the Princess just had to do likewise.

So, the next day, Leon found himself escorting not only his lovers, but also Cristina and Asiya out into the desert. Fortunately, after a day of travel with their Saternan horses, the convoy was now close enough to the desert’s outer edges that Leon’s family could use their flight suits to travel, while the Princess and her guard rode Anzu.

Dame Maxima had tried to insist on going along, but with Maia and Leon present, Cristina made a good case that she was safer in her group than Maxima would be with the convoy. Leon was also extremely reticent about carrying anyone else in his avian form, and when he weighed in that he would watch the Princess like a hawk, Maxima backed down.

It was a fairly strange experience, though. Cristina was bouncing with excitement to head out into the Screeching Desert, but once they found a good spot to land and rest, Cristina had calmed down quite a bit, to the point that she was practically morose. She sat down on the sun-backed ground and stared out into the desert, completely silent. It was such a strange departure from her previous demeanor that it took a while for anyone to work up the nerve to ask her if something was wrong.

Valeria was the one to finally approach the Princess, and Cristina’s only response was that she was still coming to terms with just how big the world was. Valeria sat down next to the Princess, and the two barely moved for an hour, during which Leon watched the Princess slowly slide closer and closer to her former guard, until she was practically leaning against Valeria, staring out at the sand dunes that seemed almost to endlessly blanket the east. Valeria didn’t seem to care about the Princess’ relaxed behavior, so he didn’t say anything about it.

When the heat and the sun started getting to everyone, they made their way back to the convoy, though they had to stop for a moment so that Elise and Valeria, after having exhausted most of their magic power using their flight suits, could climb onto Leon’s back. He wasn’t happy to be used like a horse, but for them, he could make an exception.

Everyone’s mood was lifted slightly when they finally saw something other than rocks and sand, though: some massive flying reptilian creature off in the distance, with two thin, scaled legs, a serpent’s head at the end of a long, feathered neck, and a pair of bat-like wings. Its tail was long and barbed, an obvious weapon, and every inch of its body that wasn’t feathered was instead covered in dull tan scales, perfect for hiding in the sands of the Screeching Desert.

For all of its ferocious appearance, though, when it glanced in their direction, it made eye contact with Leon in his Thunderbird form, and immediately turned and flew away about as fast as it seemed capable, great gusts of wind produced by each wingbeat kicking up sheets of sand on the desert floor

more than a hundred feet below. Leon could understand its reaction: it was only sixth-tier, and wild animals were rarely so suicidal as to attack something obviously stronger than it, especially when it had already lost the element of surprise.

Still, if he didn't have his family and a couple of friends with him, Leon might've followed it out of simple curiosity. The wild world had always had far more allure to him than the civilized one. But he restrained that side of himself, taking comfort in the knowledge that the Wetlands and their mysteries were waiting for him not too far away.

There were no more trips out into the desert, not even for sight-seeing. Everyone simply stayed in their carriages, and after several days, their environment started to get much lusher and more humid. They had reached the edge of the Ilumerian Wetlands.

Chapter 650: Attica

Attica was the first city that Leon's convoy came to in the Ilumerian Wetlands. It was positioned at the northern edge of a lake, surrounded by dense, swampy forest that reminded Leon a great deal of the Bull Kingdom's Southern Territories. It was hot, humid, and rather uncomfortable; Leon rarely left the climate-controlled carriage after leaving the comparatively dry desert's edge behind.

It was quite the stark contrast, going from near the edge of the desert and over the course of a single day finding himself staring out of the carriage window at deep swamp, and a large part of Leon was looking forward to seeing the end of the Wetlands as quickly as possible. Fortunately, now that they'd reached Attica, that meant that their time in an overland convoy had reached its end—at least, until they reached the Ilian Empire. They'd set out from Akhmim more than a month ago, and while it had been a comfortable enough journey, Leon was ready to be done with these carriages.

The city of Attica itself boasted a population of only about ten thousand or so, the surrounding land too wet and difficult to farm to support greater numbers of permanent residents. There were several thousand more temporary residents—mostly merchants moving about the Wetlands and their respective entourages—with the extra pressure put upon the city forcing it to import food. The swamps around Attica, and the Ilumerian Wetlands as a whole, simply didn't lend themselves well to large permanent settlements, which Leon saw for himself along the road, with the farms few and far between. From what Leon could gather, Attica was essentially emblematic of cities in the Wetlands.

The city had been built upon great wooden stilts or stone pillars conjured by earth mages. The city's ruling elected council had also invested in hiring several water mages to make sure that the city wasn't flooded if their levees ever broke. Most of the buildings were only a single story, small enough to be cramped for even a single family, and built out of local timber. However, the larger buildings along the city's one main thoroughfare were more heavily enchanted, and Leon could sense that most of those inscribed magics were related to protecting the buildings from water damage, which he could understand given their environs.

The layout of the city was chaotic; it was at the edge of a lake, but given the swampy nature of the Wetlands, the lake didn't have a clean edge. There were swamps and large ponds scattered about the muddy terrain, making it essentially impossible for the city to be laid out in a clean grid. The main thoroughfare, maintained only by earth enchantments as far as Leon could tell, wound through these swamps like a slithering snake, giving the city a long, winding, and rather thin footprint.

Their destination was at the southern tip of the city, where the lake created a natural harbor for ships, though Leon noted that none of the ships either on the lake or docked in the harbor were even as large as a Legion war galley, let alone a Legion dreadnought, or even the size of the Heaven's Eye yacht that had brought them from Ariminium to Akhmim.

Elise explained to Leon that the swamps and rivers that linked the Wetlands were much shallower than the Tyrrhenian River, meaning the ships had to be smaller and have a shallower draft. That here was an overwater route at all from Attica all the way to the Ilian Empire was practically a miracle, but Elise also told Leon that the Ilian Empire, Heaven's Eye, and many of the trade cities in the Wetlands invested heavily in earth and water mages to ensure that those routes remained open.

Leon wondered why they didn't use all of those resources to widen or deepen the water routes, but he supposed that there were simply other issues that needed those resources, and that simply maintaining the natural routes were all that could be done.

The convoy passed through Attica, the roads built on a foundation of magically-created stone to keep them free of the swamps. It was impressive work, but Leon didn't have much time to appreciate it as the convoy went straight for the local Heaven's Eye branch.

The Heaven's Eye enclave occupied the largest district of Attica, and going simply by how many people the Guild seemed to employ within the city, Leon wouldn't have been surprised to learn that Heaven's Eye practically owned the entire city. If they weren't strictly apolitical, he might've even suspected as much. As it was, he guessed that Heaven's Eye employed no less than a quarter of Attica's inhabitants, operated numerous enormous warehouses down by the lake, and occupied more than half of the city's docks.

With the ongoing war between Talfar and the Han Kingdom, Attica was the gateway to the Kingdoms in the northwest of Aeterna, and so Leon learned that the city was of great import to Heaven's Eye. If anything went to or came from the northwestern corner of Aeterna, it was virtually guaranteed that it had to come through Attica first, and the Heaven's Eye enclave reflected that reality.

Once again, Leon found himself, his family, and his retinue all getting settled into a guest house while Emilie and Damien Makedon arranged to continue onward over water. Since they couldn't rely on a single massive yacht, they had to acquire enough smaller ships for their large convoy and ensure that those ships were properly supplied.

Heaven's Eye, of course, had the resources for that, but getting everything ready took enough time that the convoy was given three days to rest in Attica, and Leon knew perfectly well how he wanted to use that time: hunting.

The first day, he spent entirely with his family, lavishing with all the attention they desired. But the second day, he decided to follow Emilie's suggestion and look for any bounties Heaven's Eye had on local monsters, rather than hunting without direction.

It took a surprisingly short amount of time to be presented with the biggest bounties that Heaven's Eye had received, for the third-tier mage working the main desk took one look at Leon's gold ID card and fetched her sixth-tier boss to walk Leon through their bounties. The manager then came to Leon with the two largest bounties that Heaven's Eye was running on behalf of Attica's council.

The first was immediately intriguing—it wasn't a local beast, but something that had wandered into the area from the Screeching Desert a couple years ago, setting up its lair about sixty or seventy miles to the east and having enough of a liking for shiny things that it often raided some of the smaller villages in the Wetlands and was making some of the riverine travel difficult.

When Leon asked what it was, the manager replied that it was a basilisk, a large two-legged reptilian creature with the wings of a bat and the head of a snake. It was only a sixth-tier beast, but its venom was powerful enough to kill seventh-tier humans, and it possessed a great command over earth magic despite being a creature of the sky. What made the bounty truly concerning to the manager was that the last mage he'd sent after it was sixth-tier—and quite the skilled hunter, too—and she'd gone missing. That had been more than three weeks ago, though, so she was assumed to be dead at this point.

With his recent history with reptiles triggering some instinctive hatred, Leon couldn't help but be tempted to just go after the basilisk first and foremost without even bothering with the other bounty, but he refrained from that temptation.

He was glad he refrained, for the second bounty was a creature that the bounty didn't identify, but he strongly suspected to be a Gorgon. Several farmsteads had been ruined when the families that owned them were mysteriously turned to stone, without anything seemingly having been stolen from them or the farmhouses sustaining any damage. The only thing that pointed to the perpetrator being inhuman were prominent tracks discovered at the last farmstead of what seemed to be an enormous serpent, which mysteriously ended whenever they reached a large body of water.

Leon clenched his jaw reading that bounty. While the evidence that it was a Gorgon responsible for those attacks on the farmhouses was tenuous at best, he had a feeling that his suspicions were right—petrification was a rare ability, and as far as he knew, could only be used by a creature strong with earth magic, as an eighth-tier Gorgon would be. Plus, it would fit the large serpentine tracks left behind, too. This was a creature that Maia could've become had he never entered her life, and because he did, she now had a cure for Gorgonism, though that cure would leave any Naiad's who used it sterile. Still, it was an alternative to Gorgonism, and since her aunt was able to cure herself of it, then there was a chance that with Maia's help, he might be able to reach this Gorgon, too, and perhaps even gain a new ally.

But first, he would have to confirm his suspicions, and then convince her to stop killing people.

The first bounty was a tempting issue to solve, but the manager admitted that Heaven's Eye would eventually be able to send someone to take care of this in time—though he made sure to mention that it had been years, and no one had been sent, yet—and while hunting a basilisk sounded like a lot of fun, Leon's eyes turned once more to the second bounty. After a few minutes of thought, he accepted it, and returned to the guest house to speak with Maia.

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The small boat slowly pushed through the swampy channels, making for the last place that had been attacked by Leon's mysterious quarry. The boat wasn't any larger than a rowboat, but that was more out of necessity than anything else, for the channels were narrow enough that anything larger would've placed undue restrictions on where and how fast they could travel.

Of course, with Leon and Maia being who they were, getting from place to place wasn't much of an issue, but Leon didn't want to waste this opportunity. He'd left his retinue behind so that he and Maia could head out on this bounty together, just the two of them. Risky, perhaps, but with the two of them, plus Xaphan, Leon wasn't overly concerned, and he was perfectly willing to run away if things got hotter than they could handle.

But he wanted to spend some time alone with his river nymph lover away from everyone else for a while. He'd carved out time for Elise, recently, and he recognized that he needed to do likewise for Maia and Valeria, too. This bounty was the perfect opportunity, for he knew that Maia had some personal investment in the fate of Gorgons. And, as he expected, once he told her of the bounty he'd accepted, she almost literally dropped everything she was doing to accompany him out into the swamps.

After about an hour of pushing through the water, though, both of them were starting to regret their current situation. Everyone else was back in Attica resting, while they were in the middle of a dense swamp, hardly a romantic getaway. Maia even refused to enter the water unless it was unavoidable, the place was so dirty. The lake was better, but it had still been an opaque green, while the swamp water was a filthy brown, fiercely stank, and was filled with tall trees rooted down in the underwater mud whose higher branches grew in so thick that they almost completely obscured the sky from view. The resulting darkness wasn't much of a problem for the two eighth-tier mages, but it certainly contributed to the feeling of grime that crept over their bodies.

And that was just the environment; Leon was constantly using his lightning magic to zap bugs that got too close, some no larger than a mosquito, but other unspeakably alien insectoid things almost as large as his fist seemed to rise from the swamps as they passed by, only to his lightning barrier. They just kept coming, though, and Leon eventually had to turn over control of the rowboat to Maia, letting her use her water magic to propel them onward while he concentrated on pathfinding and pest control.

Neither were having that much fun even though that was essentially the point of the expedition, and after they got off the lake and entered the swamps, there weren't many exchanges between them.

It was with relief that they finally reached a strip of dry land—their destination. There were broken remnants of an old dock pushing out into the swamp, but it had been rendered unusable—and recently, by the looks of it. Maia was forced to push their boat onto dry land, though that was harder than expected, for the entire shoreline was nothing but mud that sucked at the bottom of their boat, stymying their progress greatly and further adding to their feeling of disgust.

Further from the shoreline was a fairly large fenced-in area had numerous fruit-bearing trees growing in a rough grid—the farm they were investigating. The family that lived in the adjacent single-story house had been found turned to stone about a month before, and to Leon's knowledge, no one had been out this way in some time. The fruit, some kind of bright red citrus, seemed overripe, and many fruits had fallen naturally, and were now rotting on the swamp floor, swarmed by insects.

"Charming place," Leon muttered, his eyes taking in the gloomy farm, only partially lit thanks to the cleared land around the house.

Maia remained silent for a moment, seeming almost unwilling to get out of the boat and into the damp, muddy ground. But then she took a deep breath and stepped onto the not-quite-dry land, the boots she wore squelching as if the muddy ground were complaining that it had to take her weight.

"Anyone who would want to live here must've been either without choice or insane," Leon said as they walked further up onto the shore, desperate to leave the mud behind.

"Home is home," Maia replied out loud, her crystal-clear voice ringing in Leon's ears like the smoothest and most calming music. "They were probably locals who didn't want to leave the place they'd known all their lives."

"I suppose," Leo conceded. He'd asked about these victims before leaving Heaven's Eye, seeking any information at all that could help in his hunt. All he learned was that they were locals who'd established the farm about three decades ago, when the father and mother of the family were first married. Since there was so little farmland around Attica, the city government was usually quite generous with financial support for anyone willing to help clear land and set up any productive farms nearby.

The problem, though, was defending that farmland. Leon learned that apparently less than half of all farms established by the city that were more than an hour's journey away survive more than a decade. Less than a tenth survive for as long as this farm did. Attica didn't publicize those numbers too heavily so that potential farmers weren't scared off, but they couldn't hide the reality from Heaven's Eye. That this family of farmers was attacked by a monster living out in the swamp wasn't unusual—the unusual thing was that it took so long.

As they approached the farmhouse, Leon took note of a slightly overgrown firepit just outside of the main house, a stump for chopping wood not too far away, with a wooden lean-to about half-stocked with firewood that appeared to already be rotting from being left out for at least a month. The farmhouse itself was divided into two halves: the living area, and a storage shed. The living area was a single room, and while the door was closed, Leon could easily see inside with his magic senses—there were six beds against the far wall, with another firepit in the center of the room. There were a few tables, chairs, and a set of drawers. Two chests were near the door, but they were flung open and anything that they may have ordinarily stored had long been looted.

The storage shed, meanwhile, had rather clearly been ransacked, presumably by whomever had confirmed the deaths of this family, or whomever might've come here after hearing about the tragedy. There were about two dozen barrels in the storage shed, and a large rack to hold them on to keep them off the dirt floor. However, all of the barrels had been pried open, and some of them had been thrown to the floor—all of their contents, if they'd had any, were gone.

"Sense anything?" Leon asked.

"Nothing unusual," Maia replied. "Not too surprising, though, my kind don't tend to leave many magical traces behind."

"Aside from the bodies."

"Aside from the bodies," Maia repeated.

"Should we count Gorgons among 'your people'?"

Maia paused for a moment. "I think so," she answered, though with great hesitation. "They're unfortunate, but not lost. My aunt proved that. If we can show them that they can still be what they

were meant to be, that they are not bound by their curse, then what difference is there between them and me?”

Leon smiled. “That would depend on them, I think. Your aunt, curse or not, lived in a place that had no real human settlement, aside from me and my father. Whatever attacked this place also attacked several other farmsteads. It took the initiative to attack humans—not to eat them or to drag them off somewhere. Just to kill them.”

Maia frowned. “I don’t think you’re wrong, but maybe we shouldn’t jump to conclusions? Let’s see what’s inside, first.”

Leon nodded in agreement, though both of them already knew what they’d find.

When they pushed open the farmhouse’s door and entered, in one of the corners waited the family. The mother, a fairly plump woman with a look of both fierce defiance and abject terror had gathered up the four children, ranging from about twelve to four years old, and was quite obviously trying to shield them from something coming at them from the door. All five had been turned to stone and were left where they’d been petrified, huddled in the corner, now eternally stuck in the state they’d been at the moment of their petrification: terrified, and trying desperately to hide from whatever it was that had ultimately ended their lives.

The father, meanwhile, was a little closer to the door. Unlike his family, he wasn’t huddled in the corner, but was closer to the door. Leon guessed he must’ve been trying to confront whatever had entered his home, but had been immediately struck down. It was hard to tell, however, because if his petrified remains covered the floor. It was clear that he’d been turned to stone before he hit the wood floor because his remains were in shattered pieces, but anything more than that was hard for Leon to tell due to the broken state of his body.

But his face was largely intact, and much like the family’s mother, it was now frozen in an expression of fear, shock, and desperation.

Leon sighed as he crouched down by the father’s remains, a cold sense of empathetic dread and anger blooming in his heart. A family, seemingly just living their lives as best as they were able, attacked and slaughtered in their own home. That was something he could easily empathize with, and while this bounty had just started off as something to kill time doing, and as something he and Maia could do together, he could now feel it turning into something different.

“... Let’s find whatever did this,” he growled. This was the fifth farmstead attacked in three months. Clearly, this wasn’t going to stop unless he and Maia did something about it.