

Storm King 661

Chapter 661: Apollodorus' Offer

As he arrived at the familiar tower, Leon still had no idea what Apollodorus, the local governor, could want with him. He arrived fairly quickly, though, not wanting to leave the governor waiting for too long. He brought Marcus, Alcander, and Gaius with him as his retainers, but left everyone else back at the guest house. There wasn't any need for them, and he didn't want to show up at the tower looking like he was going to invade, so only three retainers was his self-imposed limit.

He and his retainers arrived in a Heaven's Eye carriage. Like the rest of the carriages in the city, it was both wheelless and horseless, though unlike his assumption when he saw the carriages the day before, they still required a driver. Instead of being outside where they could tend to the horses, though, the driver was secluded in a compartment at the back of the carriage, operating various advanced enchantments to keep the carriage moving.

Leon was fascinated at the level of sophistication on display, and it was all he could do not to try to give the carriage an in-depth examination on the way over. He contented himself by making plans to study these carriages upon his return to the guest house, but for the time being, he forced himself to focus on the point of this excursion.

As soon as he stepped out of the luxurious Heaven's Eye carriage, he was seen by a seemingly young fifth-tier mage dressed in a dark red uniform. The mage introduced himself as an escort sent by the governor to await their arrival, and without batting an eye at Leon's companions, walked them inside.

Leon spared a glance backward at the small Heaven's Eye contingent that had brought them here. He and his retinue were entering the governor's tower alone, but the carriage and its attendants only moved a short distance down the street where they would wait for Leon to come back outside.

Once inside, Leon was taken directly to the lift in the back, which then carried him and his companions to the tenth floor, several floors down from the ballroom at the top floor that he'd seen the night before.

What awaited him on the tenth floor was a fairly small atrium with several doors branching off to the right and left and one directly across from the lift, opulently decorated with sparkling marble and granite, and glittering mosaics on the floor and walls. He wasn't given much time to take this in, though, as his escort took him to the door directly across from the lift, explaining as he did, "This floor is typically reserved for visiting dignitaries that His Excellency wishes to entertain personally. The feasting hall is through here, and then down the hall on the right."

The escort took them into a grand hall decorated just as lavishly as the atrium, though what struck Leon more was the feeling of magical power had grown substantially compared to the first floor. Clearly, the enchantments woven into the building's structure were more powerful here than on the first floor, though strangely enough, he hadn't been able to identify many defensive wards. As far as he could tell, security around the tower was light.

If their escort was chattier person, Leon might've asked him about it. As it was, though, the fifth-tier mage was extremely serious and barely even looked at them, though his demeanor struck Leon as a

man who was just doing his job as quickly and efficiently as he could, with no time or thought given for warmer welcomes.

They walked down the hall, took a right at the T-intersection at the end, and were confronted by a massive set of double doors carved out of what Leon could only assume was Heartwood. The doors were heavily decorated, with carvings of various mythological scenes that he didn't have the cultural knowledge to identify decorating its surface. Again, though, the escort gave him no time to take it in, walking forward without breaking a step, and the doors opened before him on their own.

"Neat trick..." Marcus murmured in appreciation, and Leon had to agree. He could design something similar, but in his experience, it was an enchantment that wasn't worth the power requirements, small as they were. It was a useless extravagance, but it served as a small reminder of just how wealthy this place truly was.

The feasting hall on the other side of the doors was just as luxuriously decorated as everything else was in the tower. The room was circular in design, though large enough for at least a hundred people to feast within. The floor was black granite, polished to a near-mirror shine. The center of the room was elevated three steps from everything else, and surrounded by huge marble columns painted blood red. This raised area was further divided from the rest of the room by curtains of a matching shade of red, which Leon realized to his surprise were made of silkgrass.

'Must've been ruinously expensive to bring all of that down here...' he thought to himself.

Interspersed throughout the curtains were long strands of thin silver thread, which Leon detected no small amount of magic power flowing through. Most of the curtains were drawn, though enough were pulled back for him and his retainers to see a huge golden table in the center of the raised section, large enough to seat at least twenty-five, with extravagant golden armchairs surrounding it, each one padded with dark red velvet cushions. The table was set with dining ware of gleaming platinum. Acting as a centerpiece was a brazier, though the white fire burning within wasn't so large as to obscure anyone who might sit at the table from seeing anyone else. Floating above the table was a 'chandelier' similar to what Leon saw in the ballroom the day before, though of a slightly different design—it was a thick ring of gold, set with four glass globes the size of his head that glowed with soft white light. Numerous geometric carvings covered the chandelier's outer surface, which were highlighted with a reddish light that made them look like they were glowing from the heat.

On the other side of the curtains and columns were additional tables that followed the curve of the circular walls, illuminated by additional white fire braziers and magic lanterns hidden in long, thin slits where the floor and ceiling met the walls, filling the room with soft, indirect light.

For all of this displayed opulence, though, as he walked in, Leon's eyes were taken by the only man sitting at the central table, who radiated the aura of an eighth-tier mage.

Apollodorus, dressed once again in his dark red gilded toga. Several other Ilian officials were quietly talking around one of the outer tables, but Apollodorus was alone, sitting in silence as he waited for Leon's arrival. He didn't even seem busy, without even a single sheet of paper in front of him.

"Leon Raime!" he called out as Leon walked in. He rose from his seat and opened his arms in a gesture of joyous welcome. "Please come in and join me up here!"

Leon paused a moment, not immediately walking up to the central table. He couldn't help but wonder why none of the governor's attendants had joined him up there, and he presumed that whatever had driven the man to invite him here wasn't necessarily something he wanted shared with anyone else.

Whether or not that was true he couldn't yet say, but a sense of unease quickly made its way into his heart. However, to not seem rude, Leon caught the eyes of his retainers and jerked his head toward the outer tables. Without a word, Marcus, Gaius, and Alcander began walking towards Apollodorus' people at their table. Leon wasn't too worried about them since the Ilian officials weren't particularly powerful, largely matching his retainers in strength, though given where they were, Leon didn't take that for granted. There were likely guards and defensive enchantments he missed everywhere in this building.

With that, Leon climbed the steps and joined Apollodorus at the central table, though he didn't sit just yet.

"Wonderful of you to join me!" Apollodorus exclaimed with nothing but good-natured cheer that struck Leon as completely genuine, though it did little to quiet his mild suspicions. As he finished his welcome, Apollodorus snapped his fingers, and those few curtains that were open were suddenly drawn shut, and magic surged through them. Leon dropped into a defensive stance and almost summoned his power in response; he got so far that silver-blue lightning was surging through his veins before he calmed down, realizing what kind of magic was flowing through the curtains.

The curtains and columns faded as white light spread across them, while the sound of conversation from those at the outer tables quickly quieted. Then, the white light resolved into a projected scene that made it appear as if the central table was on a platform at the top of a snowy mountain, surrounded by a sea of fluffy white clouds.

The projected illusion was good enough that Leon found himself instinctually relaxing even though his conscious mind knew that he was still deep within the governor's tower.

"A little jumpy, are you?" Apollodorus said in good humor. "Please, have a seat with me, there's a few things I was hoping to discuss with you."

Leon acquiesced, sitting in the proffered seat just to Apollodorus' right.

"Thanks for the invitation," he said a little stiffly as he took a seat, the words almost having to be forced out of his throat in his attempt to be polite. "It's an honor to be invited personally by a mage of your power and a man of your standing."

"Oh, please, that's not necessary," Apollodorus responded, though the smile on his face told Leon that he appreciated his words, nonetheless. "A mage of *your* power and standing surely warrants a personal invitation, wouldn't you agree?"

Leon shrugged, relaxing a little more as it became clear that his anxieties had just been baseless paranoia. "I suppose you're not wrong," he stated carefully. "Though, I can't help but be curious why you invited me, and not, say, Damien Makedon, or Lady Emilie."

"While I would certainly love to have more members of Heaven's Eye here, I'm afraid that they would probably refuse my invitation," Apollodorus said with a hint of remorse in his tone. "Heaven's Eye must remain 'separate from politics', and all that."

“Ah,” Leon replied with an awkward smile, wondering if he’d made a mistake in accepting the invitation.

“However, *you*, Leon Raime, are not officially a member of Heaven’s Eye, are you?” Apollodorus lightly inquired.

Leon’s smile thinned slightly and he said, “Not officially, but Lady Emilie is my mother-in-law; her daughter is my wife. It is my intention to go to Occulara and join Heaven’s Eye.”

“And a fantastic choice you’ve made!” Apollodorus exclaimed, not letting anything but happiness be seen on his face, though Leon wondered how true that was. “I can understand the allure of Heaven’s Eye to a provincial, they’re an honorable group. By the way, how do you find my city, so far? You’ve never been to the Central Empires before, have you?”

“No, this is my first time this far south,” Leon admitted, easily brushing off Apollodorus’ ‘provincial’ comment after having spent years being called barbarian and savage. “And I have to say, Ancon is quite impressive. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a more affluent place than this before. No slums, no slaves that I can see, and the people who live here seem quite wealthy—I’ve never seen such carriages before in my life. Your city planners and engineers must earn their keep maintaining all of those bridges and the sewer system. I’ll be here for a few days yet, and I hope to see more of your city before I go.”

“If you’re looking for any recommendations, I would suggest the north side,” Apollodorus said. “Ancon has been inhabited for a long time, and ruins of older sites are very well preserved in the north.”

“I’ll be sure to check them out,” Leon replied. He knew that Ancon was old; one of the points on the map from the Cradle was here. Since Nestor hadn’t said anything about Ancon, Leon assumed that this place was nothing special, relatively speaking, especially now that whatever was left was now being recommended as a tourist attraction, but he still thought that it might be nice to go and see what he could see. For all he knew, there might be something there that hadn’t been discovered in the eighty-thousand years that people had been living here.

Apollodorus gave him a few more possible locations to visit, but Leon wasn’t as interested in them. He still filed them away in his head, though, just in case Elise or Valeria wanted to explore the city.

“... but if you truly want to see some spectacular sights, Leon, then you *have* to visit Ilion,” Apollodorus continued. “The colossi of the Brilliant Eleven, the gardens around the methuselah archtree, and the Ward of Pleasure are my personal favorite haunts whenever I find myself in town.”

“Those all sound delightful,” Leon responded politely, though he’d almost checked out of the conversation by now. He wasn’t that interested in touring too extensively, not with all the studies and training he had on his plate, but he didn’t want to just shut the governor down.

“Indeed, Leon,” Apollodorus said, “there’s no better place to live than the Ilian Empire. No better place for new experiences, to raise a family, to *live*. Under the generous stewardship of Emperor Adam and the protection of Lord Protector Anastasios, the Ilian Empire simply cannot be beaten in any category that you can think of, whether that’s quality of life, entertainment, or future potential.”

Leon’s eyes were glazing over at this point, but he snapped back when Apollodorus leaned forward a little.

"You know," the governor whispered conspiratorially, though the curtains seemed to do a fantastic job at muting their voices so that no one could eavesdrop on their conversation, "the Empire will always have room in it for men of your caliber..."

Leon smiled and cocked his head, the true reason for why Apollodorus had invited him here now creeping out into the sun.

'He's trying to recruit me...'

"And what," Leon replied, not addressing the conversation's new direction quite yet, "is 'my caliber'? Is it just my power?"

"Should it be anything else?" Apollodorus asked, his eyes narrowing mischievously.

"Well, I find it somewhat odd that you say that there's room for me in the Empire, yet you know nothing about me, really. Just that we're the same magical tier."

Apollodorus leaned back in his chair, his smile not wavering in the slightest. "You're with Heaven's Eye," he said simply. "There can be no greater endorsement of your character. Heaven's Eye doesn't recruit fools, no matter who they might be married to."

"You're putting a lot of faith in Heaven's Eye to have properly vetted me," Leon replied. "Besides, maybe I have qualities that Heaven's Eye is specifically looking for, but which might make me a poor fit to serve your Emperor."

"I never said anything about serving my Emperor," Apollodorus gasped with mock surprise. "But if that's something that's on your mind, then I'm sure His Imperial Majesty will surely give you a proper interview. In fact, if that's something that you're interested in...?"

With a wave of his hand, Apollodorus conjured a sheet of fine paper in front of him, with an almost comically oversized quill in a pot of ink right next to it. He picked up the quill and gave Leon an expectant look.

"I can write you a letter of recommendation right now, if it so pleases you. This would not only give you an private meeting with the Emperor himself, but also with the Lord Protector..."

Leon hummed as he pretended to think it over.

"And what, may I ask, would this letter of recommendation cost me?" he asked with a light tone.

"Nothing at all," Apollodorus exclaimed, looking almost offended. "I seek only to strengthen my Empire, and maybe make a few friends while I'm at it. You could consider this a gift from a friend, if you must consider it anything at all!"

Leon resisted the urge to snort in derision. Perhaps he was just cynical, but he didn't believe a word that Apollodorus just spoke. It might be a 'gift' right now, but he was sure that Apollodorus might want favors in the future, or 'gifts' to be given to him in turn. Leon didn't come all this way to prostrate himself before another monarch, and he certainly wasn't here to put himself into anyone's debt.

"I appreciate the offer," Leon said, "but surely such a thing isn't needed. Even if I *was* considering this, I would rather enter on my own merits. Your thoughtful offer warms my heart, though, and for that, you have my thanks."

Apollodorus continued smiling, but the corners of his lips seemed to strain slightly for just a moment, and then a moment later, his smile looked as natural as it possibly could.

"That's a shame," he responded. "But please, if you won't accept my letter of recommendation, at least let me write you a letter of introduction..."

Leon shook his head. His mind turned toward the letter of introduction that 'Ambrose' had given him, and he couldn't help but wonder once again just what all of these people might want from him. If he were to join Heaven's Eye, then at least in Apollodorus' case, the answers could be endless. Making friends with powerful individuals in Heaven's Eye couldn't be a bad thing, after all.

But he didn't think he'd be able to ferret out a proper answer from the governor even if he tried, so Leon simply continued to decline as gracefully as he could, and eventually, Apollodorus dropped the topic, pulling the paper and ink back into his soul realm.

The conversation continued for a while after that, though, with Apollodorus telling Leon much of his own life story, and Leon reciprocating in kind, but keeping many of the more personal details to himself. At one point, the illusion was disrupted when a handful of servants arrived carrying several large platters of food for them to take at their leisure, but Leon didn't take that much. It was a lot of fresh fruit and vegetables, along with a large platter of various meats and cheeses, but he just wanted the meeting to be over. He took the minimum he thought he could get away with while remaining polite, and after a couple of hours, he made his exit, taking his retainers with him.

Apollodorus seemed sad to see him go so soon, but Leon departed anyway, making as graceful an exit as he could, having felt quite uncomfortable the entire time following the governor's attempt to recruit him. He supposed it would've been fine if he were to make friends with the man, but that relationship would have to be cultivated at a later time, when Leon was more comfortable speaking with the man.

As his group walked out of the tower's front door, Leon was fairly quiet and contemplative. He hoped that Apollodorus' attempted head hunting was just the governor trying to snag a new eighth-tier mage for the Ilian Empire, but he had a bad feeling that this wasn't quite so cut and dry. The man hadn't seemed all that surprised when Leon told him of the goings-on of the Bull Kingdom, and he wondered just how much he already knew. He supposed the lack of surprise wasn't anything indicting, but it still struck him as odd, and the whole conversation lingered on his mind for a long time, even as he and his retainers got back into their carriage and returned to the Heaven's Eye guest house.

It took a couple hours of quiet relaxing with Elise, Valeria, and Maia, during which he relayed everything that had been discussed, before Leon was able to truly focus on his studies with Nestor, the Thunderbird, and Xaphan again.

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On the fourteen floor of the governor's tower, Apollodorus knelt on the ground, both knees pressed into the hard granite floor, his hands likewise, his head bowed so low that his forehead almost joined them. Before him, on a pedestal that was almost an altar, sat a crystalline orb the size of the governor's head,

glowing a soft blue, and flashing with brighter color as a smooth, cavernously deep voice emanated from it.

“And he refused completely?”

“Yes, Lord Protector,” Apollodorus responded, his tone one of the utmost respect, and tinged with a hint of fear and apprehension at the way the Lord Protector might view his failure to accomplish the task he’d been given.

But without missing a beat, the Lord Protector responded, “Oh well. That’s how these things can go, I’m afraid. It’ll take a lighter touch to bring Leon Raime over to our side. Keep an eye on him for now. It’s fine if Heaven’s Eye gets him, at least for the time being, but if the Sacred Golden Empire—or, gods forbid, those degenerates in the *Sunlit Empire*—get wind of his arrival, then they’ll start making moves of their own, either to kill him or recruit him for themselves. I’d rather not have that sort of trouble on our land.”

“My eyes will be open for anything at all out of the ordinary,” Apollodorus stated. “So long as I’m here, there will be peace in Ancon.”

“Yes, yes,” the Lord Protector replied. “You’ve done well, Apollodorus, don’t beat yourself up over it. Just keep me apprised of Leon Raime’s movements. I want to know everything that he does, everywhere he goes, and everyone he interacts with. Be discreet, but thorough. We don’t want to scare him away...”

“Yes, Lord Protector,” Apollodorus replied.

“Mm. Then I shan’t keep you.”

With that, the crystal rather unceremoniously ceased to glow, and Apollodorus was left on his own in his communications room. He remained kneeling there for a few seconds longer, though, wondering just who in the hell Leon Raime was that he’d attracted the attention of Anastasios, the only tenth-tier mage in all the Ilian Empire, and its de facto highest authority—practically a god unto himself, as far as most people were concerned.

Just an eighth-tier mage, Leon Raime was not. That much Apollodorus was certain. But he wasn’t sure how much he’d be able to see; Leon Raime wasn’t going to stay long in Ancon.

With a sigh, Apollodorus rose to his feet. He’d do what he could, but whatever the reason the Lord Protector wanted Leon Raime specifically, it was now in his august hands to convince the young boy to play ball.

Chapter 662: Tourist I

A flame no larger than that of a burning candle slowly undulated in his hand. It burned brightly, casting its reddish-orange light throughout the darkness of the early morning courtyard. The sun hadn’t yet risen, and he hadn’t turned on any of the magic lanterns, so his small flame was the only light around, save for the slowly brightening sky and dimming stars.

Ancon was beautiful in the morning, with cool, crisp air, colorful birds singing and flying to and fro, not to mention how perfectly manicured Heaven’s Eye kept their guest house’s courtyard, but Leon’s eyes were fixed solely upon the flame in his hand.

For days, he'd been putting in more and more time with his fire magic, hoping that maybe he'd be able to feel something different. Supposedly, his bloodline from the Great Black Dragon was less suppressed than before, but up until the battle with the vampires, he hadn't been able to tell, and after what he'd experienced at the Serpentine Isles, he'd been fairly keen to just put it out of mind. Unfortunately, his little tussle with the vamps had brought the issue of his draconic lineage back to the forefront of his mind, forcing him to spend more time contemplating it.

During that fight, however, he hadn't been nearly as emotionally charged as he'd been when previously channeling that power, as far as he could remember, and yet he'd still managed to channel black flame. But he hadn't done so consciously, so he didn't quite know *how* he'd managed it.

He'd been trying to puzzle out exactly how it had happened, and if he could now reproduce the feat with a little more dedicated study, but so far, he hadn't seen so much as a single black spark.

'Frustrating,' he bitterly thought to himself. He placed absolutely no stock in any threats or desires that the Great Black Dragon had put forth, so he thought little of probing into this power that was supposedly locked in his blood. The power was a part of him as much as the Thunderbird's lightning, and with that fire now unavoidably on his mind, Leon greatly resented that he couldn't consciously call upon it.

On this particular day, he'd been struck with a bout of insomnia, not even able to get so much as a wink of the usual four hours of sleep that he allowed himself. So, he'd risen from bed, taking care not to disturb Maia or Elise, and went outside. He hadn't been in a mood for anything more productive, and so sat down on a bench in the courtyard, conjured some fire in his hand, and stared at it. There he sat for hours, letting his mind wander wherever it pleased as he stared, transfixed, at the fire in his hand.

He didn't move an inch until the sun finally crested the edge of Aeterna and cast its light upon the plane. Only then did he finally clench his fist, his heart unsatisfied, and look away. He didn't rise from the bench, though, and instead cast his mind into his soul realm. He opened the eyes of his magic body and rose from his throne. He stood there for a moment, the long early morning hours of unfulfilling musings and mild explorations of his power leaving him feeling rather cold, empty, and melancholic at the almost tangible rejection by his draconic ancestor.

He glanced at Xaphan, who quietly burned in his pavilion. The demon seemed lost in a meditative trance, not that Leon wanted to talk to him right now anyway.

He then turned his eyes toward the distant Mists of Chaos. Somewhere out there was the Thunderbird, and while he thought he might've liked to talk to her right now, he didn't really have that much to say that he wanted to bother her with.

Finally, his gaze found Nestor's ruby on the nearby table, and the surrounding notes Leon had taken from Nestor's enchantment lessons. Right next to the ruby was the journal that Leon had taken from Jormun's transformation cave, the dead man still trying to unlock the enchantment he'd designed so many thousands of years ago.

Leon slowly walked over to the table, placed his hands upon it, and leaned over some of the notes, his eyes scanning the papers but not quite taking in what was written upon them. He took a deep breath, but it came out almost as a sigh, and he felt Nestor's attention fall upon him.

"What's wrong, kid?" the dead man inquired, his tone almost bored and resentful that it fell to him to ask, or possibly annoyed that Leon was bothering him.

Leon contemplated asking Nestor about the Great Black Dragon and that side of his heritage, but he refrained. He didn't really want to talk to Nestor about those things, he'd rather save that for the Thunderbird—and even then, he wanted to save that talk for when he actually had something to say. He didn't want to use his most helpful Ancestor as an outlet to vent his frustrations.

But... there were still some things that he thought he might be able to consult with Nestor about in relation to these matters...

"Nestor, I remember you saying that you're not that great with healing magic, is that right?"

In as much of a noncommittal shrug as the dead man could give, he grunted, "Meh."

"Is that... what does that even mean? You didn't say anything," Leon grumbled in annoyance.

"'Meh' is 'meh', what does it sound like?" Nestor riposted. "But since you seem to be having trouble with the concept, allow me to elucidate. That means 'to explain', just so you know."

"I know what 'elucidate' means," Leon growled.

"Always good to make sure when it comes to you," Nestor said. Before Leon could retort, he then elucidated, "My specialty is not healing magic, that much you're well aware of. But my knowledge of the universe is paralleled by few, so I'd say my knowledge of the subject is probably greater than just about anyone you personally know, despite my lack of specialty."

"And your knowledge of the human body is great, too?" Leon said.

"Meh," Nestor repeated.

Leon, after rolling his eyes, asked, "What about blood magic?"

"Meh."

"I'm sorely tempted to set you on fire again."

With a sigh that was almost a groan, Nestor replied, "Fine, I'll set aside the *important work* that I was doing and focus solely upon you. Is that what you want?"

"If you would be so kind," Leon responded as he lifted a hand and let fire dance between his fingers, a clear threat to the dead man.

"All right, what is it that you want to know, specifically?" Nestor asked, his voice wavering only slightly with Leon's display of power.

"The awakening ritual for the Thunderbird Clan," Leon said. "I don't know it well enough. I've only ever had it performed on me—and even then I hardly understood what it on a mechanical level—and I've only ever seen some fairly abstract and theoretical notes on it from the Teiran Archives. I want to know more about it in greater detail than those books can give me."

Adopting the professional air of a teacher lecturing his student, Nestor asked, "Very well. I'm well-versed on that particular topic—anyone in my position would've known that ritual in as great of detail as was possible. It was the backbone of our Clan's power, after all, and we couldn't let it be forgotten. Do you have any specific questions about the ritual, or do you want me to just jump in from the very basics?"

"I was more curious about the specific magical mechanics behind the ritual rather than the potions or spells that are needed. What does the ritual *do*, not how it's *performed*, is I guess what I'm getting at."

"All right. Well, I suppose a good place to start is by repeating what I'm sure you're already well aware of: human beings are not naturally magical creatures. Our bodies must adapt to magic in a variety of ways before we can truly use that power. In the case of Inherited Bloodlines, things get a little murkier."

"Because we're descended from beasts that *were* naturally magical?" Leon inquired.

"In a way, sure," Nestor said. "Keep in mind that the universe is old, and humanity is widespread. Even if our Honored Ancestor had no descendants upon this plane before our Clan's arrival, it's been eighty thousand years since then. Every single person alive on this plane right now can probably trace their lineage back to our Honored Ancestor in some way, and probably hundreds or thousands of other terribly powerful beings, besides. So it's less the descent, and more the passing down of power."

"All of this I know already," Leon said, but he kept his impatience out of his tone as much as he could.

"Then you know that we need a good kick to get our bloodlines to wake up?" Nestor asked.

"If by 'a good kick', you mean flooding our bodies with some other creature's magic power, then yes," Leon said. "It's supposed to force our bodies to awaken our dormant powers as a way to try and defend ourselves from the foreign magic."

"That's really the gist of it," Nestor responded. "That's the concept around which everything else is built. All our spells, all our enchantments, all our potions that we use to awaken our bloodlines, are designed to enhance the chances of success, and the chances for survival. Just flooding the body with foreign power is an extremely brute force approach and prone to failure, but we've had millions of years to refine our technique. I can't speak for the ritual you underwent, but the one I went through was essentially a guaranteed success. We could awaken our bloodlines safely and reliably."

Leon nodded, and went quiet for a moment. He essentially knew all of that already, but he needed a moment to choose his words as he drove at what he really wanted to know.

"And the ritual is necessary?" Leon asked. "In all those millions of years, have there ever been any members of the Clan that were born with their bloodlines already awake? Or who managed to use their inherited power without the ritual?"

Nestor went quiet for a long moment, and Leon wondered if he'd been too obvious. When the dead man spoke again, however, he didn't say anything about the Great Black Dragon.

"... No," he said. "The ritual was always needed."

Leon sighed. After a couple seconds of thought, he decided to just ask Nestor what was on his mind, to the hells with his pride.

"Is there any way to undo the Great Black Dragon's suppression on my blood?"

"I thought that was what this was about," Nestor said. "That's a difficult question to answer. Well, in a technical sense, the answer is obvious: yes, there is a way. In fact, there are many ways. But if you were to ask if any of them are particularly feasible, then I'd have to say no. You're competing with the remains of a being that stood head and shoulders above nearly every other being that has ever existed."

"But it's only the dragon's remains," Leon pointed out. "Surely that means that its power over me isn't as potent as it would be at its height."

"That's true," Nestor conceded. "However, what you're dealing with is still something *far* beyond you."

"I don't care," Leon spat. "Maybe it's hypocritical to say given how I've been treating our Clan's legacy, but this isn't some piece of magical engineering rotting in the ground somewhere, this power is *a part of me*, and in those few brief moments when I've been able to channel it, I've felt... well, I don't know how to describe it, really. It's always been in moments of great stress, and I'm not really aware of it at the time, but right now, looking back on it, I've always felt *whole* in those moments. Like chains that have always bound me are released for just a few seconds. I want these limitations gone, and I honestly don't give a single wet shit what the Great Black Dragon has to say about it. I just want his suppression gone."

Leon spoke with more and more ferocious passion with every word, and by the end, he was practically raging, even throwing his hands into the air and wildly gesturing out into the Mists of Chaos.

"Hells, right now, I think that if I could head out into all that fog and punch that *bastard* in the face, I would," Leon growled. He paused a moment and slyly glanced at Nestor's ruby. "*Can* I head out into the mists?"

"I wouldn't recommend it," Nestor said. "The Mists of Chaos are essentially pure magical energy. The nature of the mist isn't something anyone really understands, but in its raw form, it's extremely dangerous. Without the protection of your soul realm, your magic body would be destroyed in its entirety in seconds."

"And yet, that bastard and our Ancestor essentially live out there," Leon pointed out. "They don't have soul realms left, but they're able to survive this destructive nature."

"Yes," Nestor replied. "How they do that, I'm uncertain, and they're in no hurry to reveal their secrets to little old me."

Leon gritted his teeth and stared out into the mist, hundreds of miles away from where he stood.

"I'm going to get rid of that suppression, even if I have to somehow *literally* kick his teeth in to do it," he vowed, saying the words out loud but speaking more to himself than to Nestor. "Whether or not I use that power will be up to *me*. Not *him*."

"Good luck to you, then," Nestor responded, his tone making it clear that he didn't think had much of a chance.

But Leon didn't care. He'd find a way, one way or another. And he already had something of an idea forming in his head about something he might be able to try.

“Nestor,” he said, suddenly turning around, his tone lightening up so quickly that Nestor’s ruby seemed to dim for a moment in surprise.

“Hm? Yes?”

“Let’s set aside the standard enchanting lessons for the moment. I want to know more about ancient runes...”

—

Leon and Nestor didn’t make much progress, but that was fine with Leon. He had to head back out into the physical world soon enough, anyway, for he and his family were planning an excursion out to the ruins of the Thunderbird Clan to Ancon’s north.

When they set out, they did so with one of the horseless, wheelless carriages, but Leon didn’t ride in it. Instead, he rode Anzu, letting his griffin get in some much-needed exercise by following the carriage—it was illegal to fly in Ancon, which disappointed him greatly, but it also excited him more than a little to know that this wasn’t just a seldom-used regulation in Ancon, as it was in the Bull Kingdom, but a full-fledged Imperial law. In any settlement, it was a violation of the Ilian Emperor’s will that anyone take to the skies. Which suggested to Leon that there were quite a few mages around the Empire who *could* fly, enough that the law was needed here more than it was back north.

A threat and a challenge both, and at least for the later, he relished it. It made him feel kind of territorial, too, but that feeling was easy enough to ignore.

For now, at least.

But he wasn’t focusing on that right now; instead, it was the ruins that were occupying his mind.

When his short lesson on the ancient runes came to an end, Leon asked Nestor again about what the ruins here used to be. He had no hope that there was anything for him to find here if they were so well-known that the governor recommended he visit them, but he was still curious about what had been built here eighty-thousand years ago.

The ruins were a major city, Nestor had told him. One of the major staging grounds that the Clan had used to control the plane. But it wasn’t just any city, it was a place where the Thunderbird Clan exerted little direct influence. It was essentially the capital of a small province that had been delegated to one of their vassal Clans.

Leon was disappointed to learn that. It essentially meant that even if there were any long-lost things he might find, they probably wouldn’t directly pertain to his Clan. Instead, they would pertain to this vassal Clan.

Still, his excitement to see the place, while lessened, wasn’t gone entirely. It seemed that his excitement was shared, and exceeded, by his family. Maia, Elise, and Valeria were treating this like a date, and when he realized that’s what this was, he decided to lean into it.

So, he planned to stop at a couple other places on their way home: an early dinner at a fancy restaurant, followed by a short cruise on the lake. Without knowing more about the city, though, that was the

extent he was able to plan on such short notice with the concierge that Heaven's Eye assigned them for their stay.

Soon enough, they arrived at the ruins. The Imperial government was clearly serious about preserving the place, for the sprawling ruins were completely fenced off from the rest of the city, and the only way in or out was through one of a handful of lightly fortified gatehouses placed around the fence's perimeter. Only the largest of these gatehouses, which was attached to what seemed to be a huge museum, was available for tourists to use.

But for all of that, the fence wasn't enchanted against magic senses, and Leon drank in the sight of the ruins. Most of it was overgrown with vines, moss, and trees, but nearly all of those areas were little more than heaps of broken stone bricks. Eighty-thousand years was a long time, and not even stone would survive for so long in a place as long-inhabited as Ancon.

But the area directly next to the museum was more well-kept, and Leon could even see maintenance workers moving through the place, taking care of weeds and even using earth magic in a few places to shore up what needed shoring up.

These places were mostly buildings made of limestone, granite, and marble, capped with red ceramic tiles in a style rather reminiscent of the architecture of the Bull Kingdom. Their facades were garishly painted in gold, white, and blue, and if it weren't for the fact that none of the buildings had any semblance of magic flowing within them, they might've even passed for buildings that were still inhabited.

But this maintained part of the ruins was fairly small—the equivalent of just a few blocks. The rest of the place looked almost like a wild plain, were it not for the heaps of bricks scattered around, or the occasional hint of the concrete road peeking through the grass.

[Hm,] Nestor grunted when Leon arrived and explained to him what he could see. [Seems like the palace didn't survive. What a shame. Looks like their library is still around, though.]

[Keep an eye open for anything, even if there doesn't seem to be anything at all to see,] Leon asked the dead man. [I can't imagine anything's survived here, and I don't think the Empire's just going to let us roam around, but just in case... if there's anything that we, especially, need to see, be sure to let me know...]

[Will do.]

Chapter 663: Tourist II

"Welcome! Welcome!" one of the people waiting for Leon's group outside of the museum shouted exuberantly.

The woman who shouted stood at the front of the group, exuded a fourth-tier aura, and was dressed quite finely. She was an older woman, with a gracefully lined face, long silver hair, and a pair of deep brown eyes that promised nothing but warmth and cheer. Given the way the other people stood behind her, respectfully maintaining their silence, Leon assumed that this woman was the person in charge of this group, at least, if not the museum as a whole, despite several others behind her being more powerful.

Elise smiled and waved, returning the woman's welcome, while Valeria politely nodded, and Maia pointed ignored her. Leon, after dismounting Anzu, pried his attention away from the ruins and walked forward, pausing a moment to let Elise take his arm as she got out of the carriage, and made his own greetings.

Once that formality was over, the woman practically jumped toward them in her eagerness to give both Leon and Elise a friendly hug. Despite her seeming over eagerness, Leon noted that she just smiled and nodded at Valeria instead of trying to give her a hug, too, and barely acknowledged Maia—perhaps picking up on both of their desires to not be greeted in this way, though not Leon's, oddly enough.

"It's so wonderful to have all of you here!" the woman gushed with the widest and most genuine smile on her face that Leon had ever seen. "My name is Claudia, and I'll be giving you the tour today!"

"A pleasure to meet you, Claudia, and might I say, this place is *beautiful*," Elise responded. "I'm looking forward to seeing these ruins, I've heard quite a bit about them."

Claudia's smile grew wider somehow, and she beamed her joy to Elise.

"And I'm looking forward to showing it off!" she responded. "This has been my life's work, and having people like all of you come around to see it just... well, it absolutely makes my day! No! It makes my entire month!"

Claudia continued to rave about how happy she was they were there, and Elise continued to politely engage the enthusiastic woman in conversation. Leon remained a little quieter, content to simply let Elise talk, at least until they got into the ruins themselves. However, he listened closely, and learned that while Claudia wasn't the person in charge of the museum, she was still their foremost expert on the ruins, and the civilization they belonged to.

That certainly got Leon's attention, but before Claudia could go into greater detail, bringing up her position seemed to remind her that she hadn't introduced the men and women behind her. Those gathered were more archaeologists and museum administrators who'd gathered for the arrival of Leon's group—and, as he quickly found out, another group of important tourists who were due to arrive soon.

About fifteen minutes after Leon and his group arrived, another group of carriages floated in, riding a cushion of air that kept them about a foot off the ground. Surrounding the carriages were armored women on horseback, nearly all of whom Leon recognized. It seemed they were going to be joined by Princess Cristina.

The Princess exited her carriage with all the dignity and grace that her station demanded, and she warmly smiled at everyone as she stepped out onto the ground. However, her smile didn't truly reach her eyes until her gaze fell upon Valeria, and ignoring everyone else, Cristina went to greet the silver-haired woman first.

What followed was another round of enthusiastic introductions by Claudia, and only after nearly half an hour spent milling about the gatehouse were they finally let into the ruins.

"Oh, I'm just so excited to show all of you around!" Claudia enthused as the gatehouse was opened.

"And we're excited to see it!" Elise repeated from earlier. "How old did you say this ruins were, again?"

“We’re not entirely sure,” Claudia admitted, her cheery demeanor dimming slightly for just a moment. “However, we know that they’re at least fifty-thousand years old, for they were mentioned in some of our oldest texts!”

“Fifty thousand years?” Cristina murmured. “That’s incredible! It’s hard to imagine something lasting that long, even with magic!”

“It’s truly something, isn’t it?” Claudia agreed. “The city that was built on this spot back then was extraordinarily advanced. Their command over magic was at the very least on par with what we have today, if not greater, but unfortunately, very little of it remains. The site around the gatehouse that we’ve preserved only stands today because of our preservation efforts. We can only guess as to the enchantments that existed here back when their original inhabitants first built this place...”

Leon heard Nestor snort from within his soul realm. The dead man had set aside his work to watch with Leon as Claudia explained what she knew of the old Clan. Obviously, Leon knew that he could just ask Nestor about the specifics, but this was a golden opportunity to learn what modern opinions about the Thunderbird Clan were.

[These buildings were only lightly enchanted, it makes sense that they have no trace of magic left,] the dead man said.

Leon glanced around as they walked past the gatehouse. The buildings immediately to his right and left were beautiful, but rather small. Hardly the monolithic structures that he might’ve expected, especially after knowing what the Thunderbird Clan could build with the Cradle, Nestor’s lab, and Xaphan’s prison.

[What were these buildings for?] Leon asked. [I would’ve expected that the capital of even a vassal Clan would have the wherewithal to have many structural and comfort enchantments made standard...]

[That’s true, but such regulations were only for certain groups,] Nestor replied. [Do you see all the gold paint that these buildings have?]

Leon slightly nodded.

[When they were inhabited, these buildings would’ve also been painted with one long red stripe, parallel to the ground and about four feet up the wall. It would’ve identified these buildings as what they were: slave housing.]

Leon immediately grimaced in disgust. [The housing for the natives of this plane, am I right?]

[Yes,] Nestor replied without a shred of remorse or embarrassment.

“Now,” Claudia loudly said as their entire entourage filed past the gatehouse, “to your right and left, you’ll see homes. We can’t say for certain, but we believe that the average citizen would’ve resided in places like these. While they seem small, we can extrapolate from the magical remnants found in other similar ruins that those people who lived here would’ve still been quite comfortable.”

“How many would’ve lived in these places?” Cristina asked as her head practically spun around, her eyes wide as she took everything in.

“In these buildings, we believe that only one or two people at most would’ve lived in them,” Claudia said.

[More like half a dozen or more...] Nestor whispered.

"As for the city itself," Claudia continued, "our estimates fall anywhere from a quarter million to half a million."

"How are these estimates made?" Cristina asked as she turned toward the archaeologists.

"Mostly by measuring the footprint of the old city as best we can, making educated guesses as to where the residential neighborhoods lay, digging through any bits of garbage that may miraculously still be around, things like that," Claudia replied. "Unfortunately, though, we know that our estimates are probably far off. Ancon has never been fully abandoned, but it has experienced long periods of depopulation. When people moved back in, oftentimes they would demolish the old, dilapidated buildings that had been left behind and build upon their foundations, and sometimes those buildings would've collapsed or been buried, leaving the new residents to build on top of them."

"Surely there'd still be some remains even if those buildings were demolished?" Cristina asked. "They don't destroy all the way down to the foundations, do they?"

"No, they don't," Claudia admitted, and for the first time, Leon saw her smile truly slip a bit. It was back in but a moment, but when Claudia continued, he detected a few notes of bitterness in her tone. "It's unfortunate, but we don't often get licenses or funding to conduct digs in inhabited places of the city. I'm sure that we'd find quite a bit even if we were to demolish just a few city blocks and start digging, but..."

"No one in charge thinks that's worth doing?" Cristina asked.

Claudia nodded sadly. "What we have here is essentially all that we have to work with. What we might be able to learn about the past inhabitants of this city isn't worth the minor inconveniences to the people who live here—or so many government suits like to claim."

"That's too bad..." Cristina commiserated.

"Oh! It truly is!" Claudia loudly and rather dramatically bemoaned. "There's so much we could learn about those who came before us, so much that they could illuminate for us, but our short-sighted politicians simply won't allow us to find out! Ugh, what lost wisdom might be lost to us because of that decision? Our path to utopia could lie beneath our own feet, and we're forbidden from finding out!"

Leon heard Nestor quietly cackle a few times, and say, [I appreciate this woman's enthusiasm for the old Clan, but I don't think she'd appreciate what she would find. Already, the things she's shown awareness of would fit inside of a thimble.]

[Do you think I ought to let you out so you can educate her?] Leon asked, though not a trace of seriousness could be heard in his voice.

[Heh, that would be fun, wouldn't it?] Nestor said. [If I thought you were actually willing to do so, I might've considered it.]

"Oh, forgive me," Claudia said in embarrassment as Nestor was talking. She gave Cristina an extremely apologetic look and continued, "This is my life's work, my passion. I can get a little... worked up over it..."

“Don’t think anything of it,” Cristina replied with a huge smile on her face. “I, for one, share your enthusiasm for these things. To see new things and have new experiences is what I crave, and to see how other people lived, even if they’re long dead, is part of that.”

“Wonderful,” Claudia responded, switching back into her cheery demeanor with seeming ease. “Anyway, we ought to look around, shouldn’t we?”

For the next few minutes, Claudia showed them the inside of these houses and explained what little they knew about them. It had been so long since they’d been inhabited, after all, that there wasn’t much evidence left behind of how those who lived here spent their days. Leon had Nestor to consult, but the dead man could only give him some surface-level details; he’d never paid too much attention to how slaves lived, so he couldn’t fill in the more mundane bits of how they lived.

He did share that the slaves who lived in these small homes were most likely unskilled laborers, used when even the Thunderbird Clan’s legions of golems were insufficient for the work that had to be done.

That left Leon with the question of where the skilled laborers went, and Nestor shared that they were given better accommodations, but only the most valuable natives had been given the legal status of freemen.

Only those of the Thunderbird Clan, its vassals, and its direct followers were citizens.

“... and unfortunately, we can’t say much more than that,” Claudia finished as she led them out of the small house she’d shown them through, echoing Nestor from only a moment before. “Are there any questions so far?”

Cristina was the first, enthusiastically replying, “Yes! Do we know why Ancon was depopulated?”

“It’s lost many citizens several times in its history,” Claudia explained. “There was a devastating plague about twelve thousand years ago that healing magic couldn’t do much to aid, and there have been a few wars and other armed conflicts that have left sizable parts of the city abandoned.”

“But what about the one that happened to the people who built all of this?” Cristina asked.

“We believe it was war,” Claudia said, her exuberant attitude dampening quite a bit. “I have a great amount of respect for the people that built this place, but by all accounts, their system of government was rather tyrannical, which led to some kind of civil war. The records of that time are hazy; the war seemed to have been quite intense, almost leaving what are now the Central Empires in a dark age. Records *that we can rely on* don’t appear until thousands of years later, leaving much of that part of our history shrouded in myth.”

Cristina almost responded immediately, but Leon beat her to the punch. He asked with a slightly strained voice, “What are those myths, then?” As he spoke, he even felt Nestor’s attention sharpen; the dead man was just as interested in this as he was.

But instead of answering right away, Claudia just smiled. “We were going to work our way over there later in the tour, but I don’t see why we can’t just skip to it now...”

She led them down the long, perfectly-formed street. Much like the civil engineering present in the Bull Kingdom, the street appeared to Leon to be one solid block of stone, likely melted and shaped with fire

and earth magic. It wasn't particularly fancy, but Leon wasn't expecting much from the areas where slaves were quartered.

Things changed as they proceeded a few blocks down, though. They approached the largest preserved building, just on the edge of the maintained area; beyond the building was a large expanse of grass, broken up by a few clumps of trees and some lonely piles of broken marble.

The building itself was quite familiar to Leon, at least in architecture. It was the only preserved building taller than four stories, though not by much. Its front façade was beautiful, being gleaming white marble interspersed with gold covering enchanted concrete. Columns of black granite were pressed into the building's face, forming a blind arcade that encircled the entire building, joining a pair of stoa on either side of the building's rectangular footprint—while the stoa were covered by a gently sloping roof, most of the rest of the building was open to the sky. The space on the façade between each columns was taken up by incredibly detailed and well-preserved marble reliefs depicting what seemed to be legendary events of all sorts. Great battles, for the most part.

Leon's eyes were drawn to the massive relief above the enormous, two-story-tall double doors, though. There, he saw perched above the door frame, a life-sized carving of the Thunderbird, her plumage covered in stylized lightning. However, her head was missing.

With a scowl, Leon let his eyes wander a bit, and he saw the Thunderbird was depicted numerous times in the reliefs, but each and every one had been decapitated—what was now clear to be deliberate defacement.

But his instinctive anger was lessened greatly when he heard Nestor mutter, [Savages.]

With a deep breath, he calmed himself down. He felt insulted by the defacement of this building, but he didn't like Nestor's response. He'd been called savage enough times that he hardly even blinked when he heard it, but hearing it applied to people who'd been fighting off extraplanar conquerors—even if those conquerors had been his own Ancestors—had him pausing to consider the situation.

[They're not savages,] Leon murmured to Nestor. [At least, *this* doesn't make them savages. It just makes them angry and vengeful, and those aren't emotions exclusive to savages.]

Nestor scoffed, but before he could start an argument with Leon, Claudia began to speak.

"This appeared to be a library or a place of some other similar function," she explained after giving everyone time to take in the sight. "These reliefs we believe show the conquest that the civilization who built these ruins conducted. By all the evidence we've managed to gather, they managed to unite all the human territory on this plane under their banner—or at least got so close to doing so that they'd effectively done so, even if there were a few pockets of resistance remaining."

"The *entire* plane?" Cristina marveled.

"That doesn't even seem possible!" Asiya added just beside her. "Not by humans, at least."

"Maybe something divine, then?" Valeria whispered as she nonchalantly slid in to Leon's left and casually wrapped one of her arms around his. Leon glanced at her and was met with her glittering sapphire eyes staring back at him for a moment before turning back to the façade.

"It's certainly a feat that's never been repeated," Claudia said. "Various powers have waxed and waned, but none have come even slightly close to the strength of this civilization—if you notice the bird figure covered in lightning above the door, you'll also notice that same being represented in art all over the ruins that these people left behind. As a result, we've taken to calling them the Storm Bird people. We can't say much of their own history, especially since so many records have been lost. But there's enough evidence that we've been able to piece together at least a partial narrative.

"As far as we can tell, these Storm Bird people conquered vast swathes of the plane and conducted great building projects all across their Empire. However, their methods of ruling were overbearing, and the peoples they conquered rose in rebellion. They were too many to handle, resources were stretched thin, and this great Empire collapsed only a century or two after its founding. Given the brutality that we can see depicted on these reliefs, I think we can see why the conquered peoples wanted to rise up..."

She proceeded to point out several places where the 'Storm Bird' people violently subjugated Aeternan natives, enslaving, slaughtering, and dominating. They lorded over the natives, showing any who might pass by exactly where their place was: beneath their boot.

For the most part, Nestor remained quiet, but occasionally giving a few words concurring with some of the larger elements of Claudia's narration, plus a few snide remarks about how inaccurate the smaller details were.

"... and we can also see from how heavily vandalized many of these carvings were that many of the destroyed records were at least, in part, *deliberately* destroyed," Claudia said after she finished pointing out some of the more notable reliefs. "But, as always, I have to say that this is all guesswork. Educated guesswork, but guesswork all the same."

"It's still fascinating," Elise remarked as she took Leon's other arm. "For all their power, so little of them remain with us that we barely know who or what they were."

Valeria added, "These people built so much and with such grandeur, but they did so in a way that was completely unsustainable."

"Precisely," Claudia sadly agreed, but she seemed to be missing what Valeria and Elise were getting at. When Leon glanced to either side of him, though, he found both of his lovers giving him the occasional complex look.

He had to admit that he was feeling rather complex about all of this, too. But as he contemplated what had been revealed, his antipathy and disgust at his Ancestors' heavy-handed methods aside, he started to wonder about something else that Claudia had mentioned on several occasions.

'Why were the records destroyed? Wouldn't the rebelling slaves and conquered peoples want their descendants to understand what happened? Why erase all traces of the Thunderbird Clan?'

Chapter 664: The Message

Leon stood alone in the former library quietly contemplating everything that had been revealed during Claudia's tour, by both the archaeologist herself, and by Nestor's additional commentary.

Everyone else largely left him alone, and Claudia remained close to the library's entrance, fielding various questions and remaining available for consultation. Her only condition for allowing them to

wander these halls unsupervised was that they promise not to touch anything, for there hadn't been much they'd been able to preserve in the library, and all of it was irreplaceable.

Leon didn't intend to touch anything, he didn't even think there was much here to see that he hadn't already seen. The building itself was only lightly enchanted, and he guessed that those enchantments were just to protect the open-roofed building from the elements—Ancon clearly had hard-hitting storms, which otherwise would've made such a building rather unsuited for storing books and other sensitive objects. But, even though he didn't think there was anything to really *do* in the empty building, Leon still needed some time alone to process, so into the halls he went.

To an extent, Leon had already known how heavy-handed and tyrannical the Thunderbird Clan had been when they arrived on this plane thanks to what Nestor had already told him, and he'd started to make his peace with it. He could understand certain aspects of their rule—the conquest, mostly, though not how they treated the Aeternan natives—even though he'd never truly been in the position to make those kinds of decisions before. He could understand even better why the Aeternan natives would've hated his Clan for that approach, but it wasn't until he saw the defacement on the library's façade, and until he saw the slave quarters, that he started to get a better grasp on the level of hatred that the natives must've had for his Clan.

Or, at least, he was starting to understand just how much he *didn't* understand about that level of hatred. The people had gone so far as to destroy all written records of the Thunderbird Clan within the library, doing their utmost to damn the memory of his Ancestors for their crimes against Aeterna, seemingly leaving only enough behind to justify their actions.

Not that he could blame them too much, assuming things happened exactly as he was imagining; half the reason he had to get away to process these things was so that he could let his face burn in shame without drawing too much attention to himself.

As he worked to regain his composure, he wondered what information, precisely, might have been saved from destruction.

'Surely, they have some primary sources from that time beyond these few reliefs, even if their sources are unreliable?' he thought to himself. If Claudia's sources were only considered reliable from the time several thousand years after his Clan's fall, then he wondered just what the 'unreliable' sources might have to say. He resolved to ask the archaeologist once he returned to the group.

When he finally started to get a grip on his shame, he found that he'd wandered into a fairly small room, a place that seemed almost like it might've been some kind of office or small lounge. Without any furniture or any other comforts, it was hard to tell exactly what the room's purpose was, but at the least, the back wall was covered in more reliefs, showing that the room had to have held some kind of significance, given that most of the walls in the rest of the halls in the library were bare.

Leon approached the back wall and started examining it. There were a few prominent bird figures, but as with the ones on the library's façade, they had all been defaced. It didn't seem like anything else had, though, which started sticking out to him. Aside from the bird figure, which was clearly supposed to be the Thunderbird, there were other human figures, and a few animal figures prominently featured in the depicted scenes.

He saw a multi-tailed fox with its head surrounded by a radiant nimbus. He saw some kind of large spotted cat gorging itself on terrified humans. He saw armies of strong, powerful mages following the wake of that large cat, with smaller, weaker-looking humans kneeling at their flanks, their heads bowed, their limbs bound in chains.

When Leon stopped to pointedly stare at that particular scene, Nestor said, [Looks like this showed the Blood-Thunder Jaguar's push into this region, and the subjugation of those who'd lived here previously.]

Leon lightly frowned. That was a familiar name; he had the Blood-Thunder Jaguar's hammer in his soul realm. The creature had been a Strategos, indicating that it had only just achieved Apotheosis, and served Jason Keraunos as a vassal.

"And the fox?" Leon asked aloud.

[Lord Alepo,] Nestor answered. [A Despot and Ascended Beast whose true form was that of a fox, who was given roughly half of what is now the Ilian Empire as a fief for the duration of our stay on this plane. Ancon was his capital city.]

Leon nodded, silently grateful that Nestor was being a little more subdued than he was not too long ago. He supposed that his own melancholy at seeing this remnant of his Clan, and at seeing the defacement of their Ancestor's icons, was shared.

Some of the other depicted scenes were much easier to understand, such as seeing crowds of humans and various creatures of all shapes and sizes bowing to a group of humanoid figures with the heads of eagles—representations of the Thunderbird Clan proper, he assumed.

[How many vassals did the Thunderbird Clan bring?] he asked the dead man.

[Many,] Nestor replied. [Few were of any significance, though.]

[Were they all Ascended Beasts?] Leon asked.

[No. Some were descended from such creatures, others were mere humans.]

Leon nodded, and was about to continue his questions when he felt more than saw Valeria walk into the room behind him. Turning around, he saw the silver-haired woman standing just inside the doorway, quietly watching him.

"How are you doing?" she asked, her voice tinged with concern.

Leon sighed, then shrugged. "About as well as ever, really."

"You don't quite seem like it," she pointed out.

With a second sigh, Leon turned back to the reliefs, his eyes being almost drawn to the eagle-headed figures prominently featured in several scenes. In every one, they seemed to be the centers of what seemed like worship, standing before other prostrate figures, including Lord Alepo and the Blood-Thunder Jaguar. This place may have been Alepo's capital city, but it didn't seem like the fox-man had any compunctions against showing his liege.

"I'm fine, really," he repeated. "It's just... I don't want to hide myself again. I don't want to go back to being Leon Ursus. I've had enough of that."

"But you're worried about how the people in the Empires are going to see you?" Valeria asked.

"Yes," Leon readily answered. "It looks like my Ancestors rather brutally conquered this place. Nestor doesn't even shy away from their methods."

Valeria momentarily scowled at the mention of Leon's 'guest'.

"I think I can deal with the conquest and the enslavement," Leon continued. "I've never done such things myself, and I don't intend to repeat them. I certainly don't feel good about what my Ancestors did to the people here, but I'm not going to let that guilt stop me."

"That's not what you're worrying about, though," Valeria said.

"No," Leon agreed. "It's how the locals around these parts are going to see me. If I show up, the last descendent of the people who so brutally occupied this plane, how are they going to react? Are we going to have to fend off assassination attempts? Are they even going to be that subtle; would they just send their best mages after us, killing us before we grow too powerful and *possibly* try to rebuild the Thunderbird Clan?"

"If they do that, I'll stand with you," Valeria declared. "I don't care who they are, or how powerful they are. If they stand between us and the Nexus, then they have to be eliminated."

Leon blinked in surprise; he knew that Valeria wasn't one that shied away from death and violence, but he hadn't expected such a declaration from her. Her sapphire eyes were narrow with determination, and her aura had been laced with a hint of killing intent, so he knew that she was deadly serious.

"Our mothers are waiting for us up there," she continued. "And besides, power invites challenge. If we were to grow powerful enough, then those who stand above us won't just sit idly by as we start to threaten their power. Even if they don't directly move against us, they'll never be our friends. We have to prepare for that."

Leon nodded. "I suppose in that respect, my soul realm's injuries might put them at ease a bit, slowing me down and helping me to stay low."

"I don't think you're capable of 'staying low'," Valeria shot back with a wry smile. "Even when you were trying to do so back in the Bull Kingdom, you always got attention of all kinds."

"Not the worst thing ever, I suppose," Leon whispered as he and she exchanged somewhat heated looks. But then that heat disappeared, and he repeated, "I'm not going back to 'Leon Ursus'. I'm Leon Raime. I can't, and I won't, hide who I am. But I'm not going to advertise it, either. When we get back to Heaven's Eye, I think I'm going to have to call our retinue together and be completely up front with who I am and what Clan I belong to. Or, sometime soon, at least."

"That might blow up in our faces," Valeria said, though her tone didn't indicate that she thought it a bad idea—more like she was just advocating for the other side.

"Maybe it will," Leon conceded. "But I can't go back to constantly worrying about someone discovering who I am. That was bad enough when it was just you and your father I was worrying about. I won't do it

for four entire Empires. If the people fear me for it, then so be it. I'll just show them that I'm not my Ancestors."

Leon could practically feel Nestor's scorn and derision from his soul realm, but he didn't care.

Valeria, on the other hand, asked, "What are you going to do when our circumstances inevitably call for such methods?"

"Enslavement is never a solution," Leon declared as he glanced at the bound and chained figures depicted on the relief. "I'd rather lose than resort to such methods. Everything else... has to be taken as it comes. I don't want to be a conquering tyrant. I'd rather try and get people to follow me willingly."

"Some might call that being soft," Valeria responded. "Many will say that we'll never be able to rescue our mothers with such attitudes."

"Soft or no, if we resort to such methods, we'll always have to watch our backs, for we'll make enemies everywhere we go," Leon explained. He waved back at the relief, saying, "Pointless cruelties will be checked at the door. If we *must* resort to cruelty to achieve our aims—rescuing our mothers for us both, and rebuilding my Clan for me—then we will, but... my Clan made enemies here, and it bit them *hard*. I can't rule with that kind of an iron fist."

Valeria sighed. "It's all hypothetical now. We'll have to see what circumstances allow for us."

"Until then, we'll just have to act as best as we can."

Valeria finally walked over to him and took his arm. She leaned her head against his shoulder as she admired the relief.

"Spectacular craftsmanship, enslaving tyrants or no. This place has lasted for so long that it's hard to fathom..."

Leon hummed in agreement. "That this place even still has magic running through it is a testament to how well it was built. Honestly, I'm rather envious—"

[Wait, what?] Nestor interrupted from his soul realm. [There're functioning enchantments here?]

Valeria gave Leon a strange look after he cut himself off, and he could only give her an apologetic look.

"Yes, Nestor," he said out loud for Valeria's benefit, "I can sense magic running through the walls here. There's not much, and most of it is concentrated near the roof, where the weather enchantments protect this place—"

[Ignore those, tell me about the other enchantments you can sense!]

Leon cocked an eyebrow. Nestor wasn't exactly panicking right now, but he was starting to get worked up.

"What's going on, dead man?" Leon asked.

[I can't sense anything in the walls,] Nestor explained.

Leon's confusion grew, and when he asked Valeria about what he was sensing, her answer was similar to Nestor's—she could only sense the aforementioned enchantments to protect the ruins from the weather.

"It's nothing particularly powerful..." Leon said as he disentangled himself from Valeria's grip and approached the relief where he could feel a thread of magic power. "It's actually rather weak, barely even enough to power a magic lantern, were it hooked up. It's so little power that I wasn't giving it that much thought."

"It must be quite weak because I'm not sensing anything," Valeria admitted.

[That... would make some sense,] Nestor whispered. [I didn't think you'd see something like this *here* of all places, in the remains of a public library, but you know that certain enchantments can be keyed into blood, correct?]

"Yes, I'm aware of that," Leon said, quickly repeating what Nestor was saying for Valeria's benefit. "Something similar helped to protect your lab and the archives beneath Argent Palace. I could easily sense those enchantments, though, and they weren't *this* weak."

[Those enchantments were paired with powerful defensive wards,] Nestor explained. [Hiding them would've been nearly impossible. However, if it's a small enough enchantment, then it can be hidden from all but those of certain bloodlines—even certain lineages that don't have a proper Inherited Bloodline.]

"What would be the point?" Leon asked, already being able to think of a few things he could do with such enchantments but wanting to hear what Nestor's thoughts were.

[Someone might've done something like hiding a door to a secret cache, intending to return someday, something of that nature. It doesn't look like this place was destroyed by violence, though the Clan's enemies certainly got in here to blaspheme against us.]

"We're not gods, dead man," Leon quietly retorted. "Defacing our art is insulting, but it's not blasphemy."

[Those who achieve Apotheosis are gods, plain and simple,] Nestor disagreed. [Compared to the monkeys who lived here before, we were divinity incarnate. Their rebellion *is* blasphemy.]

Leon scowled, still finding the concept distasteful, but he didn't know enough about Apotheosis to properly argue his point. He didn't even know enough to *know* that he was right.

So, he decided to just shelve that topic and turn his attention back to the mysterious enchantment.

"Whatever. Let's get back to the matter at hand: someone went to the trouble of hiding this enchantment from everyone who didn't share certain blood with them? Or who weren't at least a part of our Clan?"

[That seems to be the case, but since I can't sense it, I can't say for certain. This is mostly just an educated guess.]

"Wouldn't any such enchantment that responds to me also respond to you, then?"

[Respond to what? All the blood that I don't have?]

"Eh, I see your point. But, as I said, this power I can sense is a trickle, I can't imagine that it's doing anything more than scanning for power. Anything more than that and it would definitely be noticed, especially by the archaeologists who spend their lives studying these ruins."

[Try to activate it,] Nestor suggested. [If it's as weak as you say it is, then there's no harm in trying.]

"I can think of quite a few harmful things that can happen if it's activated," Leon shot back.

[This is a *library*, not a *fortress*.]

Leon sighed, and then, with a silent apology to Claudia, pressed his hand against the relief while shooting Valeria an apologetic look. She was just watching him with an amused expression on her face, essentially just watching him have a conversation with himself thanks to his unwillingness to let Nestor out of his soul realm.

Once his hand brushed against the marble of the relief, Leon channeled a bit of his magic power into the stone, seeking out the thin thread of power that he could sense. As soon as his magic power wrapped around it, he felt a sudden, though not overwhelming, surge of magic power, and a figure appeared just to his right.

Both he and Valeria reacted with extreme alacrity, dodging sideways and drawing their weapons from their soul realms. Leon's blade sparked with lightning magic, while Valeria's practically sang as her glaive's blade chilled with ice magic.

But then both paused in momentary confusion and sudden understanding, as the man that appeared was slightly translucent, and hadn't moved following his appearance—in fact, he just stood there, staring in Leon's general direction but not really looking at him.

"... A light projection?" Leon inquired aloud.

[A message,] Nestor responded. [Give it a moment, it's old and probably needs the time.]

Leon relaxed slightly, and Valeria did likewise, taking her cue from him. The projection seemed frozen, but about five seconds later, the man whose image it had taken began to speak.

"The Alliance has been betrayed," he spoke, his voice, echoing and slightly distorted, was professional and lacking nearly all emotion, save for a slight note of fear that Leon picked up on. He also spoke with an old accent, but his words were perfectly understandable to both Leon and Valeria. "Prince Demetrios has vanished, the slaves are in revolt across the realm, and Pindar has attempted to seize control what's left of our forces. He killed Lord Alepo when he resisted. We are without a leader, and our slaves are growing bolder, knowing that we've been irreparably weakened. We're abandoning this place, we cannot hold it. Pindar can have what's left, if such is his wish.

"If you're seeking shelter here, know that there's none to be found. Lord Koukouva has taken control of the arsenal and is organizing a retreat to Tiryns for all those that are willing to leave. These savages can have their plane back; Jason Keraunos' expedition has failed."

The message ended there, and the figure blinked out of existence as quickly as he'd appeared, leaving Leon and Valeria alone to contemplate his words.

Chapter 665: Roots and Weeds

Leon and Valeria stood there, neither speaking, as they processed what the message had just said. Nestor, however, was beyond furious, and he raged in Leon's soul realm.

[Pindar...] he'd started with, a simple muttering that was laced with more hatred than Leon thought he'd ever heard from the dead man. [That ambitious little shit... he finally turned traitor! MY FATHER SHOULD HAVE TAKEN HIS HEAD AFTER HIS FIRST FAILED REBELLION! HIS HEAD SHOULD'VE BEEN MOUNTED ATOP THE WALLS OF THE STORMFORT AND HIS CORPSE FED TO SERPENTS! THAT GUTTER-LICKING BASTARD'S POXY WHORE OF A MOTHER SHOULD'VE LEFT HIM AS A STAIN ON HER MATTRESS!]

Leon had a relatively hard time processing everything that the messenger had said with Nestor ranting in his mind, and the dead man went on for a while, only stopping when Leon finally shouted, [Enough!]

Nestor went silent, but Leon could almost feel the dead man's ruby shaking with fury.

Not privy to what was going on in Leon's soul realm, Valeria said, "Well... that was something, wasn't it? I guess all of that means something, but I can't quite make sense of it. Your Clan had a bit of a civil war when your Ancestors were killed, then?"

"Looks like it," Leon whispered. "Who was this Pindar, though? Nestor? You had some thoughts on the subject, it seemed?"

Nestor answered, his voice dripping with contempt and anger, [*Pinder* was a man who ascended from the lower planes. He was a brutal user of lightning magic, and he thought that since he'd achieved Apotheosis that he was untouchable. When he arrived in the Storm Lands after reaching the Nexus, he immediately tried to usurp the closest Strategos and establish himself as an independent ruler. Such an occurrence wasn't too uncommon back in my father's time, with ambitious hicks rising from their worthless backwaters and thinking that made them entitled to power, and my father took a very hard line with them.

[The Strategos that Pindar attempted to usurp was one of my father's direct vassals—even if he wasn't, my father and all other legitimate rulers in the Storm Lands would've been obligated to defend this Strategos in accordance with Khosrow's Law. Pindar almost managed to succeed, but when my father arrived, that little shitstain was stomped into the ground. He resisted well enough, however, that my father offered to take him into his service.

[Pindar agreed, and was granted lands of his own under my father's direct supervision. With my father's patronage, Pindar reached the rank of Basileus, but he repaid my father by scheming against him, attempting to ally with several other Basileis under the Gale King to support his bid for independence. My father found out, and stripped Pinder of all rank, and once more personally stomped him into the ground, where the bastard belonged.

[But my father showed him *mercy*. I don't know why, if it was my father finding amusement in the man's failures or something else of the sort, but he didn't execute Pindar. Instead, Pindar was brought to live with my father as one of his personal agents, without title or land—living not unlike my father's pet. It seems that after my father's death, Pindar once more took to his rebellious ways...]

Leon relayed all of that as best as he could to Valeria.

“Sounds like there were some complicated politics at play,” she stated. “What was this ‘Alliance’ that the projection spoke of?”

“I’m unsure...” Leon replied, and, after using his magic senses to make sure that no one noticed the first time the message played, he reached out his magic, activating the message enchantment again. Fortunately, it wasn’t broken after only playing once, and began to play once more. Leon, Valeria, and Nestor listened in silence.

By the end of it, Leon had pulled out a sheet of paper and a pen and scrawled the messenger’s words down so that he would have a permanent record of the message’s contents.

When that was finished, he looked back to Valeria and said, “Nestor was obviously dead by that time, so I can only guess at this, but I think I’ve got something of a picture of how all of this went.”

“Lay it on me,” Valeria replied.

“I think that this ‘Alliance’ was probably the survivors of Jason Keraunos’ death at the hands of the Grave Warden. It seems that he made an assault on the Grave Warden, and his entire force, including most of his children, were slaughtered. At first, Prince Demetrios was the man whom everyone tried to rally behind, but with Demetrios’ apparent disappearance, the rest were forced into some kind of mutually beneficial alliance to try and maintain some kind of peace.”

“That clearly didn’t last long,” Valeria quipped. “Seems like it fell apart fairly quickly.”

“That’s hard to say for certain, not like we got an accurate timetable,” Leon pointed out, and Valeria shrugged in concession. “If I had to say anything, I’d guess that you’re right, though. This ‘Pindar’ attempted to use his power and influence to usurp the authority of the alliance, to take over for Jason Keraunos without someone else to carry on the Thunderbird’s legacy. And it seems that there was some pushback, as with Lord Alepo. We know that Pindar killed Alepo, but after that...”

“Who was this ‘Koukouva’?” Valeria asked.

Without waiting for Leon to relay the question, Nestor answered, [He was another vassal of my father, and another Ascended Beast. His true form was that of a giant owl, and he had been given authority over much of what is now the Ilian Empire, directly to the north of Alepo’s land. Last I was aware, he ranked as a Basileus.]

Leon passed on that explanation, and then added himself, “... and the message said that Koukouva took over the arsenal. If I remember what you told me, Nestor, then that meant that most of the Clan’s arks that were capable of traveling between planes had fallen into his hands.”

[Along with any of our weapons that my father didn’t bring to the confrontation with the Grave Warden,] Nestor whispered, his rage now seemingly cooled.

“They didn’t stay, though, they intended to evacuate,” Valeria pointed out.

Leon nodded as a scowl spread across his face. “So it would seem. Which would be a shame, because if memory serves, Occulara was where the arsenal was located. I was hoping that it hadn’t been discovered and that there may have been something there to find. If this message’s claims are correct, though, and Koukouva managed to retreat, then it’s entirely possible that there’s nothing there

remaining. Were I in Koukouva's shoes, I would fill every ark I could with survivors and destroy anything that I couldn't take with me."

"Where would that leave Pindar, then?" Valeria wondered.

"That would depend on whoever remained, I guess," Leon said. "I don't think any of us can say without knowing more of the aftermath of Jason Keraunos' death. I think the fact that the Four Empires are here and not a single unified polity can allow us an inference, though. I think that Pindar probably didn't last long as a leader, and that the natives of this plane might've managed to kill him, somehow. Or maybe there were enough remnants of my Clan left behind that his rule was challenged enough to fall apart. Or maybe he had arks of his own and he managed to evacuate—but he *was* post-Apotheosis, so I don't think he would've been confined to this plane even if he didn't. No matter what happened, it seems that this instability was enough to let the Aeternan natives reassert control over the plane..."

Leon trailed off a bit, but a possibility emerged in his mind. He'd only heard them mentioned a few times and had never truly sought out information on them, but he started having some specific wonderings about the 'Sky Devils', who supposedly lived in the far southeast, practically on the other side of the plane as the Bull Kingdom. From the way that it sounded on those few times that he'd heard of them, they were in conflict with the Four Empires, and combined with their name, made him suspect who—or *what*—they were supposed to be.

But there were no answers to those questions to be had here, so Leon made a mental note to look into the Sky Devils, and moved on.

Glancing back down at his scribbled record of the message, he activated it one more time to have a listen. When it was over, he asked Nestor, "What's 'Tiryns'?"

[Tiryns was a fortress plane,] Nestor replied. [To be powerful in the Nexus alone is a difficult thing since it destroys itself every hundred thousand years. There has to be static, more permanent roots for a Clan such as ours to form, which necessitates the acquisition of lower planes, by conquest or other means. Throughout our history, our Clan subjugated so many planes and brought so many others into its sphere of influence, that we were able to specialize many of them for certain purposes.]

"So things like devoting one to farming, another to the production of military equipment, that sort of thing?" Leon asked.

[In a sense, yes,] Nestor replied. [No plane can be completely specialized in that respect since the cost of transporting food and materials can be prohibitive, but there are certain things we had the luxury of doing with the multitude of planes under our control. Pylos was our biggest arkyard, we grew and refined many of our most potent alchemical materials on Arcadia, and we trained and stationed our largest armies outside of the Nexus on Proteus, Electryon, and Argolis. Nemea, Ladon, and Everes were entire planes set aside as hunting preserves, with all of humanity banned from setting foot upon them without the express approval of a Clan member of high rank.]

[For our Clan, we had many planes devoted to our support and pleasure. Palace complexes that spanned continents, academies the size of cities, whole planes whose produce supported us, so that our personal lands could remain unspoiled by the hand of man. Such was our power that the wealth of countless planes was sent to us as taxes or in tribute...]

As Nestor spoke, he largely spoke fairly neutrally, but Leon could pick up on some of his growing enthusiasm as he spoke of the glories of their Clan at its peak. But then he paused for a moment, and when he spoke again, his voice was tinged with such nostalgia, longing, and wistfulness that Leon didn't once think to mock the dead man for becoming almost poetic.

[But for all those planes in our possession, three stood out even amongst the glittering palaces, golden fields, and stout fortresses: Mighty Tiryns; Radiant Kypros; and Minos, the Subject of All Desire. Envious Minos was the personal property of whomever held the title of 'Storm King' and was a palace-plane that was fit for such majesty. At any one time, thousands of arks would be making their way to Far-Ruling Minos, each bearing a mountain of wealth to be used at our Clan's leisure.

[Golden Kypros was a plane of such natural wealth that it could only be managed by one of the most powerful and respected members of our Clan, with oceans of Titanstone beneath its soil, gold and silver in spectacular quantities, and jewels beyond counting. It was at Brilliant Kypros that we refined most of our stock of our most valuable materials: Adamant, Titanstone, Lumenite, and Aurichalcum. Shining Kypros didn't power our Clan alone, but its importance to our Clan cannot be overstated.

[And finally, we get to Thunderous Tiryns, a fortress-plane of such strength that it was common sense to think of it as indestructible. The strength of Invincible Tiryns was so great and so well-known that it became the ideal to which all other fortifications were compared.]

Nestor finally stopped long enough for Leon to repeat as much of what he just said to Valeria as he could, though he skipped most of the flowery language.

When Leon was finished with his explanation, Nestor said, [These three planes, and Tiryns in particular, were the backbone of our Clan. Minos was our pride and joy, but our Storm Kings mostly ruled from the Nexus, leaving it as the symbolic capital of our Clan, the site of our biggest treasury, and little more. The wealth of Kypros made us mighty beyond compare, but it was not our sole source of wealth, and we could've lived without it if we absolutely had to—though we fought frequently and fiercely to ensure we would never have to.

[But Tiryns was the greatest shield that ensured what was ours, *remained* ours. The strength of our enemies didn't matter, and even our own strength didn't matter, for as long as Tiryns remained in our control, then no matter how much our power might wane in a given generation, it would never vanish completely. Tiryns, more than any other plane, *guaranteed* our power. And for Lord Koukouva to retreat there is only natural. Minos and Kypros were off-limits to him, and the Clan would need to know of my father's death as soon as possible. Even more importantly, we would've had to fortify ourselves against the onslaught of our enemies as soon as we could, else all would be lost, for losing my father and all of our mightiest warriors on this plane, not to mention the loss of the Iron Needle, would leave us in such a weakened position that keeping Tiryns stable and under our control would've been utterly crucial to our survival.]

Leon quietly nodded, and then quietly said, "It would seem that our Clan fell anyway. Tiryns must've fallen, or we must've lost it, somehow."

Nestor sighed with such regret and loss that Leon almost shrank down an inch or two in empathetic dejection.

[There's nothing I want more than a proper accounting of the fall of our Clan,] Nestor quietly stated. [If I had to choose between that, or getting my body back, I would choose to give up on my body forever.]

"A strong statement," Leon remarked.

[Indeed, and one that I think its warranted,] Nestor replied. [Our Clan should *not* have fallen, Leon. It simply should *not* have been possible, even with the loss of my father! We were too strong, too well-fortified, too damned *wealthy* for this to have happened to us! For you to be the last of our Clan is a sin beyond compare! With the strength of Tiryns, with the wealth of Kypros, with the power of Minos, and with the might of all the rest of our planes, it *should not have been possible for us to fall!*

[And I *have* to know why, and how!]

"So do I," Leon said, his golden eyes narrowing in grim determination. "And I think I know where we might be able to start..."

—

Leon and Valeria quickly wrapped things up in the message room. They watched the message one last time, Leon ensured that his record was accurate, and then they returned to the library's main hall.

There, they found Claudia standing by the doors, quietly chatting with Dame Maxima and several other of Princess Cristina's knightesses. The Princess herself was exploring the library with Asiya and Elise, while Maia was sitting on the edge of a balcony on the second floor, staring out at the hall with a contemplative look.

Leon approached Claudia with Valeria by his side.

"Leon," Claudia said in polite greeting, and Maxima gave him a respectful nod.

"Claudia," Leon responded with a good-natured smile. "I have to say, this place has been preserved magnificently, given its age. I would've thought that something eighty-thousand years old would've been in *much* worse condition..."

"It would probably not be too different from the rest of ruins around here," Claudia sadly mused.

"Buried, with little more than a few scattered piles of bricks poking out of the dirt."

"A shame," Leon commiserated. "But even what's here is still extremely impressive. I have to admit to having some strong curiosity about the people who lived here. I know that you said that the contemporary sources of this period are unreliable, but does that mean that there's no *real* information to be had?"

"Of course not," Claudia said, almost aghast at Leon's inquiry. "We have plenty of strong evidence of who these people were just based on the art that we've managed to preserve. But what stories they told themselves, their thoughts and much of their culture, have been lost to time, I'm afraid. And those stories that we still have of that time have all largely been mythologized. There's probably some truth to them in there somewhere, but we don't quite know enough to say what's fact and what's fiction. This is why I say that our sources are unreliable—myths and folk stories don't make for compelling evidence, especially since it seems many of the people making those myths were quite biased in their storytelling."

“But those myths can still be enlightening,” Leon pointed out. “Maybe there’s not much academic value to those stories, but I would appreciate if you could share some of them with me, if you’re able...”

“I’m certainly able to do that,” Claudia responded with a joyous smile. “I actually *love* anything to do with this mysterious civilization, and even if the information is wrong, I still just *devour* any stories I can find about it!”

She paused a moment and gave an apologetic look to Cristina’s knights, but Maxima just encouraged her to indulge Leon, and they’d listen in quietly.

With that out of the way, Claudia launched into what she described as the most common myth of that time, and what was essentially the founding myth of the Four Empires, even though all four of the Empires weren’t formally founded until tens of thousands years later.

It started, Claudia narrated, with a war in the heavens between gods and devils. The gods won, but were so injured in the fighting that they were unable to stop the devils from retreating to Aeterna. The devils then used their terrifying power to subjugate all the lands of Aeterna under their banner. Things looked grim for the men of Aeterna, but in the end, the devils succumbed to their true nature, and lost themselves to infighting.

The Aeternan natives rallied around eleven great heroes—those Leon had heard referred to as the ‘Brilliant Eleven’—and with these prodigious warriors leading the charge, they struck in the moment of the devils’ greatest weakness, and drove them from the continent.

Claudia ended her story with a dire warning, though, explaining that according to the stories, the devils weren’t completely defeated, but were only driven away from the Aeternan mainland. Even now, their descendants yet lived on the island far to the southeast, known to the Empires and all the civilizations of mankind as ‘Sky Devil’s Hell’. There, they were imprisoned by the brave men and women of the Imperial navies, but had become so fortified that even the mighty proto-Empires were unable to muster the nerve to dislodge them.

In the end, the Brilliant Eleven decided to let the devils live in peace, hoping that they could eventually find some common ground, and split up to tend to their individual Kingdoms. These Kingdoms eventually coalesced into the Four Empires, but the Sky Devils never made peace with them. The Argonaut Sea and the Straits of Keraunos—

Chapter 666: Three New Goals

Leon was rather quiet for the rest of the day following the tour of the ruins. His group stayed for only another hour or so before it was time to leave, and his family split from Princess Cristina’s retinue at the gates. The Princess herself tried to object, but after a whispered exchange with Valeria, she let them go, though Leon could tell that she wasn’t happy about the situation.

Regardless, he had other things on his mind than a pouting Princess, things that weighed on him throughout the rest of the date. Elise tried to get him talking again while they were at dinner, but even though it was an expensive restaurant and rather early in the day, it was still crowded enough that Leon kept his quiet. Even during the subsequent cruise around the lake, Leon remained extremely taciturn, for he didn’t want to talk around even the small crew of their tiny, rented yacht.

It wasn't until they finally returned to the Heaven's Eye guest house as the sun started to dip below the horizon that he started to speak about what was on his mind, and when he started to speak, he didn't stop for more than an hour. He ranted about the fall of his Clan; how much they deserved it; how bitter he was that they fell at all; the avoidable mistakes they made which caused their fall following Jason Keraunos' death; how justified the Aeternan natives were in their war for freedom; and so much more. By the end of it, he was just *angry* and barely even registering what he was saying anymore.

He felt better after it was over, but was immediately apologetic for ranting that like at his lovers.

"It's fine," Elise told him. "Better to know what's on your mind like this than to have you bottle it all up."

"I agree," Valeria whispered.

Maia didn't say anything, but after Leon collapsed into an armchair, she draped herself over him and sealed his mouth with hers for a long moment, and any need she had to speak to get her thoughts across vanished.

When the river nymph disentangled herself from Leon, the conversation continued, with Valeria asking, "What will this mean? If these people think that you're connected to their mythical tyrants..."

"That *might* be an issue," Elise said as she squinted in thought, "but with the backing of Heaven's Eye, and with eighth-tier power from three different beings, we're effectively above all but Imperial recriminations, and even then, we'd have to do something *very* eye-catching to be put on their map."

"That's going to happen sooner or later," Valeria pointed out. "I mean, how long do you think it's going to take Leon to do something impulsive that'll have *everyone* talking?"

Valeria and Elise shared a knowing look, while Leon could only scowl. He wanted to argue against his silver-haired lover's words, but he knew them to be true.

"It might be sooner than you think," Leon whispered. "My Clan's arsenal was in Occulara. I have a sneaking suspicion that that's the reason Heaven's Eye is headquartered there, of all places, so the chance that the arsenal hasn't been discovered is extremely remote, and the chances that it wasn't destroyed after Lord Koukouva retreated from it is even more so, but it's something I want to keep my eyes open for, just in case."

Elise grinned with an almost greedy look in her eyes. "Arks are rare and extremely powerful; even the Empires only have a few apiece. If there's an undiscovered, and possibly even still intact *arkyard* below Occulara, then that's something we *have* to investigate." Her look then fell, replaced by something a little more contemplative and resigned. "But... you're right, there's probably little chance it hasn't been discovered given it's an all-but autonomous city within the Ilian Empire. Heaven's Eye has nearly unchecked control over Occulara, and they've built it up quite extensively."

Valeria added, "At the very least, it would seem that if the Thunderbird Clan left anything behind, it hasn't been put to any particularly unsavory uses, otherwise we'd probably know about it. So little chance that a fleet of war-arcs were left behind, or huge caches of weapons."

"I think that maybe there *were* caches of weapons left behind, at least in small quantities," Leon stated as he stared at the wall. "The Bull Kingdom's Flame Lances were supposed to have been based on Imperial weapons, weren't they? Now, I can't say for sure, but I have a suspicion that the Imperial

Lances, whatever form they take, could very well be based on Nexus-grade weapons my Clan left behind."

"We don't have any proof of that, though, do we?" Valeria asked.

"No, we don't," Leon conceded, "it's just a suspicion I've had. Still, it's not the only consideration it leaves us with..."

Leon gave Elise a meaningful look, and the fire-haired woman said, "These planes, then? Minor, Tiryns, and Kyprus?"

"*Minos and Kypros*," Leon corrected, "but yes, those are the ones. A palace-plane, a plane of unimaginable wealth, and a fortress-plane, all three of which made for the most important foundations upon which the Thunderbird Clan had been built." Leon paused a moment and looked to Valeria, who had the most knowledge of the Nexus out of all four of them. "Have you ever heard of any of these places?"

"Not much," Valeria admitted. "A few off-hand remarks—'fortress to shame Tiryns', 'not even Tiryns could withstand such might', and the like. Nothing concrete. I'd have to ask my father about them."

Leon grimaced, but nodded.

"I suppose we can't make any definitive plans for them until we know more," he said.

"Are you still intending to go to the Nexus, first?" Elise asked.

"Absolutely," Leon replied. "I have no idea how we're going to get there, but by all accounts, it seems that arks capable of traveling the Void are more common there than anywhere else. It would be better to struggle to reach the Nexus and gain the ability to travel anywhere, then struggle to reach anywhere, and continue to struggle to go anywhere else. At the very least, it seems that traveling through the Void isn't impossible for those who reach Apotheosis, but we'll still need solid access to long range arks before thinking about reclaiming my Clan's wider holdings."

"I suppose that makes sense," Elise whispered.

"Besides," Leon continued, "I want to build up some kind of base in the Nexus, first."

"Doesn't the Nexus regularly destroy itself?" Maia asked aloud, speaking for the first time since they'd returned to the guest house.

"Every hundred-thousand years," Leon replied. "It's been a little under eighty-thousand years since the last such Reconstitution, so we still have twenty-thousand years or so to accomplish this. More than enough time to get established long enough to find somewhere more permanent, I'd say."

"Hopefully..." the river nymph replied with a light frown.

Leon shrugged and sighed. "I think that right now, we have so little information that making any concrete plan is a little foolish. I *want* to go to the Nexus before anywhere else, but I don't mind changing that plan if something else comes up."

Maia mirrored his shrug. "So long as we aren't trapped," she said. Leon nodded in understanding.

“Is there anything else we need to bring up?” he asked the other three.

None had much else to say, so they moved on to making plans for the following day. They didn’t have much time to explore Ancon, and they wanted to make the most of it. After some discussion, they eventually settled on exploring a park in the morning, and then seeing a play in the afternoon.

After they broke for the night, though, Valeria went to see her father. Justin was glad to see his daughter and was a little aggrieved that she’d come to him for information rather than any other motive, but when she started asking him questions, he gave her the answers she wanted.

She asked him about the planes that Nestor had told Leon about, and she was surprised to learn that Justin was fairly well-informed on the subject—apparently the three most important planes to the Thunderbird Clan were common knowledge in the Nexus, and there were many stories about them, not the least of which how they fell.

After getting her answers, Valeria returned to Leon, Elise, and Maia to relay what she’d been told.

Kypros was the most active, being the richest and most attractive plane to hold. As far as Justin was aware, the planar cluster that Kypros was a part of was still controlled by forces from the Storm Lands, but the group that held the plane changed every decade or two. Kypros was so rich a prize that oceans of blood were spilled to take and hold it. It was considered common sense that only the next Storm King would have the power and authority to make it theirs, and there hadn’t been anyone powerful enough to claim that title since Jason Keraunos’ death, so Kypros remained a battleground.

Tiryns, however, was a different story. It was an incredible fortress plane of legendary repute. Supposedly fully staffed and supplied, it was able to defend the huge planar cluster that formed the core of the Thunderbird’s Clan’s power from attack with ease—it was the strongpoint that made all the other defenses of the planar cluster possible. However, these days, it was practically deserted, held by squatters and forces no better than pirates. Its great Tempest Cannons were silent, Tiryns’ occupiers unable to maintain them; the Hurricane Shield inoperable; its Castra satellite planes empty; its portals closed; its arkyards empty and broken; and its innumerable walls and citadels devoid of life. Only the gigantic bands of Lumenite that arced above and around the fortress-plane that could encase the entire plane in a shield of invincible light if fully powered and that bristled with other magical weapons and defense platforms, were still inhabited, all else essentially abandoned.

Buried somewhere within the planar cluster it defended was Minos, likely just as abandoned, but Justin wasn’t sure. The Thunderbird Clan, Justin had said, had always been incredibly stingy with the maps of the planar cluster where they made their home, and getting any information on it had been practically impossible. In the millennia that followed their collapse, so many charlatans had made fake maps to sell that ferreting out any true maps that may have leaked from migrants and refugees had been impossible.

Hardly anyone wanted that planar cluster, anymore, and hardly anyone ever came out of it. ‘Abandoned’, Justin claimed, or as close to it as a cluster of several hundred Aeterna-sized planes could be. Devastated during the massive wars of succession following Jason Keraunos’ death, the place had become a backwater that wasn’t worth the time to occupy and rebuild, so shattered and ruined that no one even checked up on the cluster anymore. Even the occasional bold scavenger rarely stayed long, usually scared off by the pirates and smugglers that occupied the few remaining intact fortress planes other than Tiryns in the cluster.

Tiryns, as the primary fortress that defended the cluster, had nothing of worth to defend anymore, and as the locus of power among those who aspired to seize the title of Storm King shifted, it became more and more irrelevant. Likewise, Minos, despite being the central palace and spiritual capital of the Thunderbird Clan, was unlikely to hold anyone but looters, in Justin's view.

When Valeria finished, Leon was left silent, unsure exactly how to respond to all of that information. He wondered how much of it was true, separate from whether or not Justin might've lied. It at least *sounded* plausible enough, with civil wars tracking with what he knew of the aftermath of the fall of his Clan, and depopulation and mass migration being the natural result...

'... But hundreds of planes?' he wondered to himself. 'How could so much territory just be abandoned? Along with Minos and Tiryns?'

He thought back to what he knew of his Clan outside of Aeterna. It wasn't much, but from a few off-hand remarks from the Thunderbird, he knew that the Clan survived in some form until at least the last ten thousand years, which meant that there were almost seventy-thousand years *minimum* between the death of Jason Keraunos and the final death of his last Clan member outside of Aeterna.

'Did the Clan abandon Minos?' Leon thought. 'And how did Tiryns fall? Were all the planes it defended evacuated? There has to be someone living there other than pirates and looters! It can't just be abandoned!'

No matter what, though, he was almost happy. Tiryns was occupied by squatters, and Minos had been lost to history. His Clan's home cluster was empty at best, and quite possibly anarchic in truth, while Kypros and its cluster was a perpetual warzone. Though the thought of these places being occupied by anyone else not of his Clan had his blood boiling, he also never wanted such places to just be handed to him.

'Taking them back ought to be quite the experience...' he thought to himself as a smile uncontrollably spread across his face. The retaking of his Clan's old centers of power would be the biggest proof possible that he was the true heir of the Thunderbird Clan, and not just an entitled child using power he was graced with by the accident of his birth.

He couldn't wait to get started.

—

"What's wrong, Leon Raime?" Penelope asked, her dark brown eyes narrowed in amusement as she turned from the play to watch Leon fight not to bury his face in his hands, though he'd already sunk low in his seat. "I thought a man of your caliber would have a better resistance to bad jokes. Are comedies not your forte?"

Leon grimaced in disgust, mortification, and muted rage as he returned the eighth-tier woman's look with something more akin to disgust than amusement, and didn't answer.

The play he and his family had gone to see was a comedy, and if he tried to distance himself from the subject matter then he'd say that the jokes were funny enough, especially with the jubilant reactions from the crowd, but the subject matter was too close for him to do so.

It was a comedic retelling of the life of one of the Ilian Empire's founding heroes, one of the Brilliant Eleven, which Leon and his family hadn't known before the play began. The hero was born shortly before the Thunderbird Clan's arrival, lived for a while beneath their tyrannical rule, and then rebelled—though Leon was mostly substituting the bird-headed 'otherworlders' that the play portrayed with his Clan, for these characters weren't particularly accurate to what he knew to be the plane's history.

But even though it wasn't *technically* his Clan up on stage, their substitutes were still made out to be comically over-the-top evil, and oftentimes comedically incompetent. Many jokes were made where the main character prepared for a long time to make some plan of resistance against them, only for them to destroy themselves before he could even arrive, leaving him confused and almost disappointed.

The crowd was eating it up, laughing uproariously at nearly every joke, but Leon's family were silent, and Leon himself was beyond mortified.

Making the matter worse, Penelope was there with them, making it too awkward for them to just leave. They had reserved one of the private boxes above the large theater's main seating area, but apparently she was in another of the private boxes and noticed their arrival. Contrary to what Leon would've expected had he known she was there, she actually left her box and asked to join them, reasoning that comedies are always more fun when watching with others. Not being able to refuse without looking rude, Leon and his family were practically forced to invite her into their box to watch the play with them.

And so, they were stuck watching Leon's Clan—effectively Elise, Valeria, and Maia's Clan, too, now, given their connection with Leon—be denigrated and humiliated on stage, and couldn't even explain to Penelope why they weren't enjoying the play.

"I'm fine with comedies," Leon answered the Heaven's Eye agent through gritted teeth, "I just don't think this one is very funny."

Penelope cracked a smirk. "I would normally be loath to agree with someone like you, but in this case, I simply *must*. I'm more entertained that this is the only part of the theater not shaking with laughter right now..."

"It only takes a few people laughing to make something funny," Elise whispered, the only sign of her relative anger at the mockery of Leon's Clan being a slight tinge of red in her cheeks. "If a few people start, then it's just easier for everyone to follow suit."

"Maybe..." Penelope whispered. She took a deep breath and then completely changed the subject, letting the raucous roaring of the throngs below drown out everything else. "Lady Elise, what are your intentions for Heaven's Eye?"

Elise blinked in confusion for a moment at the sharp change in topic, but she didn't let the question throw her off for long. "I had no immediate intentions, Lady Penelope. I have to see to my family's household first and foremost."

"An understandable issue that needs sorting," Penelope replied, her almond eyes narrowing, "but I was speaking of after that. Surely, after your mother assumes her new role, you will be looking to increase your duties, too?"

Elise smiled at Penelope, but from the way the corners of her mouth tightened, Leon could tell that it was forced. “My mother has released me from my role as her secretary,” Elise said. “I’m free to work on my personal projects. I don’t have much interest in rising through the ranks of Heaven’s Eye right now. That might change in the future, but right now, my plans start and end with my family.”

Penelope stared at Elise for a long moment, and then seemed to relax. “That’s... unfortunate to hear,” the woman said, not looking even remotely sincere as the words passed her lips.

Elise let the matter go, though, and seemed to turn her attention back to the play for a few minutes before Penelope spoke again.

“Do you have any idea where you might decide to live once you’ve reached Occulara?”

“We’re still hammering out the details,” Elise politely replied, not once looking at the Eye of the Director. “We need lots of land for what we’re planning, and we’re unsure of what’s on offer in the city.”

“I’ll help you out,” Penelope said, not seeming to even entertain the idea of Leon and Elise refusing.

Which they didn’t, at least not in those words.

“There’s no need for that, Lady Penelope,” Leon stated as he rose slightly from where he’d let his body slouch in his seat, “we’re more than capable of finding a villa suitable for our family on our own without taking up your undoubtedly *valuable* time.”

“I was ordered to escort you to Occulara,” Penelope bluntly stated. “After the report of that little vampire attack you had to suffer made its way to headquarters, it was decided that you needed a little extra help. My father is eager to see all of you welcomed to Occulara, and to that end, will likely order me to help you, regardless of how any of us feel about it. Get used to it now.”

Her tone remained steady, but when Leon glanced at her, the corners of her eyes were tight and her cheeks were slightly raised in a barely-suppressed squint. She was about as happy about this arrangement as he was.

Something they could commiserate together over, he supposed, but he’d still rather that he and Penelope had as little to do with each other as possible. He and Elise

Chapter 667: Ilion

When the day to leave Ancon finally came, Leon wasn’t too upset. He’d found little in the city save for frustration, humiliation, and anger—or rather, those things that frustrated, humiliated, and angered him so outweighed the good parts that he was just glad to see the city slowly disappearing into the distance behind the Heaven’s Eye convoy.

Much like the trek from Akhmim to Attica, this leg of their journey would be overland, and undergone in the lap of such luxury that Leon could hardly fathom it. Hundreds of wheelless, horseless carriages, each one large enough to be a small house, would transport their convoy northeast to Ilion, the capital of the Ilian Empire. While they weren’t to travel through the richest land in the Empire, the natural wealth of this place, to Leon’s understanding, still put nearly everywhere on Aeterna to shame.

So, with little regret, Leon turned his eyes from Ancon as it faded away into the haze of distance to what was now appearing before them.

The central regions of Aeterna were quite flat—it had its mountains and hills, especially in the Sunlit Empire and the lands of the Sentinels, but fertile plains, long rivers, and shallow, mineral-rich hills were the name of the game here. The air was fairly humid and warm, but not so much as to be uncomfortable for even second or third-tier mages, and it led to fantastic agricultural yields, as Leon was able to see—the multi-lane highway they took toward Ilion was wide enough to allow at least six carriages to comfortably fit side-by-side, but on either side of it were tall trees with branches heavy with colorful fruit. None were quite so close for people to pick the fruit as they traveled, but they were still close enough to be readily available for anyone to take if they found a hunger during their journey—Elise informed Leon that the highway-side orchards were managed by the Empire for the express purpose of feeding travelers for free, and thus encouraging commerce.

Beyond the orchards were large private farms, immaculately tailored and, being perfectly square, were shaped differently than the farms he was used to seeing. In most places he'd been to, farms were generally long and narrow, allowing for beasts of burden to not have to turn that often when yoked to a plow—a fairly arduous thing to do that wasted time, to his understanding. These farms, however, being square, implied that the Empire didn't have to rely on such methods to plow their fields.

It wasn't long before Leon saw that method for himself, with several large vehicles visible to his magic senses out in the fields doing work. They were large, sleek, carriage-like things made of gleaming gray metal, with long, thin bodies, but still able to turn on a silver coin. They hovered off the ground on a cushion of air, while having a series of revolving blades on the front that magically swiped and turned fast enough to effectively harvest whatever grains were growing in the field. Once the carriage hovered over the now-cut grain, air enchantments would suck it up into the back, quickly filling the carriage. Meanwhile, a plow was lowered in the back of the machine, allowing it to till the land at the same time that it harvested.

It was almost mesmerizing watching such magical machines work. Leon had never really seen anything like them—they were extremely well-engineered and designed for something that he didn't think he ever would've thought of on his own. His own musings on enchantments weren't devoted to something so *mundane* as farming equipment, and yet here were machines more magically advanced than anything he'd ever designed, and seemingly their only purpose was to tend to fields.

Leon sat by the window of his family's carriage for hours, just watching what few of these vehicles he could see with his magic senses working, sometimes analyzing what little he could sense of their enchantments based on the magic they emanated, but otherwise just observing. He noted that they weren't autonomous, but they had enclosed cabins for their crews of three to handle.

It was a long time before he realized that they'd traveled for more than a hundred miles and yet hadn't seen an end to the farms and orchards. He could see two hundred miles ahead of him, and even though he could see a few good-sized towns and cities along their route, it still struck him that many of these farms would have to transport their produce a *long* way to reach a settlement of significant size. He knew that the price of food could skyrocket for every day that it spent in overland transport, so he wondered just how the Ilrian Empire managed to keep the prices reasonable in this part of the world. He supposed, though, that if the carriages like the one he was riding in were plentiful enough—and by all evidence he'd seen, they seemed to be—then his usual standard for logistics would have to be seriously revised. He was in a completely different world than the one he was used to.

By the time they stopped for the day in a city of about fifty thousand, his head was buzzing with thoughts of the kind of logistical nightmare it must be to manage such a system, accounting for hundreds of millions of people at least, and a sense of dread settled into his stomach knowing that it was in his future to manage something even grander: a system where entire planes were specialized for farming, or production of certain materials—a multiplanar Kingdom.

Suddenly, he realized that he'd been far too single-minded and conservative in his recruitment of retainers. He'd been focusing on combat potential, and while those who could fight would be indispensable, he realized that the largest army he'd need to build would be one of bureaucrats.

He didn't get much rest that night, and spent most of his time fitfully training. On the second day of the journey to Ilion, he kept his mind diligently shuttered in the carriage, choosing not to think about the challenge he was staring down, at least for the time being.

Instead, he focused on training and studying, and supervising the training of his retinue. Now that he had Helen and Anna, he could justify getting the ladies of his retinue their own carriage, which served to greatly reduce some tensions in his retinue, as well, since Anshu wasn't being required to share living spaces with unmarried women. He, Gaius, Marcus, and Alcander got their own carriage, while Alix, Helen, and Anna got one to themselves.

After several days of spending his days training, he noticed that the farms that had flanked the highway orchards were thinning out, and the cities they were passing were growing more and more frequent, and much larger, to boot. There were still plenty of rural and agricultural zones within range of his magic senses, but for the most part, land that was truly wild had disappeared, leaving in their wake the golden towers of the Ilian Empire's urban centers, the villas of their perfectly manicured country estates, and the abundant fields that were needed to sustain the Empire's massive population.

The more Leon saw, the less he felt welcome. It was all quite beautiful, with the aesthetics of the Ilian Empire undeniable, but Leon felt wrong being so far away from true wilds. Even in the most heavily urbanized areas of the Bull Kingdom, he always knew that he was, at most, a few dozen miles from the edge of human territory, and that there was a forest, or wild hills, or inhospitable mountains nearby that he could vanish into if the need ever struck him. Knowing how far he'd have to travel to have the same kind of solitude here was more distressing than he'd realized it would be, but he did his best not to let it get to him and instead admire what the Ilian Empire had built.

And it was worth admiring, in his mind. Their cities sprawled across the land, showing the sheer dominance they had over their environment. Every building positively radiated magic power, showing that even their most run-down homes were as heavily enchanted as a country villa back in the Bull Kingdom, to the point that every home, and nearly every building otherwise, had been warded against magic senses, giving the people of the Ilian Empire the kind of privacy that the people of the Bull Kingdom would probably never have. The air itself was so inundated with magic power spilling out of the buildings that Leon could feel energized with every breath, which went a long way to helping him to stifle his desire to see the wilds. What helped even more was the fact that they didn't have to rest in the convoy at night since the highway was so urbanized; they could stay at luxurious guest houses run by local branches of Heaven's Eye every night of their journey.

And then, a week after leaving Ancon, the heartlands of the Ilian Empire appeared in the distance, completely blowing away everything else he'd seen in the Empire up to that point with their grandeur and sheer size.

The core of the Ilian Empire lay between a pair of massive rivers that flowed eastward from a small mountain range on the edge of the Illumerian Wetlands: the River of Serenity in the north, and the Scamander River in the south, both connected by a massive canal further west. As they rode further in, Elise spoke to Leon about this region, giving him a short crash course on local politics.

The Ilian Empire was mostly situated around the Scamander River in the south. Most of the River of Serenity in the north was theirs, as well, but everything north of it belonged to the Sacred Golden Empire. About a hundred miles from the titanic inland sea at the center of the plane, though, the Sacred Golden Empire took possession of the River of Serenity and a few strips of land on the southern bank.

These rivers were massive, more than a mile across and deep enough that a dreadnought could sink within and not obstruct riverine traffic. They ensured that the floodplains that lay between them were incredibly rich and fertile, and was what allowed the Ilian Empire to build what was essentially one long continuous city along the entire length of the Scamander River without needing to worry about feeding such a massive population. This enormous city was separated into distinct cities of their own for administrative purposes, each ruled by a mayor who answered directly to the Emperor just as the governors in the provinces did. But even with these divisions, once they reached the Scamander River, they'd be able to walk along its banks from its headwaters to the inland sea without ever leaving 'the city'.

Leon's brain hurt just thinking about what a pain in the ass that administering that kind of urban sprawl had to be, but what hurt his brain even more was contemplating just what had to happen for the River of Serenity to have been split like it had been.

Elise explained that during the two Empires' early years, they fought extensively over the river. The Ilian Empire wanted it as a strong northern border, but Evergold, the capital city of the Sacred Golden Empire, had been built upon it, and they weren't willing to share that space. After several thousand years of destructive war, however, the two Empires managed to hammer out a peace deal that had been in place for more than forty thousand years—a peace deal that had given the River of Serenity its current name.

These days, the River of Serenity now facilitated a tremendous amount of trade between the two Empires, generating more wealth in a month than all of the Bull Kingdom's silver mines could in a year.

Elise was only partway through her explanation of the local politics when Leon abruptly stopped paying attention, his eyes going wide and his jaw going slack as he saw something he'd been longing to see for a long time, but never had with his own eyes: an ark.

It looked almost like like an arrowhead flying through the sky, long and sleek, with sharp edges to pierce through the air. It was made of shining silver metal, flew through the air about five hundred feet off the ground, and was large enough that a quarter of the Heaven's Eye convoy could probably comfortably fit inside. It was decorated with flowing golden lines forming stylized glyphs, and on both 'wings' that jutted out from the slightly thicker main body, were emblazoned the sigil of the Ilian Empire: an upright spear wreathed in grass laurels, grasped in a faintly feminine hand. The backside of the ark was hollow

and open to the air, and from it poured fire and smoke—Leon assumed that that was what was propelling it through the air at speeds great enough to get from one side of the Empire to the other in no more than a day.

“Holy shit...” Leon had muttered in amazement, drawing everyone else’s attention. After explaining what it was that he was seeing, Elise explained that such an ark was probably meant for transporting people from place to place with extreme speed—though who or what they were transporting she couldn’t say.

What she could say, however, was that all the arks based within the Ilian Empire were owned by the Emperor personally—save for a few small arks owned and operated by Heaven’s Eye, of course—meaning that whoever was in that ark was extremely highly ranked.

“I want one,” Leon had said wistfully as the ark passed close by the highway.

As they drew nearer to Ilion, however, Leon’s attention was taken from the *multiple* arks he could now see patrolling the skies by the capital city. Even by the standards of the magnificent structures built along the Scamander River, Ilion stood out. Fantastic forums filled with merchants plying their trade, luxurious and exotic goods of all sorts on display. Monolithic monuments abounded, sports arenas and outdoor amphitheatres could be seen everywhere, and the interior of the city was practically a forest of golden towers, each one reaching even further into the sky than Leon had ever seen a man-made structure—he saw golden towers forty, fifty, and sixty stories tall, and some even taller than that, and each one was unique in its own, with slightly different architecture and visual aesthetics.

But all of it paled in comparison to what could only be the Emperor’s Palace.

It was on what at first looked like a massive plateau that the enormous Scamander River parted around and encircled, flowing back into a singular river on the eastern side, but it soon became clear that if it was a natural formation, then it had been so heavily transformed by human hands that it would’ve been unrecognizable.

There was a large hollow at the base of the plateau, one so large that the ‘plateau’ almost seemed to be a gigantic slab of gray rock held aloft by eleven titanic pillars—more a raised island in the sky than anything. Each of these pillars had been carved into the colossal likeness of who Leon could only assume were the eleven heroes who’d driven the remnants of his Clan upon this plane out of these lands and laid the foundations for the four Empires. Each of these colossi were massive, nearly a thousand feet tall without exception. They were all carved in various heroic poses—one in the act of drawing a bow, another with a sword raised to the heavens, a third standing aloof with a scroll in his hand, a fourth leaning against the massive rock platform with an almost comical grin on his face. Every pose was different, and every colossus rendered in fantastic detail.

The surface of the massive raised island was remarkable in its own right, with extensive gardens filled with exotic trees and flowers of all colors, shapes, and sizes—including, Leon noted, a few Heartwood trees. Those gardens well-complemented the massive palace built upon this raised island. The palace itself seemed primarily built of rose quartz and white marble, accented with gold sparkling red and orange stone. It was bigger than Argent Palace, bigger than the Bull Kingdom’s entire capitol island. The main palace building alone was ten stories tall, and contained more than sixty courtyards. More than

two hundred other buildings constituted the rest of the palace complex, allowing tens of thousands of people to work within by Leon's estimation.

Leon noted a few other buildings, including what he thought to be a temple given the robed people milling about its central courtyard. This place had more huge statues outside of its front gates, though none even half as large as the colossi holding up the raised island.

Other buildings that caught Leon's attention were massive fortresses on the north, south, east, and west sides, each once with dozens of eye-catching weapon emplacements that looked reminiscent of Bull Kingdom Flame Lances, though much bigger and sleeker. The entire raised island was ringed by a huge wall that seemed to almost grow right out of the island's stony edge. The wall connected each of the fortresses and was interrupted on every side by dozens of tall, strong-looking towers. At the top of each tower was another of the large, seemingly more advanced Imperial Lances. The entire palace was so aglow with magic power that it almost hurt for Leon to look at it with his magic senses, but the fortresses were something else entirely, with Leon able to sense so much magic power flowing through the walls, towers, and fortresses that he could well believe them to be indestructible by anything that Aeternans would consider to be conventional means.

After a few seconds of silent gawking, Leon noticed that there didn't seem to be any way to reach the top of the island by foot, though the entire area underneath the island was shrouded by magic senses-scattering wards, so he wasn't able to see for certain. Regardless, he was impressed by the sheer scale and artistry of the palace that had been constructed, it serving as a sign greater than just about any other of the power of the Ilian Empire.

The Heaven's Eye enclave wasn't located too far from the palace complex, though it wasn't on the raised island. Instead, it was located in a massive, if only slightly less opulent, palace complex of its own just off of one of the branches of the Scamander River that encircled the palace sky island. If the convoy stayed the course on their highway, they would be taken right to the front door of the enclave's tower— itself massive in comparison to just about all of its like that Leon had seen on his journey, being more than eighty-stories tall by his reckoning, nearly tall enough to be in line with the foot of the palace's defensive wall. Out front was a gargantuan courtyard filled with covered walkways and leisure gardens that allowed the surely massive Heaven's Eye staff located here to relax and move around with ease.

Leon had to force himself to get back into business mode, however, when he saw that out in front of the tower were no less than three eighth-tier mages standing at the head of a crowd of other powerful mages at least five hundred strong.

'A welcoming party,' Leon realized. *'Looks like they're really pulling out all the stops for Emilie...'*

Unlike when they arrived in Ancon, however, there wasn't a single person dressed in anything akin to the uniforms that Apollodorus had been wearing, leading Leon to think that the Ilian Empire didn't have any representatives in this crowd. But if anything, Leon was thankful for that, for a crowd that included several dozen seventh-tier mages and three eighth-tier mages was already intimidating enough for him to try and focus on preparing himself to meet them.

And by his estimation, they'd arrive in only a few more hours.

Chapter 668: Penthesilea

The Heaven's Eye convoy arrived in Ilion with fanfare. It wasn't quite a parade with music, dancing, and flower petals coating the pristine concrete road, but there was a large escort force of lightly armed and armored guards in blood red uniforms blocking off streets and allowing them to pass down the main thoroughfares with ease.

The convoy drew much attention, of course, but they moved quickly through the streets and never stopped. Leon barely had the time to admire the spectacular trees and their glowing, multicolored leaves as they passed beneath their canopies.

Only a few hours after the city came into view, the convoy was already pulling into the central square of the massive local Heaven's Eye enclave, and from there, was split up and directed in pieces through the warrens of the enclave's streets to their respective destinations.

Leon, his family, and his retinue were taken straight to a luxurious guest house, along with Emilie, Damien Makedon, and Penelope. Leon was surprised to learn that all of them were going to be sharing the same guest house, but once he took in the scale of the palace that they were being given, he understood that even with that, it wasn't going to be much of a problem.

They were all shown to their living quarters, and there, were allowed to rest for a while as the rest of the convoy was seen to. Leon was sure there was going to be more that they'd have to tend to, but for now, he was grateful for the couple of hours they were going to be given to rest before being saddled with those responsibilities.

Despite that, he wasn't quite able to rest. Everyone else had gone their ways to get what rest they could, but Leon found himself unable to sit still, for he couldn't quite get it out of his head: they'd reached *Ilion*, the capital of the Ilion Empire, and one of, if not *the* largest centers of magic on the entire plane!

He wanted to rest, but his body simply couldn't, so he left Elise and Maia napping in their bed and walked out into a large adjacent garden that their bedroom opened right up into. It was a fully enclosed garden, with only a small entrance for the gardeners to keep the place looking splendid, and with the wards Leon could sense in the walls, even though it was outdoors, there was still complete privacy.

For a few minutes, he walked around the large garden, almost getting lost with how extensive it was. He found several large pools, each with seemingly different functions—one that was long and rectangular, perfect for exercise; one that was curving and in no definable shape, but was ringed with more multicolored trees and sweet-smelling flowers, making it clear that this was a more recreational pool; another pool was so shallow it didn't even come to Leon's knees, which led him to think that it was for any water mages that might've wanted to train; and finally, there was a decorative pool surrounding a gazebo with tables and chairs connected to the rest of the garden by a stark white marble bridge.

There were several paths of limestone bricks leading through the gardens that at times had Leon starting to relax, almost convincing him that he was back in a forest, only for the illusion to be ruined by the simple fact that the garden wasn't *quite* big enough to complete that illusion.

With nothing else to do, Leon crossed the bridge to the gazebo, sat in one of the benches by the edge, and looked outward to watch the colorful fish in the pool. With his eyes busy, he then projected his magic senses to examine the city in further detail, wondering just what was going to happen next.

He fully expected that there was going to have to be some kind of political meet-and-greet; he didn't think that even the august Ilian Emperor would let a soon-to-be Chief of Acquisitions for all of Heaven's Eye to pass through his city without at least some kind of invitation to his palace, and since it had happened everywhere else they'd stayed, he expected that he would be part of whatever gathering would be happening.

He needed some time to prepare himself mentally for such a meeting. He needed to make sure that he didn't make an absolute fool of himself in the court of such a monarch, lest it harm his chances of getting into Heaven's Eye, or give him an unsavory reputation among the people that he might need support from to reach the Nexus.

This was it, now. He wasn't in an isolated, rather backwater Kingdom anymore. He was in the center of power for the entire plane, and he couldn't just not care about politics or his image. Both would have an immeasurable effect on the kind of retinue that would be at his back in however long it took for him to reach Apotheosis.

The time for the sort of uncaring, aloof behavior that came naturally to him was over. It was time to get serious about his future.

As this new reality slowly crashed down onto him, he sensed Nestor's magic senses pulse out of his soul realm. The dead man probably couldn't even see outside of the garden given its size, but as far as Leon could tell, the man still pushed for every inch, straining to reach even the walls of the enclave, let alone somewhere like the palace, raised upon its island into the sky by the eleven colossi of the founding heroes.

Leon didn't disturb him, merely letting Nestor strain himself with whatever he was trying to do, waiting for Nestor to ask for help if he decided he needed it. He didn't have to wait long.

[Leon,] Nestor whispered.

Leon didn't respond verbally, but he cast his attention down into his soul realm. It was enough for Nestor to know that he was listening.

The dead man quietly asked, [Can you tell me of this city? I would like to know how it's fared in the years since I saw it last...]

Leon solemnly nodded, not having the energy or the will to crack any jokes with Nestor's tone dripping with such a longing nostalgia that Leon could feel his eyes prickling with unshed tears of empathy. He knew what was going through Nestor's mind, for it had gone through his the last time he'd been to the Forest of Black and White.

So, without argument, Leon described the city as best as he could. Advanced magical carriages in numbers beyond counting; and people in even greater sums. Prosperity, luxury, beauty in abundance. A forest of golden towers, busy forums, monuments to ancient glories and tragedies.

The palace.

Nestor listened to it all in silence, but one thing that Leon never described, for he couldn't see any of its like, were ruins. The architecture of the Ilian Empire was just as impressive and monolithic as the

examples he'd seen of Thunderbird architecture, but he couldn't see anything, not even a single crumbled avian statue, that might indicate his Clan had once lived here.

It seemed that Nestor knew why.

[To hear of this place rendered into such a state, all evidence of our existence erased...] the dead man bemoaned, [I have no words... If my sister could see her city now, and the vermin that infest it, she would lose her mind with fury.]

[I thought this was Lord Koukouva's territory?] Leon inquired.

[It is, technically,] Nestor explained. [But my sister was allowed to come here and establish herself by my father. A little exclave of our Clan, independent of all save for my father, run by none but my sister.]

Nestor spoke with both great pride and deep sorrow, and it took Leon a moment to ask, [Would you tell me of her?]

Nestor laughed. [I think you would've either loved and respected her, or hated her with terrible passion. I can see much of her in your attitude and bearing: a lack of concern for the opinions of others, disdain for authority, and single-minded devotion to your interests.]

[But Penthesilea was much blunter than you, and less tolerant of outsiders. She had her small cohort of followers, and with her husbands and concubines, she'd largely gone off to do her own thing, leaving the rest of us to our own devices. I think if she'd lived much longer, she would've started a cadet family of her own, symbolically leaving our family without abandoning us.]

Nestor then groaned, and Leon felt his magic senses cease for a moment. He thought for just a moment that Nestor was going to stop talking, but thankfully, the dead man continued, showing that he was more embarrassed and playfully angry than anything.

[She was always Father's favorite. She was the strongest of all of us siblings, but even before that became apparent, Father always spent far more time with her than with any of the rest of us, and let her get away with just about anything she ever wanted. I know that nearly all the rest of us were destined for arranged marriages, but Father let her take whatever lovers she wanted. When we were getting ready for our invasion of this plane, his sons he ordered to accompany him, but Penthesilea was given a choice—and, without even a moment's hesitation, she chose to come with.]

[I'm hearing a hint of resentment in your voice, there, Nestor,] Leon observed, though he left out just how much love and longing he could also hear.

[That makes some sense,] Nestor lightly replied. [I hated her throughout most of my childhood. Even Cassander, my eldest brother, wasn't quite as much of a bully as she was. She was spoiled, arrogant, and wasteful. She thought herself above all restrictions, and didn't take too kindly to me after I started studying enchantments instead of learning how to fight. She was an absolute battle maniac, and she only ever really got along well with Cassander, who was much like her, if rather less talented.]

[But... still, she was my sister. Our relationship improved dramatically when we no longer lived together. I would never call us friends, but we were still family, and if there was one thing that Penthesilea cared about, it was family. I've no doubt in my mind that she would've given her life for any of us, without hesitation...]

Nestor trailed off, but Leon didn't get the impression it was because he didn't want to say any more, but because he *couldn't* say any more without completely breaking down. To try and take some of that pressure off of the dead man, Leon asked, [How about the palace and city itself? What was this place like before all of this rose up?]

[That 'raised island', as you called it, was built by our Clan. It was to serve as both a statement of power, and to protect our interests. The defenses built atop such places were impenetrable without someone who'd achieved Apotheosis, and even then, they were still formidable. I can't say how many of those defenses survived, but given what you've told me of the palace sitting at the summit, it doesn't sound like much. My sister's palace was built of red and white marble and black granite, and it certainly wasn't as big as you've described—a single palatial building, with only a few other buildings. Most of the summit was taken up by gardens and small personal forests. It certainly didn't have any of those colossi that the squatter defaced the palace with...]

Leon sighed. [Almost seems like everything that was here before was erased on purpose. Given how *built* this city is, I can't imagine that there's anything left for us to discover anymore. Eighty-thousand years and we find this? There can't be anything left.]

[I'd agree,] Nestor replied. [It also doesn't leave me hopeful about finding anything at the old arsenal, either.]

Leon grimaced and nodded. [Hadn't been thinking about that. Was hoping there might still be something left, but I suppose we'll just have to wait and see.]

[That we will,] Nestor agreed, and the dead man went silent, lost, Leon thought, in recollections about the past. Leon couldn't exactly read Nestor's expression, but he still got the impression that their conversation about the past was over, which worked out wonderfully as Leon could see Valeria walking out of the guest house and into this garden, too. So, he got up from the gazebo bench and went to join his silver-haired lover for a while.

Neither of them spoke about much of consequence; mostly just walking around the large gardens and admiring what was there. However, Leon enjoyed the time immensely, and when a servant of Heaven's Eye interrupted them with a loud knock on the door of their wing of the guest house, he was quite annoyed.

He was even more annoyed to be handed a written invitation for the leaders of the convoy to appear before the Ilian Emperor that evening, even though he knew something like that was going to happen.

With a deep sigh, he went to go and wake up Elise and share with her the news that they now had defined evening plans.

—

Leon was surprised when he and Elise walked out into the guest house's main courtyard and found not only the expected Emilie, Damien, Penelope, and Cristina waiting there, but also Helen and Anna.

"Hey there!" he called out as he walked over. "Wasn't expecting to see you two here!"

Indeed, both appeared like they were accompanying them to the palace, if their fashionable dresses were anything to go by. Anna, to match her bright green hair, was wearing a slinky green dress that

went down to her ankles, heavily embroidered with dozens of golden five-petaled flowers. It wasn't particularly fancy on its own, but it suited her extremely well. Helen, meanwhile, wore a blue dress to match her blue hair, and while it was considerably shorter than her sister's, she also wore black leggings that glittered with what looked like some kind of crystal sewn into the fabric. Both had their hair done up in almost, but not quite identical buns, leaving a few strands artfully loose to frame their faces.

"We weren't expecting to be here, either," Anna replied, while the younger Helen mildly scowled.

"If I had my way, we wouldn't be," the blue-haired woman whispered.

"We can't turn down an invitation, that would be rude," Anna chastised her sister, though her tone was more exasperated than angry, as if the two had had that argument multiple times in the past couple of hours.

"Not that I don't mind the two of you coming along," Leon began as he smiled at them to try and make it clear that he wasn't trying to pressure them *not* to, "but I have to admit that I'm curious as to who invited you two. Didn't you tell me that your family wasn't that important back in the Sacred Golden Empire?"

"Yes," Anna replied with great patience, "but that doesn't mean we were completely isolated. One of our family friends entered government. When we still lived north of Serenity, she was only a local magistrate, appointed by our local druid circles. In the years since, it seems she's been made the ambassador to the Ilian Empire. She heard we were in the convoy and extended the invitation to join her at whatever this party is going to be."

Anna beamed at Leon, and he couldn't help but smile back, though a worry started to grow in his heart. He didn't think for a moment that the convoy wasn't being monitored by everyone who was anyone, but that they were gathering information on his retinue was concerning. The more he thought about it, the less surprised he was, but the fact that they were only in Ilion a few hours and yet an invitation had already been sent to two of his retainers by an ambassador spoke volumes about how robust the monitoring was.

Or maybe the ambassador had been warned ahead of time, which would mean that the convoy had been under surveillance for quite a while. Which was undoubtedly true, and Leon wasn't sure how he felt about that. On one hand, he knew that if he were in the position of any of the Empires, he would do the same thing. However, that it was happening to him, especially when he didn't yet have the official backing of Heaven's Eye, had him starting to feel more than a little nervous. Apollodorus had already extended an offer to him to join the Ilian Empire, and he hoped that no one else was going to try and head hunt him right now. If he couldn't join Heaven's Eye, then he wasn't intending to join anyone else—at least, not for a good long while.

"I'm happy you're coming with us," Leon said to Anna as all of these thoughts flitted through his mind. "It'll be good to have a little bit of backup in that snake pit."

"Such respect you have for the court of an Emperor," Anna replied with a laugh.

Leon shrugged, and a moment later, a number of carriages were brought out. The drivers and attendants had the group separate, with Anna, Helen, and several assistants to the others taking one

carriage, while Leon, Elise, Emilie, Damien, and Penelope took the lead carriage. Cristina and her knightly escort would follow them in the rest.

As they took their seats, Leon asked his stronger companions, "What should we be expecting in there?"

"Shouldn't be too much, and neither should it be too formal," Emilie replied.

Penelope added with complete dispassion, "You'll still be meeting the Ilian Emperor, boy, so try not to embarrass yourself. Conduct yourself as if this were the full court, and not simply a fairly small party."

Emilie sent a slight glare Penelope's way, but she didn't say anything to directly contradict the agent. Instead, she continued, "I don't think the Emperor himself will be long in attendance. This is a formality, little more. An opportunity for some in his court to gladhand with us, and likely do so on his behalf, but he's 'above' doing so himself. He'll be polite and welcome us to the palace, but other than that, he probably won't stay for longer than an hour or so. We won't have to stay for much longer than that, either."

"Good to hear," Leon replied. "I don't think I'd be able to relax in the presence of someone like that, anyway. How strong is he?"

He asked the question to Emilie, but it was Damien Makedon who answered, saying in his deep, gravelly voice like he was a teacher with great patience explaining something to a child, "His Imperial Majesty is only eighth-tier. His grandfather, the Lord Protector, however, is one of the only tenth-tier mages on this plane."

Even though he'd already known that there were tenth-tier mages on the plane, Leon's eyes still widened at that statement. "Tenth-tier..." he murmured in wonder.

"As close as mankind can be to a god without taking that final step," Damien whispered.

Leon took a deep breath and asked, "How many high-tier mages should we expect here?"

"At least one ninth-tier," Penelope replied. "They'll know who we are, how strong we are, and in what numbers we come in, so they'll prepare accordingly. They know we won't be making any fuss in the heart of their Empire, but they'll still want to show us without a shadow of a doubt that they're stronger than we are. Expect at least two, perhaps even as many as four or five ninth-tier mages in this meeting."

"Five ninth-tier mages?" Leon asked, marveling at that kind of power. "How many do they even have?"

"In the entire Empire, perhaps a dozen," Damien replied. "The precise numbers are hard for even Heaven's Eye to keep account of. Generally speaking, though, all of the Empires have between ten and fifteen ninth-tier mages, and each has one tenth-tier mage."

"Speaking of, should I expect to run into the Lord Protector?" Leon asked.

"I doubt it," Damien said. "The Lord Protector rarely makes public appearances these days. I think it's been more than a year since he was last seen."

Leon nodded, and focused on preparing himself as best as he could for what was to come. Meeting the Bull King was one thing, but now he was about to walk into one of the greatest halls of power on the entire plane.

He couldn't tell if he was more excited or terrified.

Chapter 669: Palace of Ilion

As the convoy had arrived in Ilion, Leon had been struck with the question of just how the Ilian people were to access their Emperor's palace, as there didn't seem to be any direct ways to get up to the raised island. Now that he and the rest of those invited by the Emperor made their way through the grand multi-lane streets of the Empire's capital, he was about to find out, and he couldn't have been more excited.

The prospect of coming face-to-face with one of the most powerful people on the plane still had his heart rapidly beating from a great many emotions, but it was tempered slightly when he remembered a certain letter of introduction he still had stashed away in his soul realm. The Grave Warden, under the guise of an envoy from the Ilian Empire, had left him with an address and a request to look him up when he arrived in the Central Empires, and as he traveled through Ilion, he couldn't help but think about that letter. The address the Grave Warden had given him was here in Ilion.

The convoy was only to stay in Ilion for about a week—not a lot of time, but more than enough for Leon to visit if he so wished. But he wasn't so sure that he wished to; at least, not until he was older and stronger. Facing down the undisputed most powerful man on the plane without an idea of what he wanted from him had Leon feeling more than a little nervous, and he decided to ignore the invitation, for the time being. If the Grave Warden wanted to speak with him, then he doubted the man would struggle to find him, but he wasn't just going to make himself at the Warden's service, especially not with the knowledge that he was almost certainly responsible for the downfall of the Thunderbird Clan. Leon didn't blame him for acting in self-defense with Jason Keraunos' invasion of his plane, but it didn't change the fact that his killing of the Storm King had led directly to the disintegration of the Thunderbird Clan.

As Leon wondered just what the Grave Warden might have in mind for him, worry slowly making its way through his heart, his carriage finally arrived at a relatively small fort on the south side of the Scamander River, close to the foot of one of the colossi that had been carved into the support pillars of the raised island. The fort was only 'relatively' small, though, and was quite possibly large enough for a garrison of ten thousand if they packed their barracks tightly enough.

The carriages were led through half a dozen gates that wound through the fort, watched all the while by Ilian guards clad in heavy golden armor so bulky that they looked more like golems than humans. Finally, they reached the Scamander River, and a bridge made of steel was magically extended across the water from the fort, allowing them passage across.

Once on the other side, they were escorted further down the road, past beautiful gardens and enormous trees with their glowing, multicolored leaves, and into the cavern directly beneath the raised island.

As soon as they crossed the threshold and the wards that scattered magic senses, Leon realized exactly how they were going to enter the palace. Scattered about the cavern, directly beneath the four fortresses above, were smaller forts, each one heavily defended. One of them had a perfectly circular hole in the roof of its tallest tower, through which a bright beam of blue light streamed into an identical hole in the cavern ceiling. About halfway up that beam was a huge circular platform, just large enough

to perfectly fit into these holes, and which was slowly crawling downward toward the tower. It reached the tower as the carriages were brought to a halt, and Leon watched in fascination as what was obviously a magic lift disappeared into the tower, the blue light dimmed, and the holes in the tower and the ceiling closed.

It was a startling display of magic. Leon had seen many a magic lift, but they had always been a part of larger structures, with walls around them to provide support and magic power. To move a lift, especially one of that size, physically unsupported through the cavern... Leon could understand why the cavern was so inundated with magic power, more so even than the rest of the magic-rich city.

His group were summarily escorted into the tower, which was then revealed to essentially be housing for the lift, with a spectacular amount of magic power running through its walls. They and their seventh-tier escorts boarded the lift, and with a surge of magic power that had Leon's magic senses doing their equivalent of squinting at its radiance, the lift began to crawl up the tower. The circular door in the roof spun open, and the lift kept going, supported only by the blue beam of light as it rose toward the door in the cavern ceiling.

'What I would give to study this thing...' Leon thought to himself.

Soon enough, they found themselves entering the cavern ceiling, carried up a metal tunnel for about a hundred feet, and finally coming to a halt at the bottom of a tall, cylindrical chamber. Stairs ran the length of the chamber walls, with guarded landings at regular intervals. Near the top of the chamber was the single, though extravagantly decorated exit.

Leon's large group ascended the stairs, hundreds of eyes watching their every step. As they moved, Leon noticed that every guard, armed and armored even more spectacularly than their comrades down below, seemed to operate as part of a pair. Their armor was so big and bulky that he couldn't identify men from women, and if he couldn't hear their breathing, he might've thought that these people actually *were* golems.

They were then brought inside the fortress and escorted through the first level, their escorts amiably chatting with Cristina, Emilie, Damien, and Penelope the whole while, while Leon, Elise, Helen, and Anna brought up the rear, doing their best not to openly gawk at their surroundings. Though they were being brought through a fortress, a military installation, the magic flowing through its walls still beggared belief, and the opulence on display lent it more of a palatial feel than anything.

But finally, they were led back outside, where half a dozen carriages awaited them—so large was the palace complex that to rely on walking around everywhere was to waste valuable time and be rather rude to the guests. They had to get from the edge of the raised island to one of the central palace structures, where the main ballroom was located—and not, as Leon had been expecting, an audience chamber of the throne room. This was a welcoming party, not a session in the Imperial Court.

The hall they were taken to was as grand as could be expected. It was shaped almost like a theater, with an open ceiling to let the attendees bask in the light of the moon and stars. A dozen golden rings whirled about above the building, filling the air with rainbow light. The floor was pink rose quartz cut into a geometric pattern of diamonds of various sizes.

Upon his entrance, though, only one thing caught Leon's attention: in the center of the floor, directly beneath the smallest light ring, was a huge statue of the Eleven Founding Heroes standing atop the fallen corpse of a gigantic eagle, rendered in spectacular detail.

Leon did his best not to react, but it didn't seem he was that successful, as he felt Elise squeeze his arm encouragingly, and when he turned to look his wife in the eye, he found her giving him a supportive smile. He smiled back and did his best to ignore the obvious celebration of his Clan's downfall.

But that proved easier said than done. He didn't pay much attention as a flurry of introductions were made and his eyes just glazed over the many people he exchanged a few words with, the statue seemingly in sight at all times.

And finally, the time came. The lights dimmed for a moment, horns blared, drums beat, and someone with an enchanted object or spell projected their voice throughout the hall, announcing the arrival of the Ilian Emperor. The entire hall went silent, five hundred or more people immediately ceasing all conversation and turning their gazes toward the most magnificent set of doors in the entire hall.

They opened, and a large group of people entered the room, led by none other than Emperor Adam himself.

He was fairly young, as far as Leon could tell, with a smooth, boyish face closely shaven, light brown hair long enough to hang over his eyes if it hadn't been lightly oiled and styled upward, and a youthful energy to his gait that had his bright red toga almost flowing behind him. A thin diadem was set in his hair, silver and glowing with soft light. The silver band was set with precious stones of all kinds, each one illuminated from within by magic power, with an enormous sapphire taller than the length of Leon's finger made the centerpiece, positioned just above and between the Emperor's eyebrows.

The Emperor was quite handsome, and wore an easy-going smile that seemed to disarm without difficulty. Other than the diadem, he wore no jewelry, and even restrained his eighth-tier aura better than Leon thought necessary, yet he commanded the attention of every single pair of eyes in the ballroom...

... at least, until the old man walked in just behind him, and then, it seemed like all the air in the room had been sucked out, leaving it in stark silence.

His hair was long and silver with age, with a hairline that was only slightly receded. His skin was wrinkled, but not so much that it overly damaged his handsome looks, nor his clear resemblance to the Emperor. He was tall, but not overly so, and even beneath his loose-fitting clothes, Leon could tell that his body was banded and corded with powerful muscle. He wore little else save for simple brown sandals, a long, stark white tunic that reached to just above his knees, and a sash about his waist and shoulders dyed in vivid purple. Like the Emperor, he was clean-shaven, showing off his chiseled jaw and graceful, noble features.

His eyes, a strange shade of pink that he shared with the Emperor that looked almost like someone had pulled a pair of nebulae from the heavens and stuck them into his eye sockets, quickly scanned the room, taking everything in until they landed upon the feast that had been prepared for everyone to partake in.

Before even the Emperor himself spoke, the old man said fairly loudly with a voice as smooth as butter and as deep as the roots of a mountain, "Oh! Buttered duck and garlic bread! My favorite!" He then separated himself from the Emperor's group and practically skipped over to the table to begin partaking in the food on offer, while the people in his way moved as quickly and respectfully as they were able.

Leon could see why, for the man's aura was beyond his ability to identify, and from the way he didn't seem to even think about speaking before and walking away from the Emperor, it appeared that his rank was beyond reproach.

If he had to guess, Leon would say that despite what he'd been told on the way over, Lord Protector Anastasios, the grandfather of the Emperor and only tenth-tier mage in the entire Empire, had decided to join this little party, after all, and his appearance had so completely overshadowed the others that Leon was only vaguely aware of three more people who walked in behind the Emperor whose auras he couldn't quite see through—ninth-tier mages in the Emperor's service, no doubt.

Emperor Adam spoke a few words, but everyone was so conscious of the Lord Protector's presence that even with his august rank, he didn't draw many eyes. Given the way that the monarch wrapped things up quickly, and how quiet the hall had become, Leon guessed that Adam was *very* well aware of that. Fortunately, when Leon finally turned his eyes back toward the monarch, he seemed to be in good spirits about the whole thing, and was already locked in conversation with a pair of sixth-tier women splendidly dressed in deep crimson dresses.

"That was certainly an entrance," Elise whispered to him.

"You could say that," Leon said, his eyes drifting back in Anastasios' direction, the Lord Protector still filling his plate with a little bit of just about everything on offer, hardly appearing to mind anyone else who wasn't directly in his way. In stark contrast, just about everyone was giving him a fairly wide berth, his mere presence seeming to have thrown everyone off to the point that they were at least mildly uncomfortable. The Emperor already had people practically lining up to try and exchange a few words with him, with everyone kind of just being drawn in his direction, while the area around his grandfather thinned out just as quickly.

The only real exceptions to these events were the smaller groups that were congregating around the leaders of Heaven's Eye, and those around Princess Cristina—the Princess having the smallest group greeting her, though she didn't seem to mind. Glancing around quickly, Leon also noticed that Helen and Anna had split off from him and Elise, and were already chatting animatedly with a young woman with bright orange hair and eyes that almost glowed with a shade of gold that was rather like his own.

This orange-haired woman was dressed quite spectacularly, even for their environs, with crisp robes that showed quite a bit of skin, enough jewelry covering her limbs to fund a small city for a year, and beauty almost as radiant as her sixth-tier aura. She and Anna seemed about the same age, but at their power levels, it was hard to tell for sure. She was certainly speaking with Leon's retainers like they were equals, not like they were her inferiors.

"Who's that?" Leon asked Elise, nodding in the orange-haired woman's direction.

"She looks like the ambassador from the Sacred Golden Empire," Elise guessed. "Not a lot of her people around today, but I think she'd have quite the entourage if this were a proper day in the Imperial Court."

Leon nodded in understanding.

"Anyone else here that I should keep an eye on?" he asked.

"I can't answer that as well as I would like, love," Elise replied with a twinkling laugh. "There are so many people here that even with my preparations on our way here, I'm still rather woefully uninformed about the Imperial Court."

"I'm sure you've still got a much better understanding of the power dynamics in this place than I do," Leon responded with a deferential smile. "Anyone you think I should watch out for? Or should we just go and join your mother and all of those people doing their best not to look like they want to lick her boots?"

Elise laughed again. "The people I would look out for don't seem to be present: anyone wearing armor or a uniform that isn't a guard would be suspect, as they would be part of the Ilian military. Other than that... hmm, let's just try to mingle as best as we can."

Without too much resistance, Elise steered Leon toward Emilie, and soon enough, they were immersed in the greetings that Emilie was receiving. Leon was once again subjected to names and faces and names and faces and so on. He was only slightly surprised when it seemed like many of these people knew who he was before they were even introduced, as he'd dispelled all doubt in his mind that they knew his convoy was coming as soon as they arrived in Ancon, if not sooner. Many of these people had probably already learned about him, his power, his current position, and the position he was currently on track to get. Perhaps consequently, they treated him quite courteously, and he did his best to reciprocate.

After about twenty minutes, though, he found his taxed mind seeking any kind of distraction, and he found his eyes drawn back in the direction of his retainers, and as soon as his eyes landed upon them, he froze for a moment as worry bloomed in his heart. He did his best to keep his face as neutral as he could, but he knew that Elise, at least, could sense what was going through his mind if only through the brief tensing of his arm.

He saw the ambassador still locked in conversation with Helen and Anna, though their conversation seemed to have taken quite the serious turn. The ambassador was speaking quite intensely, and was leaning in to whisper as quietly as she could and still allow both other women to hear her. One of her bracelets was also emitting just a bit more magic than it was the last time Leon glanced in their direction, leading him to think that some kind of enchantment was at work to keep their words from being overheard.

Whatever was being said had both of Leon's retainers looking deadly serious, though Helen looked a shade more terrified while Anna seemed to be working to restrain her fury. The older sister's aura even had a few hints of killing intent laced within it.

Whatever they were talking about was clearly of the utmost importance, and it was upsetting them both. Only a moment later, though, Leon watched the ambassador hand each of his retainers a letter, exchange a few more words, and then walk away, whatever magic her bracelet was working dissipating at the same time.

Leon immediately began to turn in their direction, his immediate instinct being to see what was going on with his people rather than continuing to gladhand with these court rats, however, he'd barely even

begun to turn before the crowd seemed to part around him and a deep voice asked, "I hope I'm not interrupting anything here. Does anyone mind if I cut in for a moment?"

Leon glanced back in the direction of the speaker, almost ignoring it were it not for the quiet gasps that a couple of the others around let out.

And he found himself staring into the pink nebulous eyes of Lord Protector Anastasios, who stared right back at him.

Chapter 670: Anastasios

Anastasios' attention weighed upon Leon like it had physical force, though the man's aura seemed quite calm and serene, and his face was split by an easygoing smile. However, it still took Leon a moment to collect himself from the shock of the Lord Protector himself coming over and staring at him, and even then, he didn't answer right away.

Instead, he turned back toward his retainers. The ambassador had given Anna something, and it seemed that she'd been speaking quite intensely with his two newest retainers. When he looked at Helen and Anna again, though, their expressions had largely returned to normal, and they were standing by each other, neither speaking or interacting with anyone around.

It was clear that whatever the ambassador had shared with them was important, and greatly affected their moods, but with Anna's restraining of her killing intent, it seemed that it wasn't an immediate or time-sensitive problem. Leon sighed with a small measure of relief, made a mental note to speak with Anna before they left, and then turned his attention back to the Lord Protector.

Anastasios, if he were in any way aggrieved at Leon's apparent distraction, didn't let on in the slightest, merely continuing to stare at Leon with that friendly smile plastered across his handsome face.

But before Leon could respond to Anastasios' arrival, Elise quickly said, "You're always welcome with us, Lord Protector."

Despite it seeming almost impossible, Anastasios' countenance brightened even further, and he replied, "You're too kind, Lady Elise, too kind for a poor old man who struggles to fill his days."

"Not at all, it's a pleasure beyond words to meet you," Elise responded as she briefly squeezed Leon's arm in a silent signal for him to participate.

"I-Indeed," Leon sputtered as he forced his mind to stop focusing on his retainers and instead zero in on the here and now. "To have one of the most powerful mages in all of Aeterna come and speak with us is an honor."

"Please, please, relax," Anastasios seemed to plead as the others who'd been politely chatting with Elise and Leon quickly gave them some room, none seemingly wanting to spend much time around the Lord Protector, for some reason. Instead, they began to congregate around Emilie and the others from Heaven's Eye, and a couple moved toward Princess Cristina, though a few threw rather nervous glances back in their direction.

"Is it possible to relax when everyone's behaving so strangely?" Leon bluntly asked as he meaningfully nodded his head toward the largest group of people who'd just abandoned them.

"It's a hazard of the position," Anastasios replied with a tired sigh, his cheery expression slipping for a moment. "Mine is not a position that's conducive to having friends, unfortunately. People are too terrified of me to risk getting close."

"Or maybe they just respect you too much," Elise said with a smile. She sounded confident and in control as ever, but Leon could detect some slight wavering in her voice that betrayed to him just how nervous she was with Anastasios right there with them, for reasons yet to be revealed.

"I appreciate the sentiment, but I doubt that's the case," Anastasios sadly replied. "My political position isn't the sort that people want to get close to. My grandson can do them favors, and isn't so old or powerful that he seems inhuman to my people. That's why I tend to welcome foreigners like you two as warmly as I can—you haven't heard much about me, have you?"

"I'm afraid not," Leon said. "We come from the Bull Kingdom, if you haven't heard, and there's not much news of the Central Empires that can make it past the Screeching Desert or the Illumerian Wetlands to reach the Northwestern Kingdoms. This place has been little more than a vague idea to me until just last week when we finally arrived in Ancon."

"And how are you liking my Empire so far?" Anastasios asked, his good cheer returning. "Has it been a disappointment, yet? Or has it been living up to the vague idea you've had in your head for a while?"

"It's impressive beyond measure," Leon honestly answered. "I don't think I've ever seen a place so urbanized or so magically advanced. Higher end homes in the Bull Kingdom don't compare too unfavorably with those here, but the sheer ubiquity of magic I've seen since arriving kind of boggles my mind—and we certainly didn't have anything quite like the ark I saw on the way here, or those things your people use to cultivate their fields..."

Anastasios smiled even wider as Leon continued to compliment the Ilian Empire, his heavily-built chest swelling with pride.

"You do my Empire much honor speaking of it in such terms," he said to Leon. "If it's not too personal a thing to ask about, might I know why, despite your positive attitude towards my Empire, you did not wish to join it, and make it that much greater?"

Leon blinked in confusion, the abrupt change in subject almost giving him whiplash. And then he remembered the governor of Ancon, Apollodorus', attempt to headhunt him away from Heaven's Eye.

"Ah, I, uh, so Apollodorus kept you informed, did he?" Leon awkwardly replied as he did his best to hide his shock. He wasn't exactly surprised that Anastasios knew about that, more shocked that he was bringing it up like this, so blatantly and without preamble or concealment.

"My governors keep my grandson—and me, by extension—up to date about all the comings and goings of the most powerful people in my Empire," Anastasios shamelessly replied. "Men like you, with powers great enough to cause widescale death, must be monitored, wouldn't you agree?"

Leon hesitated in his answer, the ruthless individualist in him almost forcing him to shout in indignation. But... "I... suppose I can see your point," Leon admitted. "The safety of your people has to come first, doesn't it?"

“Indeed,” Anastasios replied, his smile appearing completely genuine—if he were lying, Leon couldn’t tell. “But, Leon Raime, you sound quite begrudging when you say that, do you not truly believe it?”

Leon shrugged and lightly smiled. “I don’t like it when people snoop on me like that. I’d much prefer to just fade into the background and be left alone to my own business. But I know that that’s not really possible at my level, so...”

“I understand,” Anastasios said. “Most states on this plane top out at the seventh-tier, so anyone above the eighth are automatically people that are worthy of notice. Not everyone wants that attention, but people of our power simply cannot be ignored in a safe society.”

Leon nodded.

“But, Leon Raime, you didn’t answer my question before: why did you turn down the recruitment offer when you seem to have such a high opinion of my Empire?”

Leon flushed a little with both anger and embarrassment—the former for having his decision questioned, and the latter for being asked this in public when he was neither expecting nor prepared to answer. He scowled slightly, and answered, “I’m not one who gives up his freedom that easily. I also try not to take half-measures. As far as I’m concerned, I’ve already committed to at least giving Heaven’s Eye a shot, and if they don’t work out, then I suppose I’ll just spend some time here thinking over my next steps. But I’ve come off a long time in the service of the Bull King, and I’m not looking to exchange a Royal master for an Imperial one. At least in Heaven’s Eye, I can more readily trust that I’ll be able to walk away when I need to.”

It was Anastasios’ turn to nod. “So, it’s mostly just a matter of trust, is it? That we’ll give you the autonomy you desire? Then I suppose we’ll just have to get to know each other better, and let trust come with familiarity!”

Anastasios stepped forward, his arms outstretched as if he were about to pull Leon into a hug, but Leon instinctively held up his hand to try and stop the Lord Protector, who graciously stopped.

“If you don’t mind me asking, might you tell me why you’re trying to recruit me?” Leon asked, his eyes narrowing slightly in suspicion. After the week he’d had, from learning more about his Clan’s downfall on Aeterna, and gaining some insight into how the people in the Central Empires viewed his Clan eighty-thousand years after that fall, he couldn’t help but be suspicious about the most powerful mage in the most powerful Empire trying to recruit him while they shared a room with a statue commemorating and celebrating the fall of his Clan.

An eighth-tier mage was powerful no matter where they went—as far as he knew, there were less than a hundred in each of the Empires, and Heaven’s Eye only possessed a few dozen at most. They were hardly common, but relatively speaking, a single eighth-tier mage wasn’t someone who could really upset the balance of power here in the Empires. As a result, he couldn’t believe that the Lord Protector himself was now trying to recruit him after Apollodorus failed.

“I don’t mind you asking,” Anastasios generously replied. “And the reason is quite simple: you’re an eighth-tier mage, and you’re barely over twenty years old. That’s... honestly quite staggering. Not even the Sacred Golden Empire’s young genius can hold a candle to that kind of growth.”

Leon raised his eyebrow in a silent question, not wanting to derail the Lord Protector's explanation, but hearing about a 'young genius' in the north definitely had him curious.

"Tell me, Leon Raime, are you so surprised that we're trying to recruit you?" Anastasios gave Elise a quick smile, as if wordlessly asking her if Leon were worthy of the attempt. Just as wordlessly, Elise tightened her grip on Leon's arm and gave him an adoring look, and any temptations that Leon had to argue the point died on his lips. "Apollodorus wasn't just a token effort. My Empire is serious, and we think you more than worthy enough to join us—and not for free, I can assure you. Young Raime, let me tell you, my Empire is fully willing and prepared to help you with your own growth in the magical arts, so long as you're willing to help us with problems that could benefit from your skills. And I hope you trust me when I say that that support would be substantial..."

"... As would be the support you'd expect in turn, I'm sure," Leon replied with a bitter smile. "I have no doubt that you'd be a generous Lord, but a Lord you'd still be, and even if it slows me down, I'd rather walk my own path. At least for the time being."

Anastasios sighed deeply. "The offer will remain open, Leon Raime," he said. "Should you ever change your mind, please don't hesitate to send me a message. We can discuss details then."

Leon nodded, and softly added, "You've honored me with the recruitment attempt. I'm sure that serving the Ilian Empire would be a fine way to spend one's life, it's just not for me. I hope I've caused no offense..."

"None taken!" Anastasios cried out, clapping Leon on the shoulder so hard that Leon almost lost his balance and fell over Elise. Anastasios, appearing to pretend that that didn't happen, continued, "Now, I believe that we've a quick exhibition for our entertainment, why don't you join me to watch?"

Leon suppressed the urge to scowl—only really able to do so after sharing a look with Elise, who silently told him to go along with it. Being around Anastasios was making him nervous since he couldn't figure out what exactly the man wanted other than what was on the surface, or why he wanted it, but he could hardly just walk away at this point. Creating animosity between them would only be self-destructive, and accompanying the man for a few hours was hardly the worst thing ever.

With a mildly tired tone, Leon asked, "What kind of exhibition?"

Anastasios replied, "Our friends down in the southeast will be joining us, and a traditional greeting for them—"

Before the Lord Protector could finish speaking, the doors that Leon had entered the ballroom opened again, and in trooped about half a dozen people of striking physical features. Their hair were various extremely pale shades of pink, golden and platinum blond, and blue. Their skin color was dark—not a shade of brown as Leon was more familiar with, but various shades of purple—and they seemed to shine in the light of the hovering chandelier rings like their skin was smoother than normal. The man in front wore flowing robes of various natural materials—some kind of silk and plant fibers—dyed pitch black, while the others all wore pale colors that matched their hair color. All of their eyes were black orbs that lacked any definable pupils, but the leader's were flecked with silver, leaving his eyes to resemble the night sky.

"Forest Watchers," Elise murmured.

"Yes," the Lord Protector replied. "They've graced us with their presence. Normally quite aloof, but good people when you get to know them. Their usual formal greetings involve ritual combat—generally to first blood these days, but we tend to go a little harder when they come here. They just bring out our competitiveness, you know?"

Leon watched as the troop of Forest Watchers practically marched over to the Emperor, giving no one else so much as a single glance. Their leader was seventh-tier, as were two of his comrades; two more sixth, and the last one was only fifth-tier.

"Have you ever seen their people before, Leon Raime?" Anastasios asked.

"I haven't," Leon admitted. "I've barely even heard of 'Forest Watchers' before..."

Elise added, "And I've only heard the barest minimum; they're an incredibly mysterious people, especially when they're from the opposite side of the plane from where we're from..."

"That makes sense," Anastasios replied. "They mostly stick to their lands, only leaving on rare occasions. But even though the Sunlit Empire and the Sentinels, among several other small states, lie between us and them, we still have more contact with the Forest Watchers than we do with the Northwestern Kingdoms. Do you know why that is, Leon Raime?"

Leon briefly wondered just why Anastasios was asking him so many questions like this, and it certainly did nothing to help him relax. It was both incredibly suspicious, like the Lord Protector was trying to get him to say something incriminating, and rather patronizing, like the Lord Protector was taking some kind of pleasure in lecturing Leon about the wider world.

"Not a clue," Leon tersely answered.

"It's quite simple, really: they help us to watch out for the Sky Devils that live in their little Hell far to the southeast, across the Argonaut Sea. Argos is where we enter the Argonaut Sea, but the Strait of Keraunos on the north side of the Sky Devil's Hell is on the south side of the territory of the Forest Watchers, with only the mountains we call The Shield separating them from the Sky Devils. Their cooperation ensures that we can keep the Sky Devils confined to their box." Anastasios paused for a moment, then leaned in a little bit to emphasize his seriousness. "If those Sky Devils ever got loose, then Aeterna as we know it would change forever, and not for the better."

A smile slowly spread across Leon's face as a possibility occurred to him. *'Does he know my connection to the Thunderbird Clan? Is that why he's being so... friendly to me? Why he's trying so hard to recruit me?'*

Out loud, though, Leon said in an even tone, "I think I've heard about these 'Sky Devils' before, but the few myths of yours that I've heard them in seem rather... overblown, to me. I can't imagine that they'd be as bad as you claim..."

Anastasios chuckled rather condescendingly. "If only that were true..." he murmured. "Hell, it might've even *been* true at one point, but we've been fighting for too long, we have too much bad blood between us. It's just better for everyone if those creatures stay on their side of the Argonaut Sea. If they ever managed to cross to the mainland, the streets would run red with the blood of innocents."

"Mm," Leon hummed noncommittally. "I'll have to take your word for it."

As the Forest Watchers continued to converse with the Emperor, Leon, Elise, and Anastasios fell into a long silence that only ended once several servants arrived in the ballroom and began setting up a makeshift arena. It wasn't anything particularly special, but they roped off a circular area, and laid down about a dozen light spells across the rope. Then, they set up several huge chairs facing the roped off area. The largest and most elaborately decorated one the Emperor immediately took, with the leader of the Forest Watchers taking the one to his left. Anastasios gave his apologies to Leon and Elise for leaving, and then went to take the seat on Emperor Adam's right. That left only two more seats open, one of which was immediately given to Princess Cristina. She was hardly the most powerful mage present, but she was still Royalty.

The final chair, to the Anastasios' right, was offered to Emilie, but she refused. Leon's heart sank when he saw Anastasios' gaze drift in his direction, and he closed his eyes and braced for what seemed to be coming.

"Leon Raime, why don't you come and sit with me, then?" Anastasios called out, drawing the gaze of every person in the room over to Leon.

Such a blatant invitation couldn't be refused by him quite yet—a fact that was emphasized when Leon glanced at Emilie, who nodded to show that she wasn't upset at his departure—so Leon gave Elise a quick kiss on the cheek, and she released his arm so that he could go and join the Lord Protector.

From there, the fifth-tier Forest Watcher entered the ring, removing his shirt as he did to reveal flowing silver vine-like markings that covered his torso that looked like they were actual silver infused into his wine-colored skin. He donned no armor, and brought from his soul realm a handle of a sword, sans blade, that seemed to radiate light magic.

Leon's eyes widened, recognizing this weapon as something much like the bladeless swords that the angels had used back at the Serpentine Isles. His suffering mood immediately plummeted further, and his grip on the armrests of his seat almost broke them clean off the chair. Fortunately, the weapon in the Forest Watcher's hand didn't seem nearly as potent as the angelic weapons that Leon had seen so far, but the reminder of that time was hardly appreciated.

A fifth-tier warrior that Leon presumed was loyal to the Ilian Empire then entered the ring, also taking off his shirt and leaving him just as unprotected as the Watcher, though making much less of an impression given his rather standard, if impressive, physique.

"Very well!" Emperor Adam called out. "Let's begin our friendly competition!"