

Storm King 651

Chapter 651: Attican Snapper

There weren't many clues to find about their quarry's whereabouts around the farmhouse. At this point, enough time had passed that most tracks had vanished, and those that Leon was able to find were rather inconclusive, pointing to the swamps where they disappeared.

However, there were just enough clues that things weren't quite adding up in either Leon or Maia's head.

"I don't think any of my people would live out here willingly," Maia said with a frown as she and Leon stood at the water's edge. "Most of us live in cleaner water, and in places where there is easier access to men willing to reproduce."

Leon nodded. That tracked with the place he'd met Maia—her river nymphs occupied a large river in a wild part of the Talfar Kingdom, but further down river there were small Talfar settlements. For a river nymph, it would've been the easiest thing to travel a day or two downstream, grab a victim, and then return almost before anyone even knew that their victim was missing. And that was assuming they had to kidnap anyone at all; Leon knew that there were plenty of people more than willing to go off and have sex with someone as beautiful as a river nymph without too much thought, and the men who fit that mold were exactly the kind that the nymphs preyed upon.

Out here in the Ilumerian Wetlands, where there were few people concentrated in pockets dense enough to know fairly quickly when people went missing or died, and in such a dirty environment... Leon couldn't imagine anything as powerful as a Naiad or a Gorgon would choose this over somewhere nicer. In fact, if something intelligent wanted to hunt humans, then Leon assumed that being closer to human territory would not only give them more ready access to their prey, but also have the added bonus of less predators to compete with, since humans tended to kill predators off wherever they settled.

"There weren't any missing family members, either," Leon mentioned. Thanks to his initial research, he knew that the stone statues in the farmhouse represented all of the members of the family that lived here. The Gorgon clearly hadn't been here trying to kidnap anyone... Although... "... Would any Gorgon *want* to kidnap someone?" Leon wondered aloud. "Your aunt clearly didn't care that much, and with her acting as a precedent for living so far away from human civilization, is living out here in the Wetlands that surprising? I mean, a *river nymph* would want to live closer to humans, but what about a Gorgon?"

Maia nodded her head in concession. "I can't say," she answered. "Most of my people don't become Gorgons—and since those that do only do so after more than a hundred years, that means there aren't that many that can exist at any one time."

"There are more groups of river nymphs than just your family, though, right?" Leon asked. He understood that to be true given that river nymphs were present not only in the Northern Vales, but also in Talfar, but he wanted more specifics.

"There are at least thirty... 'tribes', I guess they could be called?" Maia explained. "Thirty Pleiones, that is—Empresses of my people. That means a few hundred Naiads. One or two will Gorgonize with every tribe's generation, meaning about twenty Gorgons will be alive at any one time on average."

Leon nodded again.

Maia continued, "Gorgons become what they are because they refuse to reproduce. We require the magic power of a mate to not succumb to that disease, so those that *do* succumb are those who aren't that positively predisposed toward humans. So I *guess* that those who Gorgonize will be the kind that live far away from mankind..."

"You say that like I'm ripping out your teeth," Leon observed as he lightly bumped his elbow into hers.

Maia shrugged. "I could be wrong," she stated.

Leon waited for a 'but', but when none came, he turned his attention back to the few tracks that were left in such a damp, muddy environment. In the somewhat drier dirt a little further inland was a track, long and winding, that he identified as being clearly serpentine, which further fit with his memories of a Gorgon trail, and yet, it also didn't. From what he remembered of Maia's aunt, a Gorgon's tail had to be thicker than what had made this track.

He then glanced up and projected his magic senses in the direction that the tracks had been heading. He wasn't expecting to find much given just how old the track was, but if there was anything seventh-tier or greater in that direction, he hoped that he'd be able to easily spot it.

Several monsters immediately stood out to him, including a sixth-tier reptile that was eerily similar to some of the jungle-swelling creatures he saw in the Serpentine Isles, and a seventh-tier bat-like thing with a terrifyingly human face, but he saw neither Gorgon nor river nymph. He only had one example of a Gorgon to base his expectations on, but that Gorgon had subjugated the Forest of Black and White's resident river nymphs, and he assumed that a Gorgon here would have a similar coterie.

"I can't see any other signs of a Gorgon around here," he stated.

Maia frowned, and Leon felt her project her magic senses. "Neither can I," she said. "There aren't any places around here that any self-respecting Naiad or Pleione would establish themselves. Leon... we're not hunting a Gorgon..."

Leon's expression morphed into a frown to match hers. He could feel Maia's mild disappointment in not thinking she could save one of her kind from the curse of Gorgonism, but remembering the power of Maia's aunt had a few currents of relief pass through him. He hadn't exactly been looking forward to facing down another eighth-tier Gorgon. But that relief soon gave way to a kernel of anxiety as he landed upon the next obvious question.

"Then... what are we dealing with...?" Leon wondered.

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Leon and Maia returned to Attica, their initial enthusiasm for this bounty having been thoroughly crushed. However, it had still been accepted, and so it had to be fulfilled. With the monster responsible now in question, though, Leon decided that they had to do more research than simply relying entirely on their magic senses and experience dealing with Gorgons to see them through.

They were dealing with something that was truly unknown, and the only way they were going to find their prey now was by finding out what it was. It was almost embarrassing returning to the city having

done nothing at all when they were so confident setting out, but Leon buried that embarrassment as best as he could by reading up on local wildlife and speaking with local hunters and the bounty manager in Attica's branch of Heaven's Eye.

This endeavor took the rest of the day, but with Maia finding some potentially useful books in the local library, they managed to prevent the day from being a total wash.

Firstly, Leon found out a little more information on their bounty, being reminded that the serpentine tracks were only found at the last farmstead to be attacked—which they had just visited and confirmed for themselves—and that the other farmers that had been attacked hadn't been kidnapped following their petrification.

He then spent some time mapping out the locations of each attack, and cross-referenced with a map of other farmsteads, and information on any recent disappearances. He didn't even need to invoke Heaven's Eye's authority to do so, with the local administrators being only too willing to help an eighth-tier mage who was taking on one of their most dangerous bounties.

What he found was that each of the farmsteads had been established within ten miles of each other, though not all at the same time. There were a few other disappearances in the past year that caught his eye, too, and all from farms in the same general area. He briefly wondered just how no one else had seen a pattern in this, but he was reminded by Elise during a short break that most Attican farms failed. Having a few deaths and disappearances was the norm, not something so unusual that people took much notice. The deaths associated with these bounties were just a few more in a long chain of failed farms that testified to Attica's inability to tame their surroundings.

When he looked at the whole picture, though, Leon found that there while there were deaths and disappearances all over Attica's claimed territory, there was still a hot spot near the farms connected with his bounty.

But those others not listed on his bounty were just disappearances, not deaths, which he found quite curious.

'Maybe those people were kidnapped?' he contemplated. 'Or maybe they were just attacked somewhere out in the swamps and never made it home?'

He couldn't say, he'd have to look around those farms himself to be sure. Fortunately, all were within range of his magic senses, so he projected his power and did his best to inspect the sites from a distance. It took some time to locate each of the abandoned farms, but when he did, he found exactly what those sent to check up on the farmers found: nothing at all. No tracks, no signs of battle, just desolate farms quickly being reclaimed by the swamp.

All in all, he wasn't able to find much investigating the deaths and disappearances on their own, but when he and Maia met back up and started looking into the local wildlife, he started to put some pieces together.

There were many vicious beasts in the Illumerian Wetlands, even this close to the region's edge. Some of them were almost destined to reach higher tiers, by human standards, just by virtue of their form. Leon and Maia started by researching those beasts, with a focus on beasts with innate earth magic. There were quite a few, but none with any references to petrification. Leon, however, took note of two

particular creatures: Attican Snappers, which were huge reptilian things with ten pairs of eyes and a virtual guarantee to reach the fifth-tier if they weren't killed young; and Blue Tailed Lizards, which were gecko-like lizards that were roughly the size of a large dog, and possessed not only powerful earth magic, but also potent venom that could kill a third-tier mage in seconds. There were a few other strong creatures with some command over earth magic, but as far as Leon could tell, these were the only two types of creatures that specialized in that kind of magic in the regions around Attica.

Perhaps there were other monsters in the area that wandered in from elsewhere, such as that basilisk from one of the other offered bounties, but Leon at least now had a place to start. And he felt like he could narrow it down even further...

"I'd say of these two, it's probably more likely to be a Snapper," Leon said to Maia.

[Why?] she asked, using her mental communication now that they were back in Attica and not in private.

"Behavior," Leon explained as he scanned the open book in front of him, which detailed the behavior of the Snappers fairly extensively. "They're not ambush predators, and engage in determined hunting. They also use their magic to get around rather than legs when on the hunt, which would explain why we didn't see any tracks. And they're also territorial, which might explain why one might attack the farms around this area. They don't want to be competing for land with humans."

Maia nodded in understanding. [Makes sense,] she whispered.

"What's your opinion?" Leon asked.

[I agree with you,] she answered. [Honestly, it makes a lot more sense to me that it would be some local wildlife rather than one of my people doing this.]

Leon reached out to take one of her hands in his. She was staring out at nothing in particular, and he could feel her hand subtly shaking.

"How are you doing?" he inquired, concern and love radiating from him.

Maia took a long moment to answer, and when she did, she spoke slowly. [I... feel kind of... useless,] she whispered into his mind. [This felt like an opportunity to prove that I wasn't, to save one of my people from our curse... but instead, it looks like it's turning into nothing. There was a part of me hoping that this was one of my people, even if it meant that one of my people was suffering. I wanted to be able to show that I could at least do something useful, especially after all of my failures dealing with those pirates, who should've been nothing to me...]

Leon pulled Maia closer and wrapped her up in his arms.

[You're not useless,] he whispered into her mind.

Maia didn't seem reassured, but she took a deep breath, and any traces of vulnerability in her demeanor vanished.

[Let's find this thing, and kill it,] she said to him.

Leon frowned slightly, but nodded, and they separated. Together, the two set back out onto the lake, and then delved into the swamps.

Their first destination was one of the other farmsteads that had been attacked. Like the first farm they visited, it was overgrown, but much more so, having been hit earlier. The family inside had been rendered into five stone statues, which were already being covered in some kind of swamp fungus. If there had been any clues to find there following the attack, they'd disappeared by now, and they set back out soon after.

The next few farmsteads they visited were much the same, with the only difference being whether or not the family had vanished or been petrified. No clues were found anywhere else, but at the very least, Leon and Maia were getting a better feel for their environment, being able to move quicker as they adapted to the swamps.

Throughout their journey, Leon not only kept an eye on their environment, but also on another map he'd acquired that listed the locations of all farms that were currently operating within fifty miles of Attica. There were quite a few, and some were still in the area that he was concerned with. He fully planned to visit some of those just in case, but as they first visited the destroyed farms, he noticed something in the growing darkness of the late afternoon: there were quite a few animals, from birds to small rodents up in the trees, fleeing from the area, as if something were coming.

Narrowing his eyes, Leon projected his magic senses once more, concentrating his attention in the direction that the animals were fleeing from. Tuning his senses as best as he could, he soon noticed a circle of swamp about half a mile wide and rapidly expanding that was becoming deserted of all life that could flee.

"Hang on..." he murmured, and Maia slowed the rate at which she was moving their boat through the swamp. "Head a little further south," Leon continued, directing Maia's attention toward what he'd noticed. He didn't have to wait long before she noticed what he'd had, as well.

They meandered through the swamp, moving through the thick tree trunks that jutted out of the swamp water, both of them concentrating on what might lay ahead of them.

And then Leon felt it—something woke up. It was a pulse of magic that seemed to resonate through the swamp, which he recognized as something akin to magic senses. A moment later, he felt a magical aura suddenly light up the swamp about a quarter mile away, drawing his focus.

When his magic senses landed upon the source of that aura, he saw a long reptilian head poking out of a fairly clear part of the swamp, the head larger than their boat and filled with many rows of large, jagged teeth. The creature's long head was shaped like rather like a thin arrowhead, and covered in ten pairs of bulbous eyes.

The head rose up out of the water, propped up on a short, stubby neck attached to a massive, muscled body covered in dark green scales that blended in almost perfectly with the darkening swamp. Its body was shaped roughly like that of a large ape, being primarily quadrupedal, but with a long, thick tail that countered the weight of its elongated head enough that it could probably use its massive forelegs as arms, if need be. It also had a long ridge of porcupine-esque needles running down its spine. Most notable of all, though was the fact that it had the aura of a seventh-tier equivalent human.

If the descriptions he'd read were accurate, this was a mature Attican Snapper, but one that was even stronger than the heights they usually climbed to.

"There..." Leon murmured, though he didn't have to, for Maia's head had already snapped in the creature's direction as soon as its head pushed itself out of the swamp water. With only a look of confirmation to Leon, she waved her hand, and her water magic began to push their small boat in the snapper's direction.

The creature didn't move quickly, seemingly needing some time to fully wake itself up. As a result, in the five minutes or so it took them to maneuver through the swamp, it didn't realize they were approaching until they were practically on top of it. And when it did, it turned in their direction, it roared in challenge, the sound echoing throughout the swamp. As soon as they passed into visual range, it made the strongest case yet that it was their quarry, for six of its ten pairs of eyes flashed with grey light, and the front of their boat began to petrify.

Leon wasted not a moment in rising from his seat, conjuring a bolt of silver-blue lightning, and hurling it at the monster. The bolt crossed the few hundred feet between them with deadly accuracy, splashing across the snapper's face only a moment later.

The monster screamed in pain as scales were torn from its head and three of its eyes were instantly vaporized. From the way blood leaked from some of the others, Leon guessed he'd done severe damage to more of its eyes, as well.

He was about to conjure another bolt, but Maia hadn't been idle, either, and only a second after his lightning bolt hit the snapper, a water dragon erupted from the surface of the water, wrapped itself around the snapper, and dragged it back down into the swamp water.

Leon couldn't follow it as well after that, but the snapper flailed enough that the water was greatly disturbed. Occasionally, a scaled leg or its tail managed to break the water's surface, but as their boat entered the clear area of the swamp that seemed to be its home, the snapper went still.

Just in case, Leon had been reaching out to the magic in their environment, gathering clouds above them for a powerful lightning strike, but when Maia smiled at him and said that the snapper was dead, he relaxed, and the magic he'd gathered dissipated back into the environment.

A moment later, the water dragon lifted itself up, and clutched within its massive jaws was the bloated corpse of the Attican Snapper. It wasn't that bloody, with only a few small holes puncturing its hide, but those holes had been enough for Maia to invade its body with her magic, killing it from the within.

"There's more..." Maia said out loud, her voice dripping with disgust. She waved her hand, and out of the water rose a clutch of about ten eggs, resting on a bed of pulverized stone. Leon marveled at the massive eggs, each one larger than his head, and it took him a moment to realize that the stone bed that they'd been secured within had a few recognizable characteristics—a disembodied stone arm here, the upper half of a human face there.

"I guess we found the missing farmers..." Leon whispered. He took only another moment to gather up the snapper's corpse, the eggs, and the petrified human remains, stored them all in his soul realm, and then said, "Let's head back. I'd say our job is complete."

Maia nodded, a smile of satisfaction on her face as she shifted her seat until she could lean herself back into Leon's arms, her power at least somewhat affirmed with the slaughter of this seventh-tier monster. Their boat began to turn at a more leisurely pace than before, and they began their short journey back to Attica.

Chapter 652: The Second Bounty

Turning in the bounty for the Attican Snapper turned out to be fairly straightforward. Leon just had to bring its corpse and the remains of its victims back to the bounty manager, and he just had to accept it and Leon was a quarter million silvers richer for his trouble. The petrified remains of the missing people were taken away to be buried, but he was allowed to keep the snapper's corpse, to do with as he pleased.

He and Maia deliberated for a few seconds, but in the end, he took it back to the guest house and quickly dismantled it. The biggest reason he was accepting these bounties was to help keep his hunting skills sharp, and part of that was practicing his skill in skinning and dressing the animals.

It had been a while since he'd had to do something like this, and the snapper's hide suffered a bit as a result. Most of its head was already unusable from Leon's lightning bolt, and there were a few holes that Maia had made when she'd killed it, but Leon's rusty skill with a skinning knife also lost him the hide covering the snapper's rear legs. Fortunately, he slowed down and took his time with the rest, leaving him with still quite a bit of scaled hide to work with.

Assuming he even wanted to work with it, of course.

The process of tanning hide was tedious, especially for something as tough as a scaled seventh-tier beast, and he didn't much want to do it, so he passed off the hide to Heaven's Eye. For a few hundred silver, they'd have their own tanners see to it.

That left what to do with the rest of the snapper.

He immediately burned most of its organs. He kept its heart for a moment, but nothing else. All of the snapper's meat he quickly pulled off its bones and passed to the guest house chefs to take care of, while collecting as much of its blood as he could into a bucket as he worked. The snapper's corpse hadn't been as fresh as he would've hoped for, but he still managed to collect a good few buckets of blood, of which a significant portion was mana. He wasn't an alchemist, but he knew that even that much blood from a seventh-tier creature could sell for quite a bit of money, so he passed all of that off to Heaven's Eye, as well.

That left him with the snapper's bloody bones and heart. Taking care of the bones was fairly easy—he had a vat of alchemical acid that he just had to dump the bones into, and in the morning, he'd just have to drain the vat and the bones would be squeaky clean. The heart, meanwhile, he took great care in cutting apart.

In humans and many other beings, the connection to their soul realm in their heart was fragile and easily destroyed. If a human died, that connection would be almost immediately severed, with almost no chance of letting any of their stored magic power return to the physical world.

Leon wasn't sure where all of that stored power went, he only knew that it was essentially lost forever, along with everything that was in their soul realm at the time.

In beasts and other inhuman things, however, things were a little different. Perhaps it was because of their magical powers being natural rather than a result of adaptation, but sometimes when a beast of sufficient power died, a goodly portion of their stored magic power would be shunted out of their soul realm and back into their body. However, with the creature's death and subsequent stilling of their heart, that magic would be unable to be fused with their blood and turned into mana, leaving it stuck in the beast's body.

Most of the time that this happened, the magic power would simply dissipate into the environment, turning into ambient magic power. But sometimes, it would crystallize, forming a small sphere of what was essentially physical magic power. These objects were referred to as the cores of the creatures in question since the crystallized magic power would be affected by the magic power that remained in the creature's body, and change. If a beast with fire magic were to be killed, then the element-less magic power in their soul realm, if it were to form a core upon their death, would transform into fire magic power, resulting in a fire core. For creatures with more than one element, their cores would contain magic power for both of those elements, making them much more versatile and valuable.

These objects stored an enormous amount of power relative to their size, outdoing even the highest quality of sapphires. This, in turn, made them extremely valuable to enchanters, for such cores could be used as potent power sources for large enchantments, even if their specific element didn't exactly match the enchantments or spells it was powering.

So, it was to Leon's immense glee that as he cut the snapper's heart open, he found a small orb within, perfectly spherical and about the size of a quail egg, glowing with soft, cloudy gray light, streaked with glittering pale blue. Both earth and water magic were contained within the core, neither of which he had much immediate use for, but which made the core immensely valuable. He wasn't that knowledgeable about the value of beast cores, but if he didn't want to use this one, he thought he could get at least two or three million silvers for it, at least.

But he *could* use it, so he didn't immediately give it to Heaven's Eye to sell. The bones, however, he did. He had no real use for the snapper bones aside from *maybe* using them as raw material after he learned more about smithing, but that was far enough in the future that he didn't think the bones worth hanging onto. Besides, he wasn't that keen on the skeletal aesthetic that some might prefer, and since seventh-tier bones could be used by alchemists, he decided that selling them was the better option.

Handing the bones off to Heaven's Eye after having them cleaned thus left him with only a few final things to deal with: the clutch of snapper eggs.

His first thought was to sell them, too. What was he going to do with these eggs, anyway, aside from eating them? And from what he understood after reading up on the snappers before the hunt, they made for rather unruly and unreliable war beasts, so getting the eggs to hatch wasn't of much help, either...

However, he still had the bracelet he'd found in the transformation cave and six potential beasts he could 'tame' with it. He refrained from using it before on a seventh-tier war mount descended from beasts brought here by his Ancestors in the interest of saving those slots for something more powerful,

or with more potential, but raising something powerful enough to reach the seventh-tier on its own was something that he could definitely value highly enough to use one of his limited bracelet slots on. He could mold it himself, learning about its powers as it did. Perhaps even help it to grow strong enough to become an Ascended Beast.

Besides, Attican Snappers were primarily users of earth magic, and that was an area that Leon was woefully deficient in. If he were to use his bracelet to dominate one of these young snappers, then it might help to make up for that deficiency.

With his mind made up, Leon arranged for Heaven's Eye to sell nine of the ten eggs he'd acquired, but after getting them all evaluated by the local beastmasters, he kept the one that seemed the strongest and healthiest. After that, though, he left the egg in the care of Emilie's beastmasters, for he had no real idea how to care for it. They indicated to him that the egg wouldn't be ready to hatch for at least six months, though, so for the time being, he put it out of his mind.

Once all of that was finished, it was late into the night. He and Maia had returned to the city early enough in the evening not to miss dinner, but now it was nearly midnight, and he felt appallingly disgusting. So, he made his way back to the guest house where he spent half an hour relaxing in the baths, and then curled up in bed with Elise and Maia, tired yet satisfied with how the day had gone.

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When Leon woke up, despite completing the bounty from the day before, he still felt a bit of an itch to practice his hunting skills. So, he went back to the bounty manager to accept the other job. Hunting down a basilisk sounded like exactly the thing he needed to calm down.

But unlike the day before, it wouldn't just be him and Maia—Valeria would be joining them, for Leon could tell that she was keen on hunting down such a dangerous creature when Leon returned to the guest house to start preparing. And she wasn't the only one who'd be joining them, either...

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"There she is..." Leon whispered, pointing to a young woman by the library. Valeria and Maia followed his indication, both of them curious as to whom the bounty manager had arranged to join them on this hunt.

When Leon had accepted the bounty, the manager had told him again that the last mage he'd sent after the basilisk had disappeared, and she had been a strong sixth-tier mage who knew the Attican swamps like the back of her hand. She'd been the woman he'd always turned to when powerful beasts that others couldn't handle moved into the area—she'd never failed to bring in her bounty.

The hunter's sister had been bothering the manager to accept the bounty herself, but the manager had always refused—the sister was only of the fifth-tier, and the basilisk was strong enough at the sixth-tier to threaten mages of the seventh.

The bounty manager had been hesitant to recommend her to Leon, but when Leon heard about her, he decided that he had to meet her. Just because he passed on Santiago didn't mean that he was no longer looking for strong, talented people to recruit, and from the sounds of it, the hunter's sister—or even the hunter herself, on the off-chance that that she was still alive—sounded like fantastic candidates.

He and his people had to do a bit of research, first, to get a better grasp of just what kind of beast they were hunting, so the bounty manager had told Leon that he would send word to the sister and have her meet them at the library's entrance, then gave Leon her physical description. He didn't give Leon many details, but those he did give were enough.

The woman waiting for them outside of the small library was striking in a few different ways. First, she was quite beautiful, being tall and athletically built, with strong, almost severe features that gave an immediate impression of cold aloofness that her slight frown and narrow glare emphasized. Her hair, meanwhile, was a pale, unnatural blue. It had been tied back in a tight bun, with only a few strands left loose to hang on one side of her face, looking both relaxed and professional at the same time.

Her equipment was rather less striking, being a tight, tailored brigandine, featuring some kind of dark green scaled leather that the steel plates on the inner layers were riveted to. She didn't have a helmet visible, but she had thick leather boots that were lightly enchanted, steel bracers that were a little more heavily enchanted, and a truly enormous hunting spear clutched in her right hand. All-in-all, her armor and equipment seemed almost overkill for a hunter, but Leon knew from his own experiences in the Forest of Black and White, let alone the fact that they were going up against a sixth-tier basilisk, that such armor was likely to be needed.

What drew Leon's curiosity the most, though, was her aura, and he was quite impressed. It wasn't quite as strong and stable as Valeria's, but compared to nearly every other fifth-tier mage he'd seen, hers was still exceptional. She was strong relative to her tier, and if the way she gracefully paced as she waited was any indication, she was highly trained, too.

She drew quite a few curious looks from passers-by going in and out of the library, but she seemed to hardly even notice, let alone care. She only stopped to stare when her gaze fell upon Leon, Valeria, and Maia as they stared back at her.

"She looks like she knows how to handle that spear," Valeria muttered appreciatively as the woman tightened her grip on the weapon just a bit and assumed an almost defensive stance, though refraining from brandishing the spear at anyone.

"She's a fifth-tier mage," Leon whispered back as he started walking in the woman's direction. "I would be willing to bet a big pile of money that she didn't get that strong without using that thing on a few occasions..."

"Not a bet I'd want to take," Valeria agreed.

"Hi, there," Leon said as he and his two companions approached. "I'm Leon Raime. Might I assume you're Helen? The bounty manager with Heaven's Eye told us to look for you..."

The woman nodded. "That's me," she whispered, her pale blue eyes that matched her hair almost perfectly still narrow in suspicion. "That cravenly shit didn't tell me about your friends, though..."

Leon's smile faltered just slightly at the venom that Helen had in her voice, though he supposed he could understand it. Helen's sister had been missing for weeks, and the bounty manager had refused to send others after her until this moment. Given that the man seemed scared of sending others off to their deaths, Leon could understand his reluctance, but he could also understand Helen's anger, too.

Leon made quick introductions, but it didn't seem to alleviate Helen's suspicion much.

After an awkward silence following their introductions, Leon said, "So, shall we head inside? I think the four of us ought to have a quick sit-down and discuss what we're doing together, as well as look into exactly what it is that we're fighting."

"There's not much need for that," Helen countered. "I've been waiting for this for weeks. I've done all the research, even gone out into the swamps a few times on my own to scout out the area where the basilisk's lair has to be. I'd have saved my sister myself if I weren't so weak..."

Helen averted her gaze for a moment as if embarrassed that she'd let something like that slip out. When she turned back toward the other three, her gaze had hardened, like she was daring any of them to ask her about it.

Deciding that it would be better for group cohesion to move on until such a time as she was more willing to say what was on her mind, Leon said as good-naturedly as he could, "If you already know everything that we need, then how about we head down to the docks, rent a boat, and then get underway? You can let us in on the essentials on the way."

Helen finally seemed to relax a fraction and nodded. Without any further ado, Leon turned right around and led the way down to the lakefront, with Maia and Valeria hesitating only a moment before following him. Helen walked a fair distance behind them—close enough to converse with them comfortably, but almost so far away that she might've seemed separate from the rest of the group to any onlookers.

Once at the docks, Leon rented another rowboat, though this one a little bigger to accommodate the two extra passengers, but it would move just as quickly with Leon, Maia, and Valeria, three mages skilled in water magic, on board.

With everything taken care of, the four set out onto the lake, and Leon finally turned back to the silent Helen.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"Head to the east bank," she directed. "There's a river that feeds into the lake. We should be able to follow it into some marshes that'll take us to where we need to go."

Leon nodded, and Maia took control of the water beneath their boat and set them on their journey.

"What exactly is this creature that we're dealing with?" Valeria asked. "I would've looked into it a bit more, but we kind of left the library before I could get the chance..."

"I think it's another one of those things we saw in the Screeching Desert," Leon replied. "Looks like a dragon-thing, but with feathers on its neck, only two legs, and wings like a bat."

"They're fucking big, too," Helen grumbled. "This one is a bit of a runt, which is probably why it's here and not back in the desert. Got run out by the bigger ones."

"How big is it, exactly?" Valeria inquired.

"Big enough to swallow this entire boat whole, if it wanted," Helen informed with an almost wicked smile. "It's been harassing some of the swamp folk for a while, now. Stealing cattle and the like. It's gone

and broke some of the levees protecting some of the waterways, too, complicating travel. I think it might've even attacked a few trade ships as they passed through, but it's hard to be certain—basilisks can fly pretty far, and they don't always leave survivors, so it can be hard to definitively trace some of their movements."

"How many people has it killed?" Leon asked.

"At least a few dozen..." Helen quietly replied. "It, us... doesn't seem to like actually *eating* humans, so a few remains have been found before they were taken by the swamp."

"Makes sense," Leon replied, sensing the direction Helen's statement was going and wanting to head it off before she got too depressed. "In my experience, most predators don't really bother with humans. We're too threatening even when alone, especially for the amount of meat on our bones."

"Yeah..." Helen murmured.

"So, what else?" Leon asked. "Where is this thing's lair, and what kind of dangers might we expect on the way?"

Helen bit her lip in muted frustration, then admitted, "I... never managed to find the lair. I've looked, but the thing flies. There's not a lot of tracks that I can follow."

Leon nodded again, though his lips turned downward slightly.

"Where we're going is the thing's hunting grounds," Helen continued. "Most of the attacks happened in these hundred square miles or so, so I'd imagine that it doesn't rest its head too far away."

"A reasonable assumption," Leon said. "What should we look for that it might use as a lair? I can't imagine there are many caves around here..."

"Probably some kind of pit on dry ground," Helen explained. "Basilisks are creatures of both air and earth, so creating a lair shouldn't be too difficult in most places. The problem here is where it'll find dry land—most pits in the Wetlands will fill with water even if you only go a few feet down. But it shouldn't create a cave, they're flying monsters and they prefer to come and go from their homes as they please. That means it'll be open to the sky."

"And they're big creatures," Leon added as he thought the problem over out loud. "That'll mean some cleared ground, and they're not likely to be able to hide their auras that well." With a meaningful look to Maia, they both took all of that information and projected their magic senses, looking for any sign of a lair, or the basilisk in flight.

They came up with nothing, but neither were discouraged. There was an enormous amount of land to cover, and even though they *could* cover it with their magic senses, actually inspecting every square foot of that land took a long time. Just because nothing immediately stood out didn't mean much.

When they projected their magic senses, though, Helen almost reeled back like the force of their projected magic power had physically struck her.

"What in the shitting fuck was that?!" she shouted, her eyes going wide. "How strong are all of you?!"

Valeria responded with an almost smug smile, "I'm only fifth, as you can probably tell, but Leon and Naiad are both eighth-tier."

Helen stared back in disbelief. "E-eighth-tier?!" she sputtered. When Valeria nodded, she sat back up straight, her eyes turning back to Leon and Maia, both of whom wore proud smiles. For the first time since they'd met, her pale blue eyes seemed to brighten with hope.

Chapter 653: Helen

Following the revelation about Leon and Maia's power, Helen seemed to relax a great deal during the next half hour or so, but no one said much more that wasn't business related. Helen gave Maia more detailed directions, and after they'd traveled about forty miles, they finally reached an end of the swamp. They disembarked from the boat and pushed into drier parts of the Wetlands. The basilisk, and if they were lucky, Helen's sister, laid somewhere ahead, but they'd have to search more thoroughly to find them.

During their overland trek, the quartet fell into something of an awkward silence now that Helen didn't need to continuously relay directions, and Leon, to his surprise, found himself breaking it.

"So, Helen," he said, almost surprising himself, "are you a local of these parts?"

Helen gave him a curious look, mild suspicion flashing through her pale blue eyes. But Leon didn't mean anything untoward, he was just curious about their companion, and found her power to be exactly what he was looking for in a new retainer. He just needed to sound out her more personally to decide if he wanted to make her a recruitment offer.

It seemed that Helen decided to trust him enough to answer, for after a moments of thought, she replied, "No. My sister and I moved here about ten years ago."

"Ah," Leon responded. "I ask because your sister is a sixth-tier mage, correct?"

Helen went quiet for a moment as she stared out into the forest. "If she's still alive... yes," she murmured.

Leon cringed slightly and hurriedly replied, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to bring up anything painful. We'll find your sister if she's out there."

"It's fine," Helen shot back with a wave of her hand. "I'm a little out of sorts with finally finding myself out here with some capable mages, but I made my peace when Anna didn't come home after her hunt."

Leon nodded, then turned his head and grimaced. He happened to make eye contact with Valeria, who silently scolded him for his insensitivity with a quick slightly exasperated glare.

Turning back to his reason for bringing this up, Leon continued, "I ask because, with your fifth-tier power, I just thought it a bit strange that you two would be here, of all places. Surely those with your power could've found employment in a more lucrative place? Or at least a more comfortable location? Did you two just like it here?"

Helen gave her answer quite a bit of thought, her eyes staring out into the wet forest they were slowly picking their way through as they made their way toward higher and drier ground.

“... We came here for me,” she eventually stated. “My sister is one of the best hunters on all of Aeterna. She could’ve, as you said, found employment anywhere. I’m not the sort that enjoys hunting, but I had some interest in alchemy. The Illumerian Wetlands are dangerous, but they’re replete with all kinds of wild herbs and monster parts that can be made into various potions.”

“What kind of alchemy do you specialize in?” Valeria politely inquired.

“I’ve an interest in all fields of alchemy,” Helen answered, a smile of pride slowly making its way across her face, “but if I had to say what I’m most practiced in, I’d say that would be brewing antidotes. Just given what kind of place the Wetlands are, I’ve no shortage of poisons and venoms to synthesize antidotes from, and my most frequent patients are hunters who ate something strange or got bitten by some crazy bug. Speaking of which...”

Helen began rooting around in her pockets beneath her brigandine, eventually pulling out a vial containing about five or six mouthfuls of some foul dark green liquid and holding it up for the other three to admire. It looked kind of like bottled swamp water, but it was both far too thick and too chock-full of magic power for Leon to mistake it for that.

“I’ve been waiting for someone to head out in search of my sister for a while,” she explained. “Long enough to make something that ought to help us when we find that basilisk.”

“Is that some kind of anti-basilisk poison?” Leon asked.

“No,” Helen replied with a sharp smile. “Basilisks are nearly impossible to poison. But they have extremely potent venom of their own. I just wanted everyone to know that should they get bitten by this monster and they don’t immediately die from its huge fucking fangs, I can neutralize its venom with this stuff. Just apply it to the wound, or ingest it if that’s not feasible, and the venom will no longer be a problem!”

“That’s incredible,” Valeria praised.

Helen’s smile grew wider, and then her cheeks reddened, and she put the vial back into her pocket. “It’s nothing, and might not even work. I haven’t had any victims of basilisk venom come into my apothecary, so it’s extremely hard to test. But I’m confident that I got it right!”

Leon smiled in appreciation, but he had his doubts, too. He’d been told that this basilisk’s venom could kill seventh-tier mages, and if that was true, then it was potent stuff.

“If everything goes well,” Leon said, “then we’ll return to Attica with that stuff still untested.”

Helen shrugged. “I might want to test it if we can get our hands on one of its venom glands, but I get your meaning. Best not to let it actually bite any of us.”

Pressing on into the forest, they finally started to reach parts of the Wetlands that were more forest than swamp, with actual reliably dry ground beneath their feet. They remained focused on their task, but their conversation didn’t die down that much. In fact, as Helen got more used to their presence, she revealed herself more and more to be a rather chatty person, more than willing to share parts of her life.

After some conversation about what brought Leon and his family to Attica, she spoke a bit about where she was from.

"It's not that exciting," she nervously prefaced. "I'm not a general or the bodyguard of a Princess. I've not fought in any wars or participated in dynastic struggles. My family was fairly well off, but I'm just a simple girl from the Sacred Golden Empire who had an interest in alchemy. I don't think I would've gotten as far as I have in my magical journey if not for my sister constantly prodding me in my training or providing me with magic-rich materials."

"So you've used potions to reach the fifth-tier?" Valeria asked with some distaste in her tone.

"As training enhancers, not as training replacements," Helen explained. "There's a crucial difference there. Many people want their training to be fast, and they're more than willing to cheat to get there. But they'll usually throw caution to the wind or slack off on their actual training in the course of doing so. Obviously, this leaves those who take such measures with a less robust magical foundation and weaknesses in their adaptations. Their lungs only pulling ninety percent of magic out of the air they breathe rather than one hundred percent, for example, or more seriously, some of their bone marrow remaining un-adapted despite flooding their body with magic power with potions.

"This is not what I did. I kept my alchemic enhancements light, which helped to make my journey easier, without also completely sabotaging me."

"That sounds like a *very* fine line to walk," Leon observed, frowning slightly. He didn't exactly take the hard road in his magical journey, either, but much of his journey had still involved a lot of pain and effort. Still, it had culminated in him now being stuck at the eighth-tier, and he had no earthly idea just how long it would take for his soul realm to heal enough to begin advancing again.

"It is," Helen admitted. "Oftentimes, I forwent my potions because I was too nervous to take them, for fear of creating imperfections. I can't *stand* the thought of doing something as serious as ascending through the tiers and leaving imperfections behind..."

"If you're worried about such imperfections, wouldn't it have been better to stay in Imperial territory, then?" Valeria wondered. "I'd imagine that such a place would be much better equipped to elevate young, talented mages than a much poorer place like Attica..."

"If you'd think that, you'd be wrong," Helen practically spat as she glared eastward. She seemed like she was about to continue, but Leon then noticed something as they trudged up a shallow incline.

"Look at that," he said, pointing to a bush a couple hundred feet away that had been crushed by a gigantic pile of animal waste. Fortunately, the wind was at their backs, but even from so far away, he was catching a few stomach-churning whiffs of that foul substance. "What do you want to bet that only something like our basilisk would make something that big?"

"That's definitely basilisk poop!" Helen shouted as she started running for the dung heap, completely disregarding the nose-burning odor that only grew more intense with every passing step. "And it's fresh!"

Leon was used enough to hunting and using animal feces to track his prey that he wasn't quite as disgusted as he otherwise might have been, and Maia hardly seemed to care, but Valeria looked a little

green as they edged closer, following Helen. Out of consideration, Leon summoned a weak cyclone to blow about them, lessening but not quite relieving entirely the terrible miasma emanating from that foul pile.

Helen, however, didn't even hesitate to get right up close to it. The poop stack came up to her chest, though it was propped up slightly by the crushed bush beneath it. More leavings were above, caught in the leafy canopy of the forest, where the defecation had come crashing through. It seemed the basilisk didn't stop to release its waste and had dropped it while flying.

"We're definitely in the right area," she said with excitement, and a hint of dread crawling into her voice. "Basilisks don't usually take that long to hunt and remain near their lairs for long stretches of the day. They also mark their territory with waste, keeping other predators at bay."

"How big is the territory they usually claim?" Leon asked as he projected his magic senses. He contemplated transforming into his avian form to keep watch from above, but he wasn't yet confident in his ability to fight other airborne creatures like that, yet. His power might be enough to carry him through, but it still carried quite a bit of risk for something as poisonous as a basilisk.

"A few dozen square miles," Helen answered. "It's lair has to be close."

Leon concentrated on the slope they were steadily climbing. It remained completely covered in forest as far as he could see, but there were a few clearings here and there. Nowhere did he see any open-air lairs that a basilisk might be using.

But then he turned his magic senses upon the dung heap. It had until fairly recently been within the basilisk, but even though it had been out in the damp forest for hours, if not longer, it was seemingly untouched by the insects of the swamp.

The reason for that became clear enough: he detected a faint trace of magic within the fetid clump of waste. Leon concentrated on that spark of magic and then turned his attention outward again. With an example of just what the basilisk's aura felt like, he thought he'd be able to—

And there it was. Near a clearing close to the top of a hill about two miles away, he felt a stronger aura that matched what he could feel coming from the heinous waste in front of him softly emanating from a small cave. The mouth of the cave was barely large enough for a full grown man to pass through, though, let alone a basilisk of the size they were hunting, not to mention the sheer fact that it was in stark contrast to what he'd been told about basilisk lairs being open-air.

Leon quickly filled in the others on what he could sense. "... and stay on your toes. This cave is clearly artificial, from the looks of it, and if it's what we're looking for, then this basilisk might be a bit more than we've bargained for..."

"Meaning it may have become an Ascended Beast?" Valeria asked, immediately picking up on the same thing that Leon had.

Leon grimly nodded. Their intel said it was only sixth-tier, but that was the level at which some rare beasts might be able to take human form and assume human levels of intelligence. Or the basilisk might've just reached the seventh-tier. Or maybe its ability to use earth magic meant that it didn't need

to use standard cave entrances at all, though that left the question of why this cave entrance was there...

Whatever the case, Leon could sense the basilisk's aura emanating from the cave just as he could sense it emanating from the creature's waste.

He took the lead, with Helen at his side. She'd fallen silent when Leon revealed his discovery, and he had the feeling that she both *needed* to see what was in the cave but dreaded it at the same time. She'd relaxed as the group got to know each other, but now that they had a concrete location to work with, she'd tensed back up.

Leon wasn't sure what to say, or if he ought to say anything at all. He wasn't her friend, and he didn't think he was close enough to her to offer much comfort. In the end, when they finally got within eyesight of the cave entrance, their group had moved almost entirely in silence. Even then, though, Leon found himself quite impressed with how easily Helen moved through the forest—she was almost as quiet as he was. She was clearly a skilled ranger and not just a 'mere' alchemist.

Calling their group to a halt, Leon projected his magic senses again, focusing all of his attention on the cave entrance. It was plain enough to see that it was artificially made, with a tightly winding entrance preventing them from seeing directly into the cave from the outside, and from the smoothness of the walls. It was about wide enough for two people to walk side-by-side comfortably. Other than those details, however, Leon wasn't able to sense much about the entrance itself. There wasn't any magic securing it, nor any doors preventing physical access, which made him quite paranoid.

He pushed his magic senses deeper into the cave and down a long staircase that bored into the earth, expecting them to be at some point scattered or at least blocked by a door, but instead, he found his magic power spilling out into a large, richly appointed room that seemed more like a hall within a small palace rather than the lair of a wild beast. It was perhaps thirty or forty feet wide, and about a hundred feet long, with several doors on the right and left, and only one on the far wall. The stone floor was covered in many mismatched rugs, some of which were rather simple and woven from cheap fabrics, while others were of rich furs and fine wool. There were many pieces of furniture adorning the hall—which shared the same quick as the carpets, with almost every piece being of wildly different designs—which was illuminated by a combination of burning candles and a few magic lanterns roughly set into the ceiling.

It just looked like an underground palace thrown together with whatever was available to the builder, and if he'd noticed it without having noticed the aura, then while he might've been curious, he wouldn't have thought much of it. This was the Illumerian Wetlands, and there were likely mages living out in the swamps taking advantage of the local alchemical resources, or just living off the grid for whatever reason.

"It looks clear," Leon whispered, though his tone was strained and suspicious. "Keep your guards up, anyway."

He then led the way toward the cave, briefly contemplating the merits of announcing their arrival. It would be polite, and if this weren't the home of a basilisk, then it would be the right call. But he decided against it, just in case. He could always ask forgiveness and leave if he was mistaken.

With blade in hand, Leon pushed into the cave, the dark, winding tunnel proving no hazard at all, though he kept his eyes and magic senses open for any sign of magical defenses. But he and his people found themselves in the underground hall after only a couple of minutes, none the worse for wear, and seemingly without having been detected.

One thing that Leon did notice, though, was that the hall's central hearth—essentially just a fuel-less fire rune in a pit in the center of the hall—was going at full blast, one of the few enchantments in the place to be seen. If any of them were mortal, then the heat in the hall might've been uncomfortable.

"This place is well made," Valeria observed. "Solid, non-porous stone. I think it would flood, otherwise..."

Leon hummed in agreement, then ordered, "Let's check the doors. One at a time."

They crept through the hall toward the closest door on their right. The stone door was secured on stone hinges, which meant that Leon hesitated to even try to open it, for fear of making a racket—until he knew the palace's owner wasn't around, he was going to assume that they were. Seeing his hesitation, Maia conjured a small pillar of water and splashed it onto the door. The water seeped into the cracks between it and the walls, and she easily ripped the door out of its frame with hardly a sound.

Leon had to stifle his immediate alarm, but he didn't stop Maia. When the door was pulled away, he gave her a look that was both relieved at the result, and reproachful for giving him such a fright. She just smiled confidently in response.

With a sigh, Leon glanced into the open room, and then sighed again when all that was revealed was a fairly threadbare kitchen.

He then had the group cross the hall to open the other door that was right next to the entrance. He assumed that the door at the other end of the hall was where the hall's owner slept, so he decided not only to save that one for last, but for the group to slowly work their way down to it.

Maia ripped the other door out of its frame just like the first, disappointing the group again when all it revealed was a storage room full of unsecured crates and barrels. Leon found himself quite surprised at the goods they found, though, with several boxes full of spices, one box of silver coins minted in varying styles, and barrels of wine. Luxury goods that he would've assumed would be kept in the soul realm of whoever owned them, not kept so unsecured as these were.

But for all his disappointment and surprise, Helen had nothing but growing anxiety and dread. Leon could hear her breathing getting more and more frantic, and so he had them move on without taking too much time to check out the storage room.

The next couple of rooms were much like the second: storage rooms, but each one was for different materials. The third held various unrefined ores and sparkling bullion, the fourth had Leon's eyes widen in glee when they revealed hundreds of books, and the fifth had garments and fabrics of fine quality.

"I think these are goods that have been stolen from merchant ships that pass through the Wetlands," Valeria whispered as they moved on to the sixth door. Leon nodded, but he knew that whoever owned this hall could very well own all of these legitimately, too. Still, he knew that the basilisk had been here

for a few years and had attacked a few merchant ships, so all of these random goods being here was consistent with his hunt.

The sixth door was where they finally found something of real note. Maia tore off the door, revealing a bedroom just as opulently appointed as the main hall, but with an unpleasant surprise. As soon as the door was torn free, Leon found himself almost struck in the face with the stench of decay and r

Chapter 654: Basilisk

The basilisk—or so Leon was assuming the creature in front of him to be—came out of his room like a furious animal, but as soon as his reptilian eyes landed upon Leon and Maia, he froze in place, his look of wrath soon dropping into something more akin to a mix of terror and anxiety.

“Who... are you?” he hissed.

Leon almost turned the question back on him, but he figured that since he was in the creature’s home, he’d introduce himself first.

“I’m Leon, a mage passing through Attica,” he said. “I’ve been looking for another mage that went out to hunt a basilisk and vanished. The woman in that room appears to be her.”

The basilisk paled and took a step back. His aura began to rise, but his killing intent wavered slightly. He seemed to be panicking, and his fight-or-flight response was tilting heavily toward the latter.

“As a matter of fact,” Leon continued, “I’m also looking for the basilisk itself. That wouldn’t be you, would it?”

The basilisk bared his teeth and didn’t immediately respond. It took several seconds for him to unclench his jaw, and by then, Helen was already carrying Anna out of the bedroom she’d been laying in. The young alchemist had her sister over her shoulder while her other hand was stuffing the antidote for basilisk venom back into her pocket. She remained behind Leon, but she gently placed her unconscious sister down in a nearby armchair, then turned back to face the monster with her spear raised.

“That woman is my concubine,” the basilisk grumbled. “She thought to kill me and failed. Her life is mine to do with as I please.”

“I disagree,” Leon countered. “You’ve been a menace to human society, killing those in this area. It’s only natural that humans would come out here to kill you.”

“I claimed this territory by right of might,” the basilisk riposted. “Your kindred living in this region were too weak to hold onto their lives, and so were ended. This land is now mine.”

“This land is claimed by the city of Attica,” Valeria replied, her voice loud and forceful despite being a full tier behind the basilisk in power. “You can’t claim this land without clearing it with the city, first.”

The basilisk spat on the floor. “Weaklings who need walls to hide behind.”

Leon cocked an eyebrow and nodded to their surroundings.

The basilisk responded, “For the comfort of my women. They needed human comforts, so I provided.”

"You disgusting swine!" Helen screamed in rage as she took a step forward. "You *dare* to touch my sister!"

The basilisk sneered and replied, "I never touched that sow. Even after all I provided for her, she never gave me what I wanted."

"And what is it you wanted?" Leon curiously asked as he glanced back at Helen. He'd heard enough to want the creature dead, but there was a part of him that had initially thought they might be able to resolve all of this peacefully. If this basilisk was an Ascended Beast with human-level intelligence, then surely it was capable of reason. However, with every word the creature spoke, that part of Leon was growing smaller and smaller. Already, he was having trouble keeping his desire for more immediate justice in check—and besides, the prospect of adding Helen, an alchemist, to his retinue was just too tempting to pass by, and he could tell that she'd never let him leave this creature alive.

But he was still two full tiers above this basilisk, and he felt like he had the luxury to ask questions.

"Mates. Comfort. Everything that I didn't have in the north," the basilisk explained.

"How many have you killed?" Valeria demanded, her aura laced with prodigious killing intent. She was a hair's breadth away from attacking, herself, that much Leon could tell from her tone. And given the power difference between her and the creature, if she attacked, then Leon's hand would be forced.

With a grimace, the basilisk admitted, "Many. I'll admit that I don't know that much about you humans..." He glanced at Maia, then back to Leon. "At least, *some* of you are human... I tried to make the lives of those women I took better, but they kept killing themselves or running away when I gave them the slightest freedoms. Even after I took steps to keep them here, they still denied me what I wanted. When I got forceful, it just increased the chances that they'd kill themselves. Frustrating."

There wasn't a single trace of regret in the basilisk's tone that Leon could detect. It was almost like he was describing a failed gardening project rather than kidnapping and veritable enslavement of an unknown number of people. Leon didn't think that the basilisk believed its actions were wrong but was mostly just confused as to why none of those it took wanted to stay with him.

"You know," Valeria said as she and Helen started creeping forward, their weapons raised, "if people I wanted to be with kept killing themselves or running away from me instead of just 'giving in', or whatever you thought they should've done, then I might examine what it was about me that making those choices more attractive. It might trigger some self-reflection, and a change in behavior." The silver-haired woman took a threatening step forward, and Leon thought that if she weren't a full tier below the basilisk, then she might've already attacked him.

The basilisk took one look at her, glanced back at Leon, and without a word, fell into the floor. The stone below his feet simply split open with a titanic cracking sound, and he fell in.

Leon, having been keeping his eye on the basilisk, knew that this was the creature using its earth magic to try and escape. Before the floor could close back up, he was lunging forward, lightning crackling around his fingers as he summoned a bolt. The basilisk wasn't yet out of sight, and his head was turning upward, his human face contorted in panic and fear.

With a tremendous clap of thunder that shook the entire cave, the bolt slammed down into the floor just as it closed, but Leon knew at least a few arcs had to have reached the basilisk.

"He's not dead!" Leon shouted as he felt the vibration of the basilisk tunneling away. "See to them!" he shouted to his companions, pointing to Helen and Anna as he shot off toward the stairs. The basilisk could only be doing one thing: trying to escape by reaching the surface. It wasn't moving too quickly underground, and neither could it move that easily without Leon knowing where it was, so reaching the surface and transforming back into its true form could it hope to get away.

Any remaining desire that Leon had to resolve this without resorting to violence vanished. If the basilisk got away, then more people would die; that was the reality of the situation. Leon had to stop it here and now.

If Leon were a mere seventh-tier mage, or even an average eighth-tier mage, then if the basilisk could get into the sky, he was practically home free. Leon wouldn't have been able to follow him. But as it was, Leon was pulling his sword and most of his clothes back into his soul realm by the time he reached the first step.

His magic senses were pulsing out of his body and spilling out above ground before he reached the second step, and he forced himself to pick up the pace as he saw the basilisk erupt from the ground and immediately begin to twist and bend out of human shape. With lightning magic fueling his body, Leon reached the surface just as the basilisk returned to his true gargantuan form, with a huge serpentine head, bat-like wings, a long neck covered in feathers, and an even longer tail with a dangerous barb at the end.

The basilisk hissed at Leon, then beat its wings, pushing it up into the air on a great cushion of wind magic.

Leon didn't miss a beat, however, and took a running jump after the creature, his own body rapidly expanding and twisting into his avian form as he did. He'd finished his transformation before he'd even reached the apex of his jump, and began to rapidly beat his wings, using his command of wind magic to rapidly pursue the basilisk.

The basilisk was much larger, its wingspan at least five times that of Leon's. However, all that extra mass came at the expense of speed, and Leon rapidly closed on his prey. With a screech of fear, the basilisk began to put all of its magic power into trying to escape, but it was of little use. Leon came up from behind, dodged the basilisk's whip-like tail twice, and then let loose with a blast of lightning from his wings.

A roar of pain echoed throughout the Wetlands, and the basilisk immediately slowed, a gaping hole torn in one of its wings by Leon's silver-blue lightning. Little blood was spilled, though, the heat of the blast having cauterized the wounds.

Clearly sensing that it wasn't going to be able to escape, the basilisk's killing intent spiked, and it slowed to face Leon. But Leon wasn't going to give it any opportunities to strike, and slid around the monster with ease that surprised him given his lack of practice fighting in this form, his greater speed taking him above his prey. Another beat of his wings sent a second lightning bolt rippling out from his feathers and down at the basilisk, which slammed into the monster's back right between its wings. The creature

became momentarily lost within a great storm of lightning, as arcs of Leon's power covered it from snout to tail barb. It screeched in pain once again, and when the lightning cleared up, the scales over most of its back been torn clear, the flesh beneath had been burned black, and its wings had seized up.

The basilisk fell from the sky, still shrieking as it hit the tops of the trees and crashed right through to the ground.

Leon followed at a fair distance, not wanting to get too close to such an injured monster. He was stronger by leagues, but the basilisk was still enormous, and its physical strength was considerable. There was also the creature's venom to consider.

He kept his magic senses locked on the basilisk, though, and watched as it plowed through the muddy ground of the Wetlands, plunging down from drier land and into a shallow swamp. Finally coming to rest, the basilisk began to thrash about in the mud, seemingly unable to get its bearings enough to rise, and Leon took full advantage of its confusion.

Letting his Thunderbird instincts take over, Leon angled himself downward, his wings curled in and his talons outstretched. He fell from the sky like a thunderbolt, and before the basilisk could react, Leon had spread his wings to control his final descent, and his talons sank into the basilisk's feathered neck. The force of Leon's landing slammed the basilisk's head back into the mud, but without hesitation, Leon lunged forward, ripping and tearing into the basilisk with beak and talon, both sparkling with silver-blue lightning.

All around him, the heat of his lightning boiled the muddy ground and shrouded the environment in a thick curtain of superheated steam. But Leon kept ripping and tearing into the basilisk, not stopping until the monster had stopped moving completely, and when he pulled back, his face, covered in brown and gold feathers, had been practically dyed red from the basilisk's blood. The monster's head itself had been nearly torn free from its mangled neck, and it had fallen still, its eyes glassy and unfocused as more water and mud rushed in to replace what Leon had boiled away, covering the creature's scales, and threatening to pull both Leon and the basilisk's corpse further into the muck.

Leon took a deep breath, taking half a second to savor his victory, and then pulled the basilisk's corpse into his soul realm. At the same time, he lifted off with a great wingbeat, and after reaching a height of a couple hundred feet, he surveyed all the damage done.

The basilisk's landing had carved a long trench into the forest and down into the swamp, while Leon's lightning had started a few small fires. He didn't pay much attention to the latter—given the general dampness of the environment, those fires wouldn't spread far even if he left them alone. He used some of the abundant local water magic to snuff them out, anyway.

There were a few other beasts in the area with auras that caught his attention, but none were stronger than the fifth, and all were fleeing away from the site of the basilisk's fall. Amusingly to Leon, about a quarter mile away were a small handful of what looked like fishermen on a dirty boat, their lines lowered into the green water of the swamp. All of them were staring up at the sky in terror, though none seemed able to see him through the leafy canopy. He guessed they'd heard the fight, but none were stronger than the second-tier, and so he wasn't worried about them noticing him.

Almost lazily, he turned around and began flying back in the direction of the basilisk's lair. They hadn't been flying for long, but he and the basilisk had still managed to cross a couple miles, and it took a few seconds for Leon to land back on the shallow hill just outside the cave entrance.

As he touched down, Maia, Valeria, and Helen emerged, with Helen pulling a hovering litter behind them which had the still-unconscious Anna tied to it.

Without hesitation, Valeria rushed forward and summoned a low wall of opaque ice just tall enough to cover most of Leon's naked body. As he assumed his human form, he quickly dressed himself and stepped out from behind the wall.

[Is it dead?] Maia demanded as Valeria rushed over to check Leon for any wounds.

"It's dead," Leon confirmed aloud. "I'm fine, and its corpse now decorates my soul realm. So how about we head back to Attica and get miss Anna some medical attention?"

His words didn't deter Valeria from looking him over, and Maia calmly walked over to his side. Helen, meanwhile, stood fairly far apart from them, staring at Leon like... well, like he'd just transformed into a massive eagle and then back again.

"What... in the FUCK... just happened?!" she screamed.

Leon smiled at her as nonthreateningly as he could, though the effect clearly wasn't quite what he intended as he saw her tense up a little with his attention focused upon her, and he said, "Let's get back to our boat. I can explain on the way back to Attica."

—

The journey back to Attica proceeded fairly quietly. Leon started to explain what he was comfortable with on the way back to the boat, but he'd barely started before Anna started to awaken, and after that, all of Helen's attention was focused on her sister. Anna didn't truly wake up during the journey, though her eyes did open part way, and she mumbled incoherently, though those episodes never lasted too long. Helen seemed to think this wasn't much to worry about, though, or she was keeping her emotions a little more bottled up after seeing what Leon did. She notably sat as far away from Leon, Valeria, and Maia as she could on the boat, indicating that whatever trust they'd built up on the way to the basilisk's lair had been lost.

Leon felt more than a little regretful for that, though he couldn't say the result was too terrible. Anna had been found alive, contrary to seemingly everyone's expectations, and the basilisk had been killed. It hadn't been quite the hunt that Leon had expected, but it was a fine enough way to spend the day. At the very least, the rural residents of Attica would be just a little bit safer now that the creature had been taken care of.

What Leon was most looking forward to now, though, was dissecting the basilisk. He was a little squeamish about it because the basilisk had been a creature of human level intelligence, but his excitement at maybe seeing what was going on within its body was overpowering that particular anxiety. Besides, he didn't regret killing the creature that much, given his seemingly complete unrepentance for the harm he'd inflicted on many other people. He thought that he might need some

help, though, since not only was the basilisk incredibly large, but he also didn't think he had the biological knowledge to truly understand what he was doing or what he might learn.

He'd need some help from Heaven's Eye.

After that came the issue of what to do with its parts. As he contemplated that particular problem, his eyes drifted over to Helen, and he figured that he'd save the parts until he and she could meet up again—assuming she even wanted to, she seemed quite freaked out at his ability to transform—and perhaps work out some way where she could sign on with his retinue. He might have to sweeten the deal a little bit more, but the idea of adding a fifth-tier alchemist, and maybe even her sixth-tier sister, to his retinue was too attractive of an opportunity to pass on.

Upon their return to Attica, Helen swiftly disembarked from the boat to bring her sister to a healer. Anna appeared to stabilize during the trip, falling back into total unconsciousness not long after they got back to their boat, and Helen seemed unable to do much to help. Not even some of Leon's healing spells did much, though she at least accepted them, giving Leon some hope that she would at least hear him out when he made his offer of employment.

That left Leon, Valeria, and Maia with the rest of the evening to fill. So, they turned the boat back in, informed the bounty manager of their success, and made their way back to the guest house, where they met up with Elise and the rest of Leon's retinue. As they sat down for a large celebratory dinner, a number of Heaven's Eye workers came by to help Leon prepare the basilisk for dissection the following day, and Leon was able to leave the corpse with them until then.

The rest of the day he spent with his family. Elise managed to get Leon, Valeria, and Maia to head out into town with her to sample the night life, but Attica was a small city with not much in the way of fun to be had after nightfall. Consequently, Elise then dragged them over to where Princess Cristina was staying, and the four spent a long night with the Princess and several of her knights.

When they returned to the guest house, Leon was tired, both mentally and physically, but he considered it a day well spent.

Chapter 655: Another Offer

The hospital in Attica was fairly small, with no more than ten healers working there at any one time. Leon found that fairly strange, but when he mentioned it, Elise said that there were quite a few small private healer's clinics around the city, too.

Regardless, it was to the hospital that Helen had taken Anna following her rescue several days ago, and where Leon had been directed to by her assistant.

It was the last full day that the Heaven's Eye convoy would stay in Attica and Leon still wanted both sisters in his retinue—or, at the very least, he wanted Helen. Having an alchemist on his team would be a huge boon, and his first impressions of the young fifth-tier woman were quite good. He just hoped that he hadn't scared her off with his display during their hunt.

In the interest of recruiting her, he made a few discreet inquiries, and eventually found himself outside of her apothecary, but found only her assistant there, a young woman who possessed only first-tier

magic and couldn't possibly be older than he was. It was from her that he learned Helen was visiting her sister.

Leon then made his way to the hospital. The entire way, he argued with himself over whether or not he ought to wait until Helen returned to her apothecary, but in the end, he figured that if he wanted to recruit Anna as well, then he'd find himself at the hospital at some point today, anyway. Better to do it now while the two sisters could confer with each other rather than having to wait and find that he'd missed his chance.

The hospital staff were quite helpful in directing him to Anna's room, a small room not much larger than a walk-in closet, with barely enough space for the hunter's bed and a single chair. The healer he spoke with just outside of the room couldn't tell him much about her status, but he did indicate that Anna was doing just fine, had regained consciousness not long after being brought in by her sister, and that she was fit enough to have non-familial guests.

So, with that in mind, Leon knocked on the closed door and waited. A moment later, Helen opened the door, and her pale blue eyes widened in surprise and, to Leon's mild dismay, momentary fear, when she saw him standing there. She froze right there, the door only somewhat open, staring at him, clearly shocked by his presence and unsure what to say.

Taking her reaction completely in stride, Leon smiled good-naturedly and said, "Hi there. Would it be all right if I come in?"

Helen looked like she was about to refuse, but a weak, but an upbeat voice called out from inside the room, "Come on in!"

That response seemed to pull Helen out of her shock, and she sighed and pulled the door open further, stepping further in to give Leon enough room to enter.

It was a truly small room, with nowhere to sit, and feeling rather cramped with both him and Helen there visiting Anna. But the window was open, letting in about as pleasant a breeze as Attica was capable of getting, and allowing the light of the sun to spill inside. Those, however, were nothing compared to the bright and cheery smile on Anna's face as she watched Leon walk on in.

"You must be Leon Raime," she weakly stated as Leon closed the door behind him.

"I have the dubious honor of being Leon Raime, yes," he replied as he debated with himself what the most non-threatening posture he could assume could be, because Helen didn't seem to be relaxing at all. He eventually settled on leaning against the wall as far away from her as he could get without seeming like he was blocking the door, though it didn't seem to help much. "You're looking much better than the last time I saw you, I'm happy to see."

It was true, the green-haired woman had some color back in her face, and her smile glowed brighter than a magic lantern. Aside from the weakness in her voice, there wasn't much that Leon could see about her that made it seem like she'd been in the hospital for days—she fidgeted on her bed with fairly substantial energy, and her sixth-tier aura was robust and active. For all intents and purposes, she seemed to be almost recovered—physically speaking, at least.

"And I'm happy to hear that," Anna replied. "I'm told that I have you to thank for killing that fucking animal and helping to get me out of there."

"I played my small part, but I'd say it was your sister who had more to do with your rescue," Leon responded with a nod toward Helen. "She quite literally carried you out of there, and were it not for her, I don't think you would've survived your poisoning. I have no clue at all how to deal with basilisk venom. Speaking of which..."

Leon reached into his soul realm and retrieved several things. The first was a large receipt, marking all over with the sigil of Heaven's Eye. The second was a large jar of foul-looking dark green liquid that looked thicker than molasses. The third and final thing was another jar of bright red mana that pulsed with magic power, which Leon had to summon on the floor.

"This is proof of your contribution in hunting down that basilisk," he explained as he handed the receipt to Helen. "The bounty manager has already seen to it that the payment has reached your account."

Helen gave him a look of great skepticism and surprise, but she took the receipt and gave it a once-over, her eyes practically popping out of her skull for just a moment as she saw the amount that she'd been paid. "Thank you..." she whispered, quickly composing herself.

"That's not all," he said as he brandished the jar of green liquid. "I had the basilisk taken apart. This here is about half of the venom that was extracted from its glands. This other jar is filled with a good portion of its mana. I figured that I'd deliver both of these to you two for your contributions in dealing with that creature."

"That's entirely unnecessary, at least for me," Anna responded with a look of amazement. Leon could understand that since what he was giving them held quite a bit of value. The basilisk venom in the jar alone was probably worth at least half a million silvers, while the mana's value was a little more fluid depending on where they might be and who they might be talking to, but he estimated it to be worth five million silvers at the least.

"But we'll take them," Helen countered as she snatched up the two jars and placed them on the edge of Anna's bed. For just a few moments, her antipathy and suspicion of Leon had vanished as she stared at the alchemical treasures that Leon had just handed over.

"Please forgive her, she can be a little narrow-minded when she sees rare ingredients," Anna said with an affectionate smile aimed at her younger sister. She reached over and patted Helen's hand, and the younger woman seemed to relax slightly, though her guard certainly went back up when she glanced back at Leon.

"That's quite all right," Leon replied. "I understand the shock at seeing how I took out that basilisk..."

Anna sat up in her bed a little straighter and said, "Yeah, my sister told me something about that day that's pretty hard to believe..."

Leon awkwardly smiled and nodded as he stole a glance at Helen, who stared back at him with a little less antipathy, but still not anywhere close to even the basic levels of trust she had before he revealed he could transform.

Instead of directly launching into an explanation of that, though, he said to Anna, “Uh, I don’t really know how to get into that right now, so how about while I think of that, you tell me how you’re doing?”

Anna quietly chuckled, ran her fingers through her long green hair, and replied, “I’m doing about as well as anyone else would be, I think. That animal didn’t do much to me, thank the gods, aside from the whole poisoning thing. But... I’m certainly not the only one he kidnapped.”

“We found another corpse in there of a young woman,” Leon said with a nod of his head. “Looked like she’d been dead for a while.”

“That would make some sense,” Anna responded. “He wasn’t quite so overbearing for the first couple of weeks, though still extremely manipulative. But about three weeks ago, he forced me to drink his venom, and then tried to get me to agree to be his mate...” Anna’s voice cracked slightly, and Leon wondered just how well she was actually doing, but he didn’t think himself nearly close enough to challenge her on her claims of being fine. “Thankfully, you got to him before he could escalate matters to something more physically forceful.”

“Thank the Ancestors for small mercies,” Leon whispered.

“Indeed,” Anna agreed.

“If you need anything, don’t hesitate to ask me,” Leon offered, but from the way that Anna just smiled, he didn’t think that was an offer that she was going to take up anytime soon—at least, not for anything material.

“I wouldn’t say I *need* anything,” Anna replied, “but I would like to have some answers, if possible.”

“That depends on the questions,” Leon stated with a smile.

With a tone as blunt as a mace, Anna asked, “Are you an Ascended Beast?”

Leon shifted his posture a little in discomfort. “Are you concerned with my ability to transform?” he asked.

“Maybe,” Anna admitted, and Leon watched as Helen tensed up a little more. The fifth-tier alchemist’s aura started to churn, and Leon guessed that she was reaching into her soul realm, not to pull anything out right now, but certainly preparing to do so if needed.

“I’ll admit that I’m unsure how to answer that question,” Leon replied with a cheeky smile, ignoring for the moment Helen’s reactions and focusing entirely on her older sister. “I would consider myself human; that’s how I’ve spent my entire life, after all. However, I can see how someone else might think of me as an Ascended Beast. After all, a beast that can transform indefinitely into a human isn’t all that different from a human that can transform indefinitely into a beast, right?”

“That’s an argument of semantics,” Anna responded with an almost breezy tone. “As far as I’m concerned, it’s a little more complicated. I would consider a human that can turn into a wolf very different from a wolf that can turn into a human, if only because a human has presumably been raised in human culture and adopted most of our norms. A wolf that can turn into a human is still a beast, not a human, because it may not have the same respect and willingness to adopt human culture, including its taboos against things like rape and murder.”

Leon detected a few notes of bitterness in her explanation, and he wondered just what they might indicate. "Deal with a lot of wolves that can turn into people, have you?" he asked only half-seriously.

"I dealt with a pack of werewolves a few years back," Anna replied. "It was a tough hunt, but they were terrorizing some of the more secure villages in Attica's territory, and I was the best hunter that Heaven's Eye could get on short notice."

"I'm impressed," Leon stated without a trace of dishonesty. "I've had to deal with a werewolf or two. They're tough creatures."

Anna nodded in appreciation, then took a deep breath. "If you say that you're human, I suppose that's that, isn't it? Not like there's much of a way to prove it on short notice."

Leon shrugged.

"Well, thank you, Leon Raime," Anna said. "I'm grateful to be alive, and you, as you said, 'played your part' in my rescue. As much as I hate to have lost to that creature and been in a situation where I needed rescuing, my fate would've been much darker had you not come for me with my sister."

"Think nothing of it," Leon replied with a dismissive wave of his hand. "I'll admit that I thought you were already dead, and so went on that hunt for the sake of the hunt. Had I known that you were alive, I probably wouldn't have taken such a leisurely pace."

"It's good to hear that."

The three went quiet for a moment, the atmosphere turning steadily more and more awkward until Leon decided to just get to the point already.

"So, what are your plans for the future, if you don't mind me asking?" he inquired.

"Haven't been making many," Anna admitted as she turned towards her silent sister. "Mostly just supporting my little genius over here..." She reached over and tried to tousle Helen's hair a bit, but only managed to run her fingers through the pale blue locks once before Helen pulled herself out of reach, her cheeks reddening slightly in embarrassment as she fixed the minute damage to her hairstyle that Anna had inflicted.

"If support is all you're looking for, then might the two of you be open to an offer from me, assuming you don't have any other obligations to people in this city?" Leon inquired, his tone light and cheerful, but nothing but deadly seriousness glittering in his golden eyes.

"Leon Raime, if I didn't know any better, I'd say that sounded like a job offer," Anna said with a cheeky smile.

"Maybe you don't know me better," Leon shot back. "Maybe that *was* a job offer." He let the joking atmosphere between the two of them last just a little bit longer, but then he let the façade drop and let his more natural stony seriousness take its place. "I'm heading east, to the Ilian Empire. Occulara, specifically, where I'll be joining Heaven's Eye. As an eighth-tier mage, I'll probably be given a fairly high-ranking post, especially since I'm married to the daughter of one of the board members. And I'm not going alone, I have a small retinue accompanying me. They support me, and in turn, I support them. Would you be willing to sign on with my retinue?"

Anna exchanged a look with Helen, and something completely unspoken passed between the two. In fact, it was almost as if they had an entire silent conversation that Leon wasn't privy to, with Helen shaking her head a few times, while Anna made a few head tilts and angled her eyebrows. After a few seconds, Anna finally turned back to Leon while Helen turned to steadfastly stare out of the window.

"I'll admit that your offer has me intrigued, Leon Raime," she said. "But whether or not we join you will depend on what you're willing to offer in return for our services, and what services you'll be expecting of us. A fifth-tier alchemist and a sixth-tier hunter won't come cheap, and they'll certainly not come if degrading things are expected of them..."

Leon quietly chuckled. "Nothing *degrading*, I assure you. Even if you don't believe that I'm not an Ascended Beast, you can at least trust that I will ask nothing of you that you don't want to do, and I'll certainly not be asking for anything *intimate* in nature."

"What, you think we're not worth romantic interest?" Anna shot back with a playful smile, though the weakness in her voice ruined the effect somewhat.

"Don't bait me," Leon replied, though he wore a smile that matched hers. "The two of you are beautiful, and I'm sure anyone would consider themselves lucky to catch your interest. But I won't be making any moves on you, even if you ask for it. I'm a married man and have two other ladies in my family. I'm sufficiently tied up, and am not looking for anyone else."

"Relax, I was just teasing," Anna replied. "But let's talk benefits and duties. I wasn't joking when I said your offer has me interested..."

Leon and Anna then launched into a more detailed negotiation, with Leon offering her the same generous terms that he'd given the rest of his retinue. Their contract could be terminated at any time, for any reason, by any of them, at least for now. That particular provision was enough that Leon was able to knock down their asking price quite a bit, but it was one that he would've included anyway, he didn't want to force them to stay with him if they wanted to leave.

After that, they agreed that Anna would join Leon's retinue, at least provisionally, as one of his warriors. She'd have plenty of time to hunt if she wished, but her duties to Leon would always have to come first. Helen, even though she didn't say much, still agreed to sign on with Leon as his retinue's alchemist, filling in a hole that Leon hadn't much considered when making plans for expanding his retinue. With her on board, he wouldn't need to rely entirely on enchantments to heal his people when they were injured, as well as all the other benefits that an alchemist could bring them.

Fortunately for the two sisters, Anna was well enough that she was able to leave the hospital that night, though the healers did insist that she get as much rest as she could. Leon, meanwhile, was able to return to the guest house fairly secure in the knowledge that he'd added two at least superficially skilled people to his retinue. He'd have to put them through the ringer a bit to get a better feel for their capabilities, but for now, he was happy.

He spent the rest of the night with his family and retinue. He told them of the new recruits, and when morning came and everyone started making their way down to Attica's docks to leave the city, Leon found that Anna and Helen were there waiting for him. Together with the rest of his retinue, they

boarded the largest yacht that Heaven's Eye had arranged for the convoy's journey through the Wetlands, got settled in, and departed from Attica.

Chapter 656: Helen and Anna

Leon's decision to recruit Helen and Anna seemed to be immediately validated when he formally introduced them to the rest of his retinue and his family. Most of them were polite enough, but it was Elise and Helen who truly hit it off, with his fire-haired wife immediately bonding with the alchemist over their shared love for exotic herbs and alchemy. Anna, meanwhile, got along quite well with everyone else, with Anshu being the sole exception. Leon saw the Indradian subtly scoff during the introduction, and as soon as he could, the man left the room with an almost disgusted look on his face.

Leon knew that Anshu's attitude was going to be a bigger problem going forward, but for the moment, he put it out of his mind. This journey was going to be as quick as possible, given the sheer lack of human settlements and relative danger of the Wetlands, but that still meant that his retinue was going to be stuck on the ships for a few long weeks. He had time, and for the moment, he could afford to put this problem off.

So, he spent some time talking with Anna and Helen, getting to know his two newest retainers a little better.

As it turned out, hunting wasn't the only passion that Anna had, and the green-haired woman told Leon that her childhood had been spent studying under a private tutor who happened to be a fairly well-known poet in the Sacred Golden Empire. That took Leon by some surprise since he'd had the impression that the two sisters hadn't the means to have private tutors. Anna explained that while they weren't noble or anything like that, they'd still grown up relatively well-off.

Helen, meanwhile, had been the one who studied more martial skills growing up, only to abandon them about a decade ago, shortly after reaching the age of majority. The blue-haired woman hadn't much used those skills in this past decade, choosing instead to throw herself completely into her study of alchemy—though Anna was quick to note that Helen should still be unparalleled with a bow despite her lack of practice.

Hearing that, Leon felt a few sparks of competitiveness flare up within him, but it soon became apparent that Helen was rather uninterested in testing her skills against him. He let it go for now, but testing both sisters' martial and magical skills made it to the top of his priority list after that conversation.

After that, Leon mostly let himself fade into the background, watching as Helen and Anna integrated themselves into his retinue. He listened as the two made small talk with Gaius, Marcus, and Alcander, and as they spoke a little more freely with the exuberant Alix. Maia hardly gave them much of her attention, and while Valeria wasn't much better, she at least shared a short, polite conversation with the two. As he listened in on all of that, Leon was surprised to learn that Helen had given her former assistant half of her payment for killing the basilisk—a not-inconsiderable sum—as thanks for her work, and in recompense for shutting down her apothecary and rendering the girl jobless.

Apparently, Helen's assistant had been down on her luck, to put it mildly, and had no one else to turn to, so Helen had taken some pity on her, hiring her as her assistant. That was only a few months ago, and Helen had felt guilty enough to practically set the girl up for life as an apology for leaving so suddenly.

More than a little of that guilt rubbed off on Leon, but he was comforted to hear that Helen had told the girl to find her in Occulara if the life of an idle rich girl wasn't to her liking. If Leon were honest with himself, he probably would've accepted it if Helen had wanted her assistant to join her in his retinue, reasoning that a single first-tier teenager was hardly much of a problem or threat, and having a second alchemist wasn't the worst idea ever, but he was content with this solution, too.

Soon enough, the little impromptu welcome party came to an end, and everyone broke to see to their own business. Most of Leon's retinue went back to their training, while Anna and Helen busied themselves getting settled into their room. They'd have to join the rest of Leon's retinue in training eventually, but he didn't mind giving them a couple of days to settle in and get acquainted with everyone.

Over the next week or so, he and his retinue settled into something of a routine. Training took up their mornings, and then they'd break for the afternoons to relax or take care of their personal business. Leon was satisfied with how everyone was progressing, estimating that it was a matter of months, perhaps only a year or two, before most of his retinue that was below the fifth-tier managed to ascend and gain access to elemental magic. Meanwhile, he put Helen and Anna through a small battery of tests to see where their magical and martial strengths lay.

Helen was almost as good with a bow as her sister had boasted, which still made her a near prodigy. Leon thought if the rust was cleaned off her skills a bit, she'd probably even be better than he was. He was thus dismayed to hear that she hated archery rather passionately and was far more fond of the spear. Marcus, his next best archer, was just as dismayed, and was much more vocal about it. Leon was happy enough to let the alchemist train with spears alongside Valeria, but Marcus' incessant arguing and reasoning got her to agree to also keep up with her archery skills, though she made it clear enough that her agreement was solely to shut him up.

Anna, meanwhile, was surprisingly inexperienced and amateurish when it came to the arts of battle. She was skillful enough, but it was clear when Leon sparred with her that she'd never been in a true life-or-death fight with another human being. He'd yet to see her hunting skills in action, but he learned that she didn't quite know how to pace herself in a proper fight, and had quite a few exploitable holes in her defenses. The biggest one that he could see was that she didn't protect her head nearly enough, and she explained that when she was taught how to duel, head strikes hadn't been allowed.

'Sports fighting', Leon had rather derisively called it in his head, but he kept that bit silent. In a strictly objective sense, Anna was skilled with an arming sword, polearms of various shapes and sizes, and quite skilled with a bow, so at the least, he knew that it wouldn't take too much to bring her actual martial abilities more in line with what he needed them to be. He needed a warrior, not a performer.

Fortunately, her hunting skills more than made up for that deficiency. A brief sojourn into the Wetlands while the convoy was busy slowly navigating a particularly narrow river between two swamps proved her to be as proficient as he was in moving through forested regions quickly and quietly, and her knowledge of the local terrain and wildlife was both deep and vast. Even better, since she'd grown up fairly wealthy in the Sacred Golden Empire, she'd been on hunting expeditions throughout that northern Empire, and on many within the Han Kingdom, the Ilian Empire, and the lands of the Sentinels, among other places. She was remarkably well-traveled, remembered just about everything that she'd seen in those places, and could list off quite a few aspects of their environment when Leon asked.

He could already anticipate quite a few conversations he'd have with her in the future about these places.

Things got much more interesting, at least for a while, when he moved on from combat training. In that respect, Helen started to truly shine. Whereas her combat abilities were rather lackluster, her skills with even the basic alchemy tools she'd brought with her were more than satisfactory. She could brew healing potions stronger than Leon's healing spells at a rate of almost two per hour, and could do much more besides, such as brewing potions to help a mage replenish their magic power; temporarily increase compatibility with certain magical elements, and thus increase the efficiency of that mage's power when using those elements; and even some potions that could increase a mage's ability to defend against certain elements. Leon, in particular, was drawn to her ability to defend a mage against darkness magic, which, by extension, would also increase their resistance to most mind-altering magic.

And that was barely scratching the surface of her skills as an alchemist. She could brew explosive concoctions, lures for certain kinds of monsters, and various fast-acting acids. Her specialty, though, especially after living so long in the Wetlands, was in antidotes for the various poisonous monsters that lurked these lands. She boasted that she could cure all but the most exotic of poisons, and Leon had no reason to doubt her.

Eventually, after all of this testing and learning about his new retainers, Leon put in quite a bit of thought as to how to both use and increase their skills. And he soon landed upon what he hoped would be a good way to do just that...

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After leaving Attica, the convoy had passed through several other small settlements, though none as big as even the modestly-sized Attica on the edge of the Wetlands. Given the state of human civilization in these parts, the convoy, despite moving as quickly as it was able, was still forced to a crawl. There were several days where the convoy passed other ships going the other direction, and so had to move so slowly that there were opportunities for people to disembark and walk around on some relatively dry land, if they wished.

Leon took full advantage of one of these days, but not to stretch his legs—rather, he commandeered one of the smallest escort ships and ventured out into the swamps, accompanied only by Helen, Anna, Alix, and Anshu.

He'd put some thought into these particular companions—Anshu needed to get more used to his female retainers, and the man certainly wasn't making much effort on his own. On the other hand, Leon wanted to grow a little closer with the Indradian, as well get a bit more value of including him in the retinue, and so letting him use some of his naval expertise by driving the boat seemed the perfect opportunity. He also wanted the opportunity to get a bit closer to Anna and Helen, while Alix's outgoing nature he hoped would help everyone socialize a bit more. He didn't include Valeria or Maia, however, for Valeria's time had been claimed by Princess Cristina and he couldn't pull Valeria away from her friends, and Maia had a lot of baggage with Anshu due to her lineage. Having her with them might be a boon, but it might also remind the Indradian of his home culture too much.

Leon fully intended to bring Maia on other expeditions like this, but for now, he wanted Anshu to socialize more with the other ladies without the silent Maia there to act as a crutch or an excuse not to participate.

The boat itself was fairly large, more than enough deck space for a dozen people to ride comfortably, while still elevating the passengers a comfortable distance from the murky swamp water. On the back was mounted a small magic engine that enable the ship to travel swiftly, while as backup, the boat also had six mountings for oars.

It was a fast and comfortable boat, perfect for spending some time out with his newest retainers. However, Leon covered up the true reason for bringing these four out by speaking first with Helen and Anna about the local flora and fauna. Helen had been quite forthcoming, much of her antipathy and suspicion of Leon having vanished over the days spent in his company—though not gone entirely—telling him of several swamp flowers that grew in nearby swamps that she could use in some potions that cured specific ailments. Anna pitched in a bit, too, telling Leon of the kinds of beasts that those flowers would often attract in the wild—various reptiles of the fifth and sixth-tier, mostly.

So, Leon proposed that they venture out into the swamp to collect some of these flowers. Since they were valuable, he wanted to see if they might grow on the herb farms that he and Elise were planning to set up in the Ilian Empire.

He got Anshu on board with the journey readily enough, though the Indradian wasn't pleased when he heard about their other companions. Alix, however, was pretty ecstatic to be brought along, and she chatted with Helen almost from the moment they took their seats near the front of the boat.

Anna, Leon, and Anshu, on the other hand, sat closer to the back. The atmosphere between the three of them started off much more awkward than it was for the other two, with Leon and Anshu remaining largely silent, and Anna only giving Anshu basic directions to where these herbs were most likely to grow in this region. It seemed to Leon that Anna had picked up on Anshu's reluctance to speak with her or her sister, for she'd deliberately sat as far away from the man as she could, almost forcing Leon to sit between them, and she rarely, if ever, glanced over at him.

It became clear before they'd even left line-of-sight with the convoy that these two weren't going to start talking without Leon's intervention, to which he could only sigh.

'Nothing's ever easy, is it?' he bemoaned. He never thought it would be, but there had been a large part of him that hoped all he'd have to do was put the two of them together and let them work their own issues out.

Leon eventually found his chance to try cutting through the tense atmosphere when they went from a swamp into a fairly long waterway, leaving Anna without the need to keep giving directions and thus leaving them in stark silence.

"So, Anna," Leon said as naturally as he could, which was not very, "you've been practicing earth magic, right?"

Anna gave him a strange look, and he could understand why: she'd been quite explicit about her magical talents and interests with him while he was still getting to know her skills.

“... Yes...” she responded with a questioning tone.

“And you’ve been hoping that you could find someone who could teach you a bit about light magic, right?” Leon continued, and he thought he detected Anshu stiffen slightly. The man probably realized where Leon was going with this, and dreaded it.

Anna nodded, her long green hair spilling about her shoulders and sparkling in the few rays of sunlight that penetrated the thick overhead canopy.

Leon smiled almost apologetically before clapping Anshu on the shoulder. “I ask because Anshu over here, even though he’s only fifth-tier, is a light mage, if you didn’t know.”

“I hope you’re not suggesting what I think you’re suggesting,” Anshu grumbled.

“I probably am,” Leon shamelessly replied. He turned back to Anna, who was barely holding back a repelled look. Undaunted, Leon said, “Anshu can probably give you a few pointers in that particular element, if you want.”

“I think that there are better possible teachers...” Anna whispered.

As her voice died down, Anshu added, “It’s bad enough that the women you bring on are taught magic, but a man like me ought not to associate with unmarried girls. It might invite untoward rumors.” His statement elicited a chilling glare from Anna, but she didn’t immediately respond.

“Who gives even the slightest shit about rumors?” Leon shot back, his irritation at Anshu’s behavior creeping into his tone. “We’re going to be fighting alongside each other at some point or another. It won’t kill any of us to associate with the other—in fact, it would probably save our lives if we could all get along a little better than we have been.”

“I care about rumors,” Anshu bitterly murmured.

Leon sighed as a wave of guilt hit him. “All right. I apologize if I sounded callous, but the point here is that I’m in charge, and I want all of you in my retinue. And in the interest of making sure we all survive till we’re old and gray, or even until we’re all immortal and utterly tired of life, I want to make sure that we all get along.”

“I’m all for making friends, but not with those who are closed-minded,” Anna replied.

Again, Leon sighed. “There’s a middle ground we can reach here, I know it. How about this: Anshu, you work at not being quite so sullen, and Anna, you treat Anshu with absolute formality? Would that work?”

Both scowled, which Leon took to be a rejection, but he pressed further, eking out smaller and smaller concessions from both until they finally begrudgingly accepted. The crux of the matter, he found, was that Anshu was extremely uncomfortable around the ladies of his retinue. To an extent, Valeria and Maia weren’t so bad since they were in relationships with Leon, and Elise was tolerable since she was out and out married to Leon, but the others were too much for him.

Still, Leon managed to get him to commit to not being quite so distant around them. In return, Leon got Anna to promise to give Anshu plenty of space, and he promised to give the others the same

instructions. Anshu felt like he would do a lot better with the ladies if they weren't alone together, and they didn't treat him nearly as informally as Alix was wont to do.

In the end, Leon wasn't satisfied yet, but he considered it progress. Anshu was willing to take this step, which meant that maybe he'd be willing to take another later on.

As they hammered this out, they finally entered the swamp where the herbs Helen had her eyes on grew. It still took about half an hour of diligent searching to find them, even with Leon and Anna's magic senses, but they finally found a mature enough patch for Helen to start harvesting.

The herbs themselves were fairly eye-catching, being bright red and covered in purple vein-like patterns. They grew in long, thin stalks that reached Leon's hip fully grown, and ended in a cluster of between six and nine arrowhead-shaped leaves.

Helen left the stalks alone, instead picking almost every leaf off the stalks, leaving only one on each—she didn't want to kill the herb, merely harvest what she could and let the herb regenerate later.

"What kind of potions do these things make?" Alix had asked when they arrived at the patch. "They kind of look poisonous..."

"Most medicines are poisonous if taken in large enough quantities," Helen remarked. "Or, I suppose it would be more accurate to say that a lot of poisons can be used as medicine in small enough quantities. These, I can turn into potions that certain men might pay quite a bit of silver for..."

"Certain men?" Alix responded. "What men are you talking about?"

Helen smirked and said, "I can make potions that cure impotency with these. Some guys have even had success treating hair loss when using the potions as ingredients in certain salves."

Alix went silent for a moment, then burst out into a fit of giggles. Anna didn't seem to be paying any attention, but Leon detected Anshu not too far away rolling his eyes and bitterly mumble something about wasting his time gathering 'dick juice for weak men'. Leon would've found it funny if he didn't find it fairly concerning.

Altogether, though, he found it a fairly relaxed and enjoyable atmosphere. At the very least, Alix was bonding quite well with Helen, and Anna was being friendly enough that he didn't think he'd need to worry about integrating her into the rest of his retinue.

But he should've known that this short expedition had been going too well to last. They'd harvested about half of the patch—enough to make about a hundred potions—when Leon suddenly felt strange, like something was wrong in the swamp.

A moment after he realized what he was feeling, Xaphan said from within his soul realm, [Leon... you have some uninvited guests...]

Leon summoned his magic power and conjured his blade into

Chapter 657: Vampiric Assault

Without hesitation, Leon shouted a warning to his retinue about the incoming vampiric threat. Helen reacted a little sluggishly, but Anna and Anshu were armed and armored in a moment. Alix was just

behind them, drawing the blade she kept at her waist, though she wasn't armored given that this was just supposed to be a trip to gather alchemy ingredients.

And to Leon's horror, the auras of these vampires were already towering as they merged and billowed outwards, all of them together seemingly in possession of magical power greater than even his own.

"Back to the boat!" Leon shouted, and with nothing more than a thought, he pulled all of the herbs they'd gathered into his soul realm, removing any temptation to stay or to carry baskets that might slow them down.

They began to run back toward the shore of the swamp not too far away, where their boat had been tied to a tree. As they ran, Leon projected his magic senses in an attempt to more thoroughly evaluate the danger.

He saw a dozen vampires of varying, but potent, strength. There were three seventh-tier, four sixth-tier, and five fifth-tier bloodsuckers. With them were half a dozen war beasts—one sixth-tier griffin, three fifth-tier wolves, and two large fourth-tier birds of prey.

They'd practically come out of nowhere, to Leon's shock. He'd barely noticed them until they were within five hundred feet. They weren't chasing them, but as his magic senses washed over them, he realized that this wasn't a good thing—the reason they were standing around in one place was because the lower-tiered vampires were arranged in a tight formation around their stronger comrades, channeling their power into each other in some kind of ritual.

A moment later, the demonic aura surrounding the group spiked in intensity, and spiraling ribbons of dark red demonfire erupted into existence over the three seventh-tier vampires' bodies. The lead vampire lifted his hands and pointed in the direction of Leon's group, and then the other two raised their hands to the sky.

With a terrible explosion of magic power, the ribbons of demonfire coalesced and formed enormous globes of demonfire larger than their boat, which were then launched up through the leafy canopy with great force.

'Artillery!' Leon realized as the fiery orbs almost lazily rose high into the air, and then began curving back down in the direction of him and his comrades. The aura those globes emanated filled him with dread—he was individually stronger than any of those vampires, but these fiery spheres contained all of their powers combined. If he were to try and take one head-on, he'd be heavily injured, at the least.

"Incoming!" Leon shouted as he pointed to the sky. His retinue faltered for a moment as they climbed into the boat, and he summoned his water magic as quickly as he was able, not waiting for any of them to get properly seated before he conjured a wave of stagnant swamp water to carry their boat out into the swamp as quickly as he could.

Helen shrieked as she almost lost her balance and went over the side, but Alix was a little more sure of foot and managed to grab the back of the blue-haired alchemist's shirt and keep her from falling out. Anna and Anshu, meanwhile, were more securely seated and strongly held onto the sides of the boat, so with his retinue secured about as well as they were able to be, Leon put even more power into the wave to help them escape faster.

His caution and panic were both vindicated when only a few seconds later, the first of the artillery orbs fell upon the spot where the boat had been moored only a moment before, burning clean through the canopy as it fell. As soon as it touched down, everything within a hundred feet of the landing spot was enveloped in a horrific conflagration of demonfire. Leon's magic senses were almost drowned out as magic spilled out of the explosion, and he had to avert his gaze and retract his magic senses to not be blinded. The swamp quaked in response, with water for a dozen feet outside of the explosion so quickly vaporizing in the heat that it exploded outward with enough force to strip nearby trees of their bark.

The shockwave of the explosion devastated the surrounding swamp, and the magic within; Leon's water magic was disrupted, and the wave propelling their boat onward collapsed. Their boat was then battered by the aftershocks of the explosion, and the wood it was made of cracked and bent under the pressure.

Leon barely noticed, though, for the pressure on his ears from the sheer volume of the explosion was tremendous, and he had eyes only for his retainers. They were thrown about in the boat, and Alix and Helen were both screaming in pain as their weaker senses and lesser pain tolerances were both put under extreme pressure. Anna and Anshu fared a little better, but Leon could see the pain in both of their faces.

When the fire died down, another of the fiery orbs impacted the swamp not too far away, slightly to the north. If Leon had tried to escape in that direction, then it would've fallen practically right on top of them. He couldn't count his blessings for too long, however, for even though that explosion was more distant and more easily weathered, the third and final of the demonic artillery strikes was now falling only a couple dozen feet away—given the size of those explosions, it might as well have been falling down amongst them.

They wouldn't survive if that attack struck them, Leon realized. He had to act. He had to do something to try and shield himself and his retinue, otherwise they were going to die in just a few seconds.

There was no time for any complex planning. Perhaps if his body were flooded with lightning magic, he might've been able to think quickly enough to come up with something, but he'd been channeling water magic, not lightning, and so his reaction speed suffered. All he could think to do as the orb of demonfire hit the swamp just in front of them was to reach out with his magic power, calling upon all of his command over the magical element of fire.

The orb detonated on contact with the ground and demonfire erupted from it. Fire surged toward Leon and his boatful of retainers with explosive speed and crashed into his projected magic power with force enough to nearly knock him over.

But it parted around them, Leon's magic power acting as a shield against it. Leon roared in exertion, his powers straining as he used everything he had to bend all of that demonfire around the boat. He was vaguely aware that the boat started to burn under the heat, and the magic engine sputtered with strain. Something within the engine snapped, and all magic power within the boat vanished.

He was more concerned with his retinue; Alix screamed in pain, and then went silent. Helen was a little quieter, but she soon went still, as well. Anna and Anshu were right there with him, still conscious, but in Anshu's case, only just barely. The Indradian howled in exertion as he extended a hand and conjured a

thin, translucent sphere of white light around the boat, providing relief from the heat, but only for a moment before the power rolling over them shattered it.

And with that, Anshu went quiet as his eyes closed.

The explosion lasted for five seconds. Those seconds felt like years as Leon put his all into shielding his retinue from the blast, his own magic causing his fingers to become enveloped in bright orange fire. But the blast couldn't last forever, and when the fire finally died out, Leon almost fell to his knees, panting from exertion.

Anna was the only one still conscious, and she was in pretty rough shape. Blood streamed from one of her ears down her cheek, and her eyes were hazy and unfocused. Helen, Alix, and Anshu, meanwhile, were all out for the count. None were dead, if the magic radiating from their bodies was any indication, but none were in any condition to fight.

The boat, meanwhile, fared worst of all. The wood creaked and groaned as Leon shifted his weight about, the bottom of the boat stuck in the dried mud at the bottom of the swamp, now practically hardened into concrete from the heat of the blast. He only had a moment to take in their situation, though, before the swamp began to rush back in to replace what had just been vaporized.

They were within a crater made by the artillery strike, close to the edge, but more than deep enough that Leon realized they would be submerged if they didn't move.

"Get up!" Leon shouted to Anna, pulling her out of her stupor a little bit. He grabbed Anshu and Alix and pointed to Helen. "Grab her!"

Anna blinked in confusion for a moment, and then moved to follow his directive. With Anshu tucked under one arm, Alix over his opposite shoulder, and Helen in Anna's arms, Leon and Anna struggled out of the boat as swamp water came rushing back in. Leon had to use his water magic to part the rushing water around them, allowing them to get out of the crater, but behind him, the savaged boat disappeared beneath the murky swamp water.

Once they struggled out of the crater, however, they found that a significant portion of the swamp around them had been utterly leveled. Trees closer to the center of the blasts had been rendered into ash, and those further away were burning, their trunks stripped of bark, their branches devoid of leaves. All around them, Leon could sense the various beasts and animals of the swamp scrambling to get away as fast as they were able, and less than three hundred feet away, near the edge of the crater their first strike had made, stood the dozen vampires and their war beasts, staring at them as they struggled out of the third crater.

There wasn't much cover they could use, and Leon's heart sank as he felt the auras of those vampires spiking in clear indication of further violence.

But then, the voice of his demonic partner came blazing through his mind. **[LEON!]** Xaphan bellowed, saying no more. Leon needed nothing more, however, and he pulled on their connection.

A circular plane of fire sprang into being just in front of his chest, and from it burst Xaphan, his killing intent staggering, his aura immense.

“YOU DARE TO RAISE YOUR HAND AGAINST ME!” the demon bellowed, staggering the vampires with the roar alone.

Xaphan charged at the vampires and their beasts, but instead of gormlessly watching, Leon turned to Anna and shouted, “Come on!”

His priority was to see to his retinue, not watch Xaphan fight.

Not too far away, a tree had ‘survived’ the artillery strike, though it had been completely blackened by fire. Leon carried Alix and Anshu over there, fighting against the swamp as it surged back in with every step. He lifted his unconscious retainers up onto the tree’s roots, which were high and numerous enough to act as an impromptu platform to keep them out of the swamp water. Once that was done, he turned around and helped Anna and Helen up, laying the unconscious alchemist down beside the rest of his retinue.

As this was happening, the swamp shook as his demonic partner battled the vampires, and heat roiled through the environment, accompanied by intense flashes of light and waves of magic power. When Leon finally turned back in their direction, he saw that all of the fifth-tier vampires were dead, as was the griffin and wolves. Only one of the sixth-tier vampires remained, as did all three of the seventh-tier leeches, and their two birds. The seventh-tier vampires were working in tandem to keep Xaphan busy, their power borrowed from their demonic master allowing them to keep up with every fiery blast that Xaphan sent their way, while the final sixth-tier vampire seemed to be directing the birds to send vicious wind blades at Xaphan at every opportunity.

Despite his power and what he’d already done, Xaphan couldn’t make much progress. He was fighting on all sides, and he couldn’t focus on any of the vampires for long enough to do much appreciable damage—at least, not without leaving himself open for the rest.

That was all Leon needed to see. He turned to Anna and ordered, “Stay with them and keep them safe!” He then conjured a stack of healing spells, pressed them into her hand, and then leaped into the air, his blade reappearing in his hand as he did.

He was *furious*. His heart beat against his ribs like they owed it money, and magic power surged through his veins. He was still channeling his fire magic, and he was far too wrathful to take even the briefest of moments to switch from fire to lightning. He descended upon the sixth-tier vampire, his blade erupting into bright orange fire as his fingers tightened around the grip.

With one vicious swing, he took the surprised vampire’s head off, which he followed with another swing, sending a wave of fire into the air to roast the two birds. This wasn’t nearly enough for him, and with his body shaking with wrath, he turned upon the nearest seventh-tier vampire.

His killing intent washed over the vampire like a tsunami, and the bloodsucker froze in terror, only able to turn his head slightly to see Leon stalking towards him, his burning blade raised, his eyes flashing orange in the light of his power. The vampire barely managed to fight off his paralysis in time to raise his arm to stop Leon’s first cruel strike, but even the vampire’s seventh-tier power was unable to stop Leon’s blade. The burning sword pierced right through the man’s arm, cleaving through flesh and bone with ease, sending Leon’s deadly magic power surging through the vampire’s body, burning all it touched. Leon’s blade wasn’t stopped by any of this and pierced all the way through the vampire, sliding

between his ribs, impaling his heart, and then right out the other side, nailing the vampire's arm to his chest.

The vampire was probably killed instantly, but Leon roared in anger as he flooded the vampire's body with his magic power. This monster had nearly killed him and four of his retainers, and that fact alone had Leon seeing red. The vampire practically exploded under the pressure of Leon's power, and for a moment, Leon and the vampire's body were lost in a pillar of flame of Leon's making.

A moment later, the pillar died down, leaving Leon standing there, a pile of charred bones at his feet. His blade still burned just as furiously, though, with just a hint of black fire licking at its edges.

Leon barely even noticed this, and when he turned to the rest of the vampires, he found that Xaphan had already dispatched one of the other seventh-tier vampires, having capitalized on the massive opening Leon had made. The final vampire, however, seemed to be the strongest. He had been backed against a scorched tree by Xaphan, and his hands were raised, a storm of dark red demonfire pouring out of them and just barely holding Xaphan off. The arms of his shirt and coat had been incinerated, leaving his burned arms bare for Leon to see.

Leon recognized those kinds of burns; he'd suffered them many times in his younger years. The vampire was calling upon powers beyond his ability to control properly, and that power was injuring him from within. These were the same burns Leon had endured as when he'd called upon the fifth-tier equivalent Xaphan when he was only fourth-tier to aid him against the Valemén during Hakon Fire-Beard's raid.

The vampire couldn't hold long against Xaphan, but Leon didn't care. His demonic partner soaked up that power, his own rage spilling through their connection and letting Leon feel it just as he felt his own. Each fed off each other, but the vampire was concentrating on Xaphan, leaving Leon relatively free to act.

Leon took a few running steps forward, then swung his sword in a horizontal slice. A thin wave of potent flame was ejected from his sword, burning bright orange, but with a core of black. This, Leon noticed easily, and he froze in shock, his rage melting away almost in an instant.

Fortunately, when the fiery wave hit the final vampire, the bloodsucker had no power in reserve to protect himself. Leon's power crashed over him, stripping flesh from bone with ease and leaving nothing more than a blackened skeleton propped against the tree, its bones fused together and keeping it upright.

Xaphan didn't care, however, and as soon as the vampire's power ceased, he stepped forward and swung one of his massive fists into the skeleton, crushing it against the tree and rendering it ash on the wind.

The swamp went relatively quiet. Many fires had been started during the battle, but it was a swamp, and there was almost no possibility that any of those fires would spread very far.

The area around the battlefield, however, had been completely transformed by the short fight. The swamp water had been turned dark gray by ash, what few trees survived in the area were little more than blackened husks, and the sun now shone down directly on the swamp for hundreds of feet around them, a huge hole having been punched in the swamp's thick canopy.

Leon saw none of this, however. Now that the fight was over, his eyes fell to his blade, where fire continued to burn. But now that his emotions were under control, there wasn't a hint of black within his fire.

—

"Hmmm, that could've gone better," the tall vampire said as he watched the fight from hundreds of miles away. He stood upon the deck of his yacht, a large vessel for the Wetlands, and as opulent as it should be, given his high power and station.

"That's an understatement," the woman beside him whispered, her black attire immaculate, and covering nearly all of her body save for her head despite the heat and humidity of the Wetlands. "Even with that spell of invisibility letting them get close, they were crushed in minutes."

"This is why we send scouts on these sorts of missions," the tall vampire whispered. "We'll attack later, at a more opportune moment. Now that we know Leon Raime can summon Xaphan like that, we'll be able to account for it."

Without a word, the tall vampire turned around and made for the interior of the yacht. He pushed open the door and entered, the female vampire only a couple of steps behind him. Both were of the eighth-tier, but neither fancied a go at Leon or Xaphan right now, not after the brutal fight and show of power they'd just witnessed. Sheer power wasn't the be-all and end-all of fighting, after all.

They had to make their plans and prepare properly. They had a much better idea of Leon and Xaphan's capabilities, now, and they were going to capitalize on that knowledge.

And when they finally succeeded in killing both, their master would grant them immeasurable power.

Only a few minutes later, their yacht began to turn east. They were, much like Leon's convoy, going to the Ilian Empire, but they weren't going to risk taking the same route that Leon was.

As the yacht turned, the sigil of Heaven's Eye, prominently emblazoned on the ship's side, glittered in the light of the sun.

Chapter 658: Leaving the Wetlands

"Is it over?!" Anna shouted from behind the tree, where she was still taking cover with the unconscious Helen, Alix, and Anshu.

Leon, still in a state of shock from the battle and coming down from his adrenaline high, needed a moment to process what he'd just heard, his eyes still locked on his blade, where he'd *felt* his fire burning strangely, and from where he'd seen just enough black fire erupt that he couldn't just discount it as a hallucination.

But as if sensing his strange mental state, from behind, Xaphan nudged him, the demonfire that coated his obsidian body not even singeing Leon's shirt.

Thus prompted, Leon rapidly blinked, turned in Anna's direction as if only now realizing what she'd asked, and loudly responded, "Seems to be!"

He wasn't able to sense anything out in the swamp, and his magic senses were still projected, but just in case, he turned his attention back outward to reevaluate their surroundings. Those vampires had come out of nowhere and nearly killed the lot of them with their artillery magic. The swamp around them testified to the strength of the magic thrown against them, looking like the site of a massive battle with nearly all greenery burned away for hundreds of feet.

Coming back to his senses, Leon then turned to look back toward the Heaven's Eye convoy, and to his immense relief, it seemed that not only were they fine, but it seemed that they'd caught wind of the battle that had just happened; half a dozen small boats filled with powerful mages were already making their way in their direction, and he could feel Maia coming closer even quicker than the boats were. Fortunately, it seemed that Damien Makedon had stayed with the convoy—while Leon wouldn't have minded having another eighth-tier mage with him, he was of the mind that the convoy needed to be protected more than he did right now.

"Get back in here," Leon said to Xaphan.

"Blunt that tone, boy," Xaphan responded testily, though he still shrank down into a bead of fire and rocketed back into Leon's chest.

With a deep breath, Leon then turned back toward Anna, wondering just how in the hells he was going to explain his demonic partner to her.

Rather, he knew *how* he was going to do so, but he more dreaded what her reaction might be. Fortunately, she wasn't exactly panicking right now, despite Xaphan having been right there in plain view not a moment before.

Deciding not to waste any more time, Leon summoned his water magic and, with some struggle given his relative inexperience with the element, froze some of the swamp water into an impromptu raft. He then got on the raft and continued to use his water magic to propel it over to the tree he'd left his retainers on.

"Hop on," Leon ordered Anna. "I'll try to explain everything on the way. We should be safe, now, and Heaven's Eye is already sending reinforcements."

Anna nodded and complied without complaint. For all his dread, Leon appreciated her professionalism. She doubtlessly had a thousand questions, yet she was keeping batted down, for now.

Together, Leon and Anna pulled Helen, Alix, and Anshu onto the raft. Leon had to continuously use his water magic to keep them upright for the weight wasn't distributed evenly, but he was able to start pushing them back in the direction of the convoy.

"How are they doing?" Leon asked, indicating the three unconscious members of his retinue.

"I applied those healing spells, but they're still out, obviously," Anna replied. "I think that my sister has a few tinctures that help people recover from physical trauma like this, which would've woken them up, but she mostly keeps her completed potions in her soul realm, so..."

Leon hummed in displeasure. His healing spells weren't the best at waking up the unconscious, but at the least they should've healed any damage that those artillery strikes had done. His retainers should start waking up any moment, now.

“Remind me to ensure that everyone has some of those tinctures, and whatever other healing potions that Helen can furnish us with,” Leon noted to Anna. “I don’t care if I need to spend a million silvers buying the materials, we should all have the proper medical supplies for situations like these.”

“Makes sense,” Anna replied. “Those healing spells of yours are pretty good, though. Do the rest of your people have them?”

“They do.”

“Then we can wait a hot minute, can’t we?”

“I suppose we can.”

“Good, because I have some questions...”

Leon steeled himself for Anna’s barrage of questions, and he wasn’t disappointed. In the five minutes it took for a water dragon to erupt out of the swamp and deposit a furious Maia onto their raft, Leon had barely managed to get a word in edgewise as Anna asked question after question, thought out loud, and in general, vented over this experience. She seemed to relax more and more with every word she spoke, though, so Leon didn’t push to interrupt. He just took this time to organize his thoughts as much as he could.

When Maia appeared, though, he spent a good few minutes calming her down and making sure she understood that the danger had passed. She wasn’t that thrilled that she missed all of the excitement, but what was done was done.

She was at least able to refine the raft a little, curling the sides up until it resembled a proper boat and ensuring that no one was in any danger of sliding off into the swamp. She also took over driving the raft toward the convoy, leaving Leon free to answer as many of Anna’s questions as he could.

He kept his explanation fairly light on details since he knew that he’d have to go over most of this again with Helen and have to explain what had happened out in the swamps to the rest of his family and retinue, but he did what he could to immediately alleviate some of Anna’s burning curiosity.

He told her about Xaphan first, and to his surprise, she didn’t seem all that shocked or offended at the idea that he’d partnered with a demon.

“... Partnerships with demons isn’t exactly uncommon in the Empires,” she explained. “It’s not exactly encouraged, and there are pretty strict rules against blood sacrifice, so most of the more unsavory parts of being aligned with a demon are still illegal, but, at least in the Sacred Golden Empire, having some light, water, and earth demons contracted with our ruling class it partially responsible for our great command of nature magic.”

“That’s... surprising,” Leon whispered.

“I can imagine,” Anna responded. “The Empires are powerful, and they’re... *civilized*. Many of the outer Kingdoms are too weak to enforce their rules, and are too steeped in superstition to recognize the good that humans and demons can affect if they work together.”

[Hmmm, I think I like this one,] Xaphan murmured from Leon’s soul realm.

Anna continued, "That such a powerful demon is in your corner is, if anything, an encouragement to me. Granted, I don't have much experience with demonology, but I'm not going to judge you. From the sounds of it, you've needed that power before, and it certainly came in handy today. How could I be angry that you had the power to save our lives?"

Leon nodded in understanding, though he was still reeling a bit from shock. If contracts with demons weren't illegal in the Four Empires, then could he spend more time researching the connection that his contract with Xaphan had forged between them? Could he and Xaphan devote more overt time to growing their respective powers?

He couldn't say right now, but he was excited to find out.

With that tangent taken care of, Leon proceeded with his explanation of the day's events, and their implications. He and Xaphan didn't need to confirm with each other to be certain that this attack was the work of Amon; the demonic power used by the vampires had been familiar enough to both for that to be apparent.

Amon had made another move against him and Xaphan, and it had nearly succeeded. It seemed that Xaphan's claims that Amon had better things to do than retaliate against them for the exposure of his channeler were a little inaccurate, to say the least.

"Is this going to be a more frequent occurrence?" Anna asked, her voice sounding almost anticipatory than anything.

"You sound excited at the idea," Leon observed.

Anna flashed him a wry smile. "I'm a hunter. Fighting exotic creatures *does* excite me. I'm not too fond of vampires and I try to exterminate them whenever I can."

She continued to sound upbeat, but Leon detected a slight undercurrent of bitterness to her voice. He almost wanted to call her out on it, but decided against it. He wasn't sure what he was hearing, anyway, and if she didn't want to explain it, then he wasn't going to pry.

Anna continued, "Monsters born of man are typically the most exhilarating opponents to face off against. Werewolves, vampires, mad mages, they're all the most personally rewarding to bring down, I've found."

"Gone on many hunts against such beings?" Leon inquired.

"A few," Anna stated in what Leon suspected to be an understatement. Before she could elaborate, or Leon continue with his explanation, Anshu began to stir. At almost the same time, Helen began murmuring and turning over in a clear indication that she was about to wake up. Alix was still out of it, but Leon didn't hold that against her—the other two were fifth-tier, while she was only fourth.

As Leon and Anna helped Helen and Anshu to wake up and get their bearings, the force that left the Heaven's Eye convoy finally met up with them, and then turned around to escort them back to the ships.

Leon was rather determined not to leave the convoy again until they reached the Ilian Empire. A group of three seventh-tier vampires was a powerful force to throw against them all on their own, let alone the rest of the vampires that had joined the attack, but he couldn't possibly imagine that it was all that

Amon could wrangle together. He could easily imagine that next time it might be three eighth-tier vampires, or maybe even something worse.

Regardless, it was clear that Amon hadn't forgotten them, and there could easily be a follow-up launched against them if they weren't careful. Better to travel in the largest group they could until they reached the safety—at least, Leon *hoped*—of their destination.

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"... and that's about what happened," Leon finished narrating, his family and retinue listening with rapt attention as he concluded his story of what had happened earlier that day. He hoped this was the last time he'd have to tell this story, at least for a while; he'd gone over it with Anna, then with Helen, Anshu, and Alix when they woke up, then again with Emilie and Damien Makedon upon arriving at the convoy, and then *again* with the rest of his retinue and family. He was quite tired of talking, by this point.

No one spoke in the immediate aftermath of his story, almost as if no one quite knew what to say. Elise and Valeria, however, had each taken one of Leon's hands at different points during his retelling, and now seemed almost silently determined not to let go of him for a while. Maia, meanwhile, had made it clear enough that she wasn't going to leave Leon alone for a while, though she wasn't trying to physically inhabit the same space as he was like the other two were.

"That was... quite the story," Marcus eventually whispered, breaking the silence that had fallen over the small lounge on the yacht that they'd all gathered in. "If it had come from anyone else, or if I hadn't *felt* the power radiating from that fight all the way over here, then I might've thought the person telling that story a liar..."

"We don't doubt you, though," Alcander cut in, and Marcus nodded in agreement. "If anything, this just underscores how important our training has to be from here on out. Even if we were there, we wouldn't have been anything other than a ball and chain around your ankles. We're only fourth-tier; you're eighth-tier. We can't do anything other than slow you down..."

Leon wanted to object, but what Alcander was saying wasn't wrong. The enemies that he was facing completely outmatched anything that his retinue could bring to bear. Only Maia was strong enough to stand against vampires like this in the same way he was able to.

That had to change.

When Leon imagined heading into the Four Empires, he'd thought that one of his biggest priorities would be to hunt down any potential legacies that the Thunderbird Clan may have left behind, to claim for his own.

Now, however, he realized that his priority had to be elsewhere. Even if there was extreme power just waiting to be claimed at the sites that he was intending to visit from Nestor's map, he could always compensate for not having them. There was always more power he could gain by his own merits rather than seeking to loot it from the corpse of the Thunderbird Clan.

His retinue needed his attention more. If he was to be a proper King, then he couldn't rely only upon the strength of his own arms, and occasionally recruiting some powerful person as he advanced through the

tiers. He couldn't afford to leave behind valuable talent like Marcus and Alcander. If he had to pursue his own goals a little slower, or even put them off indefinitely to ensure that his retinue wasn't left behind, then so be it. That was a decision that he had to make as their leader.

None of his retainers could've stood with him against those vampires. None of his retainers were able to stand with him of their own power against Jormun. None of his retainers could've helped him against Nestor during his expedition to the dead man's lab. If he'd been forced to confront Justin before the man had lost his powers, none of his retinue could've helped him.

There would be more enemies, and he didn't want to stand against them alone. He didn't even want to stand against them with just Maia and Xaphan at his side. He wanted to have his whole damned retinue with him, supporting him and ensuring his victory.

It seemed that Alix could read the emotions on his face, because as the room fell into silence, she quietly said, "We're with you, though, Leon. Or at least, I am. This isn't the first time that Amon has sent his bloodsucking goons after us, and it won't be the last. The next time he does, I'm going to kick their fucking teeth in!"

Leon couldn't help but chuckle as Alix slowly worked up more and more passion. He hoped she could maintain that enthusiasm, because she'd need it. As far as he was concerned, their leisurely cruise down to the Ilian Empire was over. From now on, they'd have to devote as much of their time as possible to training. He couldn't say when Amon might strike again, but it would most certainly be before they were ready. It was his responsibility to ensure that they were as ready as they could be. If they weren't, then he might start losing retainers before they even reached the Nexus, and that idea wasn't something he could abide.

On a more personal note, he felt the Great Black Dragon's power when he struck down those vampires. He almost thought he was mistaken, but he remembered the edge of his blade having black flame. He needed to look into that more, too, and see if it was at all possible to coax that power out more often. It was extremely potent, and if he could call upon it as easily as he could the Thunderbird's lightning... well, the Great Black Dragon might not be so happy, but at this point, Leon couldn't care less. If anything, right now, the fact that the Great Black Dragon was denying him that power only made him want to unlock it even more.

Quietly, he gripped Elise and Valeria's hands with a bit more strength. They all had much to do, and they needed to start immediately.

—

Almost five months had passed since they'd left Ariminium. They'd had some adventures, gotten into trouble, and almost died. But the convoy had finally come within sight of one of the most powerful nations on Aeterna.

More specifically, they'd reached the final stretch of this leg of their journey, the river that led out of the Illumerian Wetlands and into the Empire proper. The environment around them was slowly getting drier and less densely wooded, there were more and more ships around carrying goods to and from the Imperial heartlands, and with his magic senses, Leon could see the land filling up with more and more homesteads.

But most eye-catchingly, especially to Leon as he stood on the prow of the yacht with his family close by, the moon high in the sky, was the orange glow in the distance. It was so bright that even here, miles and miles away from its source, the stars struggled to be seen. Only the brightest stars in the sky could be seen through all of that light pollution.

And with his magic senses, Leon could see what was causing it.

Less than a day's journey upriver was a city—a *proper* city, but the likes of which none of them had ever truly seen before. Its size was something that they hadn't seen since leaving the Cortuban Alliance, possessing a population of at least a quarter million by Leon's estimate, but that wasn't all. It was a marvelous place, an obviously planned settlement built in a grid layout, with expensive, high-class homes on the outskirts, affluent shops to service their inhabitants all around, and with much taller buildings in the city's core. There, ten-story-plus buildings were the norm, built of golden metal and black, perfectly reflective glass, positively glowing with magic power to Leon's magic senses, the enchantments wrought within them more extensive than any he'd sensed before in a civilian building.

And there were so many of them, rising up from the ground like the fingers of buried golden giants, grasping at the heavens.

The people living in that city, despite being on the periphery of the Ilian Empire, almost as far away from the state's center of power as they could be without leaving the Empire, still lived with a quality of life that was unmatched in any of the Kingdoms in the northwest.

Finally, after so long, they had reached the Ilian Empire.

Chapter 659: Ancon

The sky was overcast, filled with dark storm clouds. The wind was howling, not quite a gale but still more than enough to have mortals leaning against it to remain balanced. Lighting flashed across the sky with great frequency, and the thunder that accompanied it shook the earth and rattled the glass in windows. Rain hammered the city in whirling sheets, flooding through the streets, through drainage ditches and sewers, and into the river that led into the Ilumerian Wetlands, up which the Heaven's Eye convoy steadily maneuvered.

In short, it was a *beautiful* day in Ancon, at least in Leon's opinion, and he spent his time gleefully basking in the storm as the yacht he was on took the lead in the convoy.

The river they were sailing up wasn't quite as wide as the Naga or the Tyrrhenian Rivers, but it was a fairly wide channel. There were a few private docks on either side of it, but their true destination was on the other side of Ancon. This city in the west of the Ilian Empire had been built along a river that carried water away from a large freshwater lake further inland. The city bordered that lake to its south, and that was where most of its commercial docks and warehouses were located, including those in use by Heaven's Eye.

So, as the convoy finally left the Ilumerian Wetlands behind and entered the city, they were given plenty of time to take it in as they sailed up the river, past the numerous fortified walls and towers that would protect the city if any beasts from the Wetlands ventured out of their home, beneath gigantic bridges that towered over their ships, and into the lake, where they turned toward the local Heaven's Eye

enclave. Ancon was an important city, being the western gateway in and out of Imperial territory, but not important enough to have a proper Heaven's Eye Tower.

And yet, the local headquarters for the guild was almost as impressive as one: it was located closer to the center of the city, essentially on the border between Ancon's core and the commercial district, and was made of the same polished black glass and golden metal that all of the tall, ten to fifteen story tall buildings around were made of.

Leon took all of this in as he reveled in the weather, letting the magic power of the storm fill his body with energy. He even reached up into the sky with his own power, letting the storm run through it in a manner that was fairly similar to dipping his fingers into a river. He didn't seize control of the churning magic, but he just stood on the prow of the ship, letting the storm slam the city all around him.

It wasn't just recreation, though; this was a fairly decent learning experience. With his magic suffusing the air, he could learn quite a bit more about the weather's natural process.

Unfortunately, he wasn't able to stay out on the ship's prow for as long as he would've liked, for the convoy soon reached the private docks of Heaven's Eye, and he was both elated and dismayed to find that despite the weather, a substantial crowd had gathered to welcome them to the city. He quickly realized why so many people had braved the storm when he saw that the rain was parting around the crowd, not so much as dampening all the gilded finery they were wearing—presumably the reason they had a number of sixth-tier water and wind mages on the periphery of the crowd.

Leon's ship passed through the protective dome that the water mages had set up, separating him from the rain, and for that he wasn't too happy. He was even less enthused to realize that since he was the only person out on the deck of the ship, and because his position was so prominent, that there were quite a few eyeballs fixed upon him.

He, in turn, turned his gaze upon the waiting crowd.

There were quite a few notable people in the crowd, he found, which somewhat dampened his irritation. The crowd he estimated to be about four or five hundred people, and of them, more than a hundred were sixth-tier, while a dozen were of the seventh-tier. Those mages were spread throughout the crowd, though, indicating that even though they represented enough force to wipe out a good-sized army from the northwestern Kingdoms—assuming they were seventh-tier mages skilled in combat, at least—they were 'merely' prominent down here in the Ilian Empire.

More notably, however, were the two who stood at the front of the gathered crowd: their obvious leaders.

The most eye-catching of the two was a man radiating the aura of an eighth-tier mage, dressed almost entirely in deep, attention-grabbing reds. His clothes were tight against his rather lithe frame and were heavily embellished with floral designs rendered in slightly lighter reds than the rest of his attire. Meanwhile, about his shoulders hung a golden cloak that sparkled with numerous embedded rubies that, to Leon's eyes, seemed enchanted to ward away the rain, and didn't even flap in the wind. The man himself had sharp, chiseled features, wasn't particularly tall, and had long black hair tied back in a tight ponytail that hung down to about the center of his shoulders. His mouth was framed with an oiled goatee, though the rest of his face had been so thoroughly shaven that there wasn't even a shadow of

hair on his cheeks. His eyes caught Leon's interest when he saw that they were the color of gleaming platinum, and seemed practically locked upon him as his ship came sliding into dock.

Leon didn't detect any hostility in his gaze or killing intent in his aura, though, so he didn't think too much of the man's attention.

Standing just to the man's right, neither behind nor in front of him, was another eighth-tier mage, though she was modestly dressed in extremely formal black. Her hair was cropped boyishly short, while her sharp, almond-shaped eyes seemed to bounce between Leon and the windows of the yacht as if he was of interest, but not the person she was most looking forward to seeing.

She was quite beautiful, with a lovely heart-shaped face, an enviably fit and well-endowed figure, a healthy golden tan so complete that it could only be natural, and an air of confidence and control that suggested she was the most important person around, save only for the man to her left. Adding to that air of control was the emblem of Heaven's Eye, prominently emblazoned across her tight black uniform's top.

Just behind these two mages were several fifth and sixth-tier mages that he could only assume were their assistants. Those behind the man wore clothing that largely matched his, with a red color palette and a focus on floral designs. Behind the woman, meanwhile, were people wearing uniforms of Heaven's Eye.

Leon's ship finally came to a halt at the largest and most prominent dock, with the rest of the ships behind his fanning out to the rest of the docks in the yard. The enclave had so many docks that even though his convoy needed quite a few docks, they didn't even take up half of those that were available.

As his ship finally stopped moving and the crew started to come outside dressed in rain gear to tie it down to the dock, Leon reluctantly stepped back from the ship's prow. With barely more than a wisp of intent, he used his water magic to dry himself off and dress himself in something a little more formal, then he walked back along the deck to where the rest of the ship's passengers were coming out onto the deck and preparing to disembark. Elise was the first to notice his arrival, and she welcomed him with a smile that could illuminate even the murkiest of nights.

She looked gorgeous and utterly impeccable, with her long red hair put up in a loose bun, leaving only a few strands untied to frame her face. She was dressed in a fairly modest black dress that reached her ankles and covered her arms as far as her elbows, though it had a fairly low cut and high thigh slit. More eye-catching, however, was the stark white snow lion coat she wore about her shoulders, and the emerald rings she wore on each hand. On her right index finger was one of the rings of invisibility that Leon had looted from the assassins that the Duke of Aurelianorum had sent after him, while her left ring finger had the ring that Leon had given to her during their wedding's gift exchange. She also wore the bracelet that he'd commissioned for her in Ironford, though given its lack of enchantment, it was slightly less eye-catching than the rings.

To match her in spirit, Leon wore the black formal outfit she'd had tailor-made for him a long time ago, his own snow lion coat, and the sapphire amulet she'd given him during their wedding.

Nearby, Valeria and Maia were also in their formal outfits and wore the snow lion coats that Leon had given to them, bringing a warm smile to his face. His retinue and the rest of the important people of the convoy were there, too.

“Ready, husband?” Elise asked as she snaked an arm around one of his elbows. “We’ve finally arrived, though it doesn’t seem like the weather is cooperating that much...”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Leon replied with a smile, his words punctuated a titanic clap of thunder and blinding flash of lightning. “It’s almost like Aeterna itself is welcoming us to the heart of civilization.”

“I think you and I have *very* different ideas of what a good welcome is,” Elise replied, her emerald eyes twinkling brilliantly in the light of distant lightning.

Leon could only smile a little wider as he felt the storm’s power coursing through him, lifting his mood and fortifying him against the inevitable social events that were going to ensue in the wake of their arrival. He then checked in with the rest of his family and retinue, making sure that they were ready to finally leave this damn ship, and then accompanied Elise as she steered him over to where Emilie and Damien Makedon were quietly discussing some of the finer points of their arrival.

With the two of them, Leon and Elise took the lead in disembarking. What followed was a long, almost ceremonial greeting between those waiting at the docks and those leading the convoy. There was a complex relationship existing between even just the Heaven’s Eye personnel, let alone those who were here representing the Ilian Empire, but Emilie navigated that complexity with extreme grace. Leon was a little more lost, but Elise was an irreplaceable boon to him during all of it.

The eighth-tier woman turned out to be named Penelope and had the distinguished honor of being the daughter of the Director. However, her official position within Heaven’s Eye was just as one of the Director’s agents—essentially a position that Leon had been led to believe he’d be filling once he officially joined the guild. She was stronger than Emilie, and better connected. If Heaven’s Eye had a Princess, it would be her. Yet, given her official status compared to Emilie’s, she acted with pleasant humility, and Emilie responded in kind, both women treating each other as old friends even though this was their first meeting.

The eighth-tier man, meanwhile, was the local governor of the city and its associated province—the Ilian Empire’s highest administrative divisions were provinces, and they numbered eleven, each ruled by a governor that was recommended by local elected councils and then confirmed by the Ilian Emperor himself, and then served for quarter-century terms. Despite being one of these extremely highly-ranked officials, Apollodorus, as the governor was introduced, was neither servile nor overbearing, and he greeted Emilie with stiff politeness.

Following them came a round of introductions from everyone behind them. Dozens of people came forward to tell Emilie their names and have a short exchange with a woman who would soon become one of the most powerful people in all of Aeterna, and it was all so *riveting*, so *captivating*, so utterly *enthral*ling, that Leon’s eyes glazed over almost immediately.

Instead, he entertained himself watching the lightning in the distance, which was fading in intensity and frequency, almost as if the dry, boring introductions weren’t just suppressing Leon’s mood, but the weather itself, too.

After Emilie, most of these people then addressed Damien Makedon, but fortunately, he knew most of these people from previous visits to Ancon, so their exchanges were mercifully brief.

However, after Damien came Leon, and he just about lost his mind. They treated him not too differently from Emilie and Damien, but there was definite strain in some of their expressions. Perhaps it was his own imagination, but he figured that strain was from hiding their reluctance to greet someone like him as politely as they were. He couldn't say for sure, of course, but he was immensely glad when all of the introductions were over, and it seemed they were, too.

There was a bright spot of entertainment, though, when attention turned to Maia, and she largely ignored everyone save for a few derisive glances at Penelope and the governor.

But after half an hour—it had been so dry and boring that Leon almost couldn't believe it had gone by that quickly—they were finally released from the purgatory of propriety and allowed to properly progress into the polis. They were shown to their guest house, where they would stay for the next week while another land caravan was put together to ferry everyone north to the Empire's capital city, Ilion, where one final trip on a large yacht would bring them to Occulara only a few days later.

And there, Leon vowed to himself, he wouldn't be traveling any great distance for a long time. He was ready to be done with all of this moving around, he just wanted to settle in somewhere and have a little bit of stability.

Elise and Valeria both poked fun at him for his brief complaints, but they still agreed that they couldn't wait for this journey to be over.

But for the time being, they had other things to attend to—most notably, a formal party to 'properly' welcome them to the Ilion Empire. Leon personally thought a proper welcome would be to leave them the hell alone for a couple of days, but it seemed that was a wish he wouldn't see granted. His retinue wasn't quite of high enough station to join them at the party, Valeria decided to stay with them out of solidarity, and Maia simply couldn't be bothered.

Leon envied them for their freedom to choose, for such a privilege was denied him and Elise. Given their relation to Emilie, their presence was so expected that it might as well have been mandatory. He was tempted to blow it off anyway, but Elise wanted to go, and he figured that it would at least be worth it in a practical sense to potentially get closer to Penelope, who would also be in attendance. He just hoped that their time in Ancon wouldn't be taken up entirely by these kinds of formal engagements.

Reluctantly, instead of relaxing in the guest house, Leon prepared himself for a formal dinner party with the governor, Penelope, Emilie, Damien, and whoever else was of sufficient status to receive an invitation.

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Leon had been hoping that the party would be a fairly low-key affair, with only a handful of important people attending. He was sorely disappointed.

There *were* only a handful of important people attending the party, but they'd brought their friends, and those friends had brought friends, and soon enough, there were hundreds of people attending.

Fortunately, the party was taking place on the top floor of the tallest golden tower in the city, which Leon found exciting enough to pique his interest.

He, Elise, Emilie, and Damien left the opulent Heaven's Eye guest house at about sunset, and the city's dozens of golden towers looked almost like they were burning in the light of the setting sun. The central tower, however, *was* burning—or at least, its roof was. It didn't have a flat roof, but instead the building was shaped rather like a javelin, tapering off after the final floor for several dozen more feet, and it was this part of the building that burned with blazing golden fire in the early evening sky.

Leon wasn't quite sure what the point—or if there was anything practical point at all—of it was, but he found it cool regardless.

The interior of the golden tower was just as opulent as the exterior implied, with floors of sparkling rose quartz polished almost to a mirror shine, columns in the lobby took the shape of nearly lifelike gargantuan statues of men and women with godly physiques literally holding up the ceiling. The magic lift in the back that took them up to the top floor was larger than many houses Leon had seen, and one whole wall was given to windows that allowed them to watch their own ascent.

From that vantage point, Leon could see with a whole new perspective that the city remained just as alive and busy with the sun dipping below the horizon as it was in the daytime, with every street in the large city heavily lit with both great beams of golden light that stretched over the sidewalks, and by the many trees that lined its larger streets whose leaves glowed in various rainbow hues, allowing Ancon's many citizens still going about their day. Moving through the streets, he could see horseless, wheelless carriages moving apparently autonomously, lacking even a driver, and he could see small theaters and other entertainment venues filling with people all over the city.

In addition, there was a fair amount of green space, with the thoroughfares shaded by the rainbow trees planted at regular intervals in small plots of land that broke up the concrete and brick streets and sidewalks. Combined with the sewers and ditches that magically kept the roads and sidewalks free of water that might wear them down, it was clear that even just the basic infrastructure of the city had been greatly enhanced with magic, showing the power of the Ilian Empire that it could make even these mundane things so magical.

Leon was impressed, but his jaw didn't start to drop until the magic lift reached the top of the tower and opened to reveal the ballroom that had been prepared for the party.

The ballroom was filled with people already, but Leon barely noticed them as he took in the room itself.

The floor was a series of mosaics made of dyed glass, each one depicting some presumably legendary hero slaying various monsters, but this was the least impressive of the halls' decorations. What drew Leon's eyes first was a series of five massive concentric metallic rings floating in the air above the center of the dance floor, gently spinning, each ring giving off a different color of light. The windows, meanwhile, had been enchanted to show an outdoor landscape outside instead of Ancon, making it seem like the ballroom was just an opulent pavilion in the center of a dark, moody forest lit by a full moon, countless bright stars, and thousands of fireflies flitting between the trees, though the illusion wasn't perfect enough to be truly convincing. Finally, soft music was playing from *somewhere*, but as Leon took in the décor, he couldn't spot any band or bard playing anything—it was like the sound was

being projected from somewhere, but he couldn't quite figure out where it was coming from no matter how he tuned his senses to examine the ballroom's enchantments.

Other than all of that, the ballroom seemed fairly standard for a party of this sort. There weren't any places to sit, but one wall had been lined with huge tables laden with food and drinks, and the hundreds of people there before the arrival of Leon's party were mingling and quietly chatting amongst themselves. Leon noted that no one was speaking particularly loudly or boisterously, signaling just as much as the dreadfully expensive clothing everyone was wearing that this was a Formal Event.

As he glanced around and stepped into the dance hall with Elise on his arm, he started to really take in who was here, and he could feel his patience already start to fray. Most of these people were older, and seemed fairly soft. Many had relati

Chapter 660: Penelope's Challenge

Despite her intense gaze, Penelope didn't immediately come over to Leon. Instead, as Leon and his group slowly dispersed into the crowd, with many others coming forward to greet them, Penelope approached Emilie.

Leon didn't think about the eighth-tier agent of Heaven's Eye much after that, what with others clamoring for his attention. Though he wasn't yet officially a part of Heaven's Eye, many people seemed to take it for a given that he was, and he was forced to endure many more greetings from people whose faces he recognized from their arrival ceremony, and others whom he was only now meeting.

It was tiring and seemingly unending. He had no chances to duck away, or even to just quietly chat with Elise and enjoy the party's ambience. None of the people coming up to him were particularly long-winded, but every time someone finished their short greeting and went back to mingling, someone else would come up and launch into their own greeting.

If Elise hadn't been right there with him, practically holding his arm in a vise-grip, preventing him from slipping away, he would've considered ducking out for a while to at least get some fresh air. He was sorely tempted to just leave, but everyone who'd come up to him had been unfailingly polite, and no single person outstayed their welcome, so he couldn't find much reason to complain.

But, finally, everyone who had decided to come and chat for a few minutes with them had done so, and Leon and Elise were given a moment to breathe and collect themselves. Elise, as if sensing his mental fatigue, quietly drew him over to the windows about as far away from anyone else as they could reasonably get in the ballroom.

"So, how are you doing?" she asked him quietly, seemingly thriving in the social atmosphere.

Leon took a deep, steadying breath and answered, "Better than I thought I'd be. Not great, but still... better."

"That's good to hear," Elise replied. "Anyone stand out?"

Leon chuckled and nodded. "The guard commander certainly left an impression..."

The guard commander was a short, rather portly man of the sixth-tier, dressed in magnificent blue silks, with a light blue velvet vest, and black boots that reached his thighs. He was a jolly fellow, too, and he

hadn't seemed to think much of pulling Leon into a tight embrace upon their meeting and laying a pair of kisses on his cheeks. Leon hadn't seen many people do that in the party, but from those few who did, he guessed this was an intimate greeting mostly reserved for family and close friends.

Still, as much as Leon wasn't that thrilled about such intimate contact, it was hard to hold that against the guard commander when the man so enthusiastically welcomed Leon and Elise to Ancon, even inviting them to another small get-together he was hosting with the governor in a few days.

"That he did," Elise replied. "I think he was trying to 'mark his territory', so to speak. I've heard that he's been angling to be made the next governor of Ancon when the current governor's term is up, so he's been trying to make contacts with powerful people wherever he can."

Leon quietly cringed a bit, though he wondered just what the requirements for becoming a governor were, given the guard commander's clear lack of magical strength compared to Apollodorus. "Maybe it's best if we give his party a pass, then?"

"Absolutely," Elise replied. "Might give the wrong impression, and we *don't* want to be seen supporting him like that."

"If that would be seen as a sign of support, then why are we here at *this* party?" Leon asked.

"It's nothing more than a greeting," Elise replied. "It's fine to interact with politicians, but we have to be discerning. Besides, we also have to know our value and attending the party of a *guard commander* is below us."

Leon chuckled, but squeezed his eyes shut for a moment in mild shock at what she'd just said. "Well, I'm glad *you* said it," he whispered as he pulled her against him in a quick hug.

"You were thinking it, too," she replied. "So, anyone else?"

Leon nodded, but paused in his answer. "You seem to know quite a bit about the local politics," he observed.

"I brush up on my local knowledge with reports from everywhere we go," Elise explained like it was nothing, though Leon hadn't ever *seen* her doing that—though, he was often busy training or studying, so it wasn't like she didn't have the opportunity to do so without his notice.

"I'm almost tempted to ask you to share next time," he said.

"Are you really?" Elise responded with playful skepticism.

"Almost."

Elise laughed, but before she could turn the conversation back to the other partygoers, Leon felt the approach of a powerful mage. Sure enough, he turned his attention back to the rest of the ballroom and saw Penelope making her way over to them, her eyes locked upon him like a shark eyeing prey. She came without attendants, though Leon didn't doubt that they were somewhere in the crowded ballroom, keeping an eye on their boss but staying out of the way.

"Heads up," Leon whispered before turning to gaze at the illusion of the forest plastered over the window. This close up, it was clear enough that it was just a projected illusion, but it was impressive

nonetheless, with subtle magical fingerprints that he could examine to puzzle out the enchantment making the illusion.

Elise didn't even turn around to see Penelope approach, she simply took a step back from Leon, which seemed to be some kind of signal that their private conversation was over, for a fifth-tier mage suddenly cut in front of Penelope to approach them. However, his initial greeting was barely out of his mouth before the tall eighth-tier woman brushed against him just hard enough to let her presence be known. The fifth-tier mage looked at her at first in indignation, but as soon as he made eye contact, he seemed to wither, and retreated like a cowed mutt.

Not even addressing what just happened, Penelope said, "Leon Raime, Lady Elise, good to see you two again."

"Lady Penelope!" Elise replied with enthusiasm. "Oh! It's only been a few hours, but it's seemed like so much longer!"

The two women briefly embraced, and then Penelope turned to Leon and cocked her head, as if waiting for something.

Leon, with the awkwardness of someone who hadn't been doing this his whole life, said, "Lady Penelope... I'm glad we ran into each other here, I was hoping we would get a chance to speak."

"Did you have a topic in mind?" Penelope asked, her tone still formal and polite, but carried a hint of combativeness that had Leon straining to maintain his smile.

"Nothing specific," he replied. "Just an exchange of words that might help us be more than just familiar strangers."

Penelope stared at him for a long moment, and just as Elise was about to break their silence, the Heaven's Eye agent stated, "I'm not impressed with you, Leon Raime. Not at all."

Leon blinked in surprise, while Penelope leaned in to whisper something into Elise's ear. If Leon hadn't been so taken aback, he might've been able to hear what they said to each other, but as it was, after their brief exchange, Elise just gave Penelope a hard look, and then walked away. She didn't go far, but it was far enough to give Leon and Penelope some small measure of privacy in the increasingly packed ballroom.

Penelope took a breath, clearly intending to speak, but Leon cut her off before she even began.

"I'm curious, Lady Penelope," Leon said as a trace of iron entered his tone, "why you think your opinion should matter that much to me."

Penelope's smile hardened and her eyes narrowed in displeasure. "If you join Heaven's Eye as you are, then you'll be placed under *my* supervision. You would be my subordinate. Just as I answer to the Director, you would then answer to me. My impression of you is *very* important."

"You're in charge of the eighth-tier agents?" Leon asked, though he continued before Penelope could answer. "That's not the story I was told. I was led to believe that the agents of our power answered directly to the Director, not anyone else."

"My *father*," Penelope shot back in what was a clear threat, "relies upon me to watch over his agents. His 'Eyes', and his 'Hands', he calls them. We're not so numerous that there needs to be a large hierarchy or established ranks, but make no mistake, Leon Raime, *I* am first among equals."

"Good to learn," Leon spat through gritted teeth. "Now, what is it about me that you find so unimpressive? I mean, I'm well aware that there's plenty of things to choose from, but please, satisfy my curiosity and tell me which you find so unimpressive."

Penelope clicked her tongue, then said, "I've spoken with Lady Emilie about you. Your history was one of the most frequent topics we discussed. And in just these couple of minutes, you've vindicated my impression of you completely."

"You have no respect for authority. You're reckless. You're rude. You're a child with more power than sense. You would make for a terrible agent of Heaven's Eye, of that I have no doubt at all. But more than that, I find that your 'accomplishments', if they can even be termed as such, to be not numerous enough, nor spectacular enough to warrant a place among the ranks of Heaven's Eye's most trusted problem solvers. You're *unimpressive*, Leon Raime."

When Penelope was finished, Leon just stared at her, expecting more than what she'd given. When nothing more came, he blinked in surprise and disappointment.

"What a shame that you don't like me," he said with sarcasm dripping from his tone. "I don't need Heaven's Eye. I'm going down there for my own reasons, and if you don't let me join your little club, I won't mind. Honestly, I won't. Hells, depending on how quickly we get established and what your daddy might expect of me, then remaining independent is probably the better choice."

"To be frank, Lady Penelope, I'm not that impressed with you, either. If your aura is any indication, your magic isn't anything special for those of our tier. Your attitude is overbearing, showing you to be just as rude as I am. You're arrogant, too confident that your power and position make you untouchable. That, I think, will get you killed one day, if you're not careful."

"Is that a threat?" Penelope demanded as a wisp of killing intent permeated through her aura.

"I'm still thinking it over," Leon replied, her killing intent not fazing him at all, "but right now I'm leaning toward 'yes'." He then let loose with some killing intent of his own. Their auras began to writhe and roil around each other, subtly wrestling and grappling even as their physical bodies remained almost completely motionless.

Leon wasn't too surprised to see that his killing intent, as potent as it was, didn't have much of an effect upon Penelope, but he was more surprised to see that she wasn't doing much else. Her aura was keeping him away from her body while launching a few forays of her own, but those weren't getting anywhere. He could push things a little further, but he'd let their little pissing contest escalate about as far as he was comfortable with. When it became clear enough that neither were going to get the upper hand without actually resorting to more direct magical attacks, they both in almost perfect unison, contracted their auras.

During their short spat, they'd attracted some attention, with many of the nearby party guests pausing their conversations to watch with unease. Their killing intent had even dropped the temperature around

them far enough that the window right next to them had started to fog up, and a few hints of glittering frost could be seen on its surface.

Just at that moment, though, before either of them could say anything more, a loud voice rang out through the ballroom.

“Now arriving!” the voice declared. “Governor of the Imperial City of Ancon, and all its associated Territories! Representing His Imperial Majesty and the people of the province of Ancon! Apollodorus, son of Agisthenes!”

All attention was seized from Leon and Penelope as the governor entered the room from a modestly-sized yet opulently decorated set of double doors at one end of the ballroom, followed by a dozen others, though none of them were announced.

The governor himself was dressed to impress, having changed from his outfit from that morning, though keeping the color scheme. He wore a massive toga draped about his frame, dyed a bright red, trimmed with gleaming gold, and embroidered with red and pink floral patterns. He kept his left arm raised against his body, holding the toga up, while with his right arm, he waved to everyone in the room. His right arm was covered in golden jewelry, with rings adorning each finger, three different bracelets jingling on his wrists, and armbands almost entirely covering his forearm and bicep. Around his neck was a beautiful, eye-catching golden torc, the ends of which had been set with a pair of enormous rubies that glittered with magical light, making it obvious beyond a shadow of a doubt that they had been enchanted.

“Welcome, everyone!” Apollodorus shouted as he confidently strode into the room. “I can’t express just how delighted I am that all of you were able to find time for my modest little shindig! Please, eat! Drink! And most of all, dance!”

With that, Apollodorus began to make his rounds as the host, visiting everyone to exchange a few words. No one seemed to be taking him on his offer to start dancing, though, so Leon turned his attention back to Penelope.

That distraction had served to cool both of their tempers, but they both still stared at the other with great antipathy.

“Leon Raime,” Penelope said, breaking the silence between them first, “I will not stop my father if he wants to make you one of his Eyes or Hands. I trust that he knows what he’s doing. But I can assure you, that if you’re thinking you can just use Lady Emilie to score a cushy job at Heaven’s Eye, you’re sorely mistaken. I will make damn sure that you earn your keep, no matter what happens.”

With that, Penelope turned around and walked away, not even waiting for Leon to respond. It irked him, letting her get the last word, but he wasn’t so petty as to shout after her—besides, he was already kicking himself for letting her get a rise out of him so easily, and he knew that letting things go for the moment was the better thing to do. He just stared at her retreating form for a couple of seconds before looking back to Elise. His wife had been watching them this whole time, and while she still had a look of concern on her face, it wasn’t nearly as pronounced as it was just a moment ago.

“Is everything all right, husband?” Elise asked, clearly worried.

“Yes. No. I suppose it depends,” Leon unhelpfully replied.

“You sure know how to quiet my anxieties,” Elise remarked, forcing herself to take on a more joking tone.

“Sorry,” Leon genuinely replied. “I think I’ve made an enemy, though; she does *not* like me.”

“That’s a shame,” Elise responded. “Hopefully it won’t be a problem, but... Lady Penelope is *very* highly ranked and respected. This might be a problem.”

“Yeah,” Leon said with some bitterness. “I think we’re going to have to have a chat about contingencies just in case this Heaven’s Eye thing doesn’t work out.”

“We’ll do that,” Elise agreed. “For now, though, let’s get back to mingling?”

Leon took a deep breath, and quietly groaned, “If we must...”

Elise gave him a reprimanding look, but he just smiled at her, letting her know that he was just playing around a bit. She smiled back, and the two dove back into the party, socializing with as many people as they could.

Eventually, people took to the dance floor, but they didn’t do much of the kind of dancing that might’ve graced the floor of a club. Rather, this was heavily ritualized, extremely formal ballroom dancing, fitting their environment. After a while, Elise managed to drag Leon out onto the dance floor for a few songs, and Emilie even cut in for one, but none of them stayed much longer after that. It was in Heaven’s Eye’s interest to remain aloof, Emilie had said.

Leon noted that Penelope had already left the party by that point, and he was slightly miffed that she’d managed to get out of here before he did. It almost felt like she’d won, in that respect, even though whoever left the party first was hardly a proper competition.

Regardless, he was happy to just get out of there and head back to their guest house. It was extremely late when they returned, and Leon and Elise wanted to do nothing more than collapse in bed. The rest of Leon’s retinue had already racked out, but Valeria and Maia had both stayed awake waiting for Leon and Elise to return. However, neither of the latter were up for any bedroom fun, so after some chatting about what how their evening had gone, everyone followed the example that Leon’s retinue had set, and went to bed.

The following morning, Leon slept in as much as he could, nestled between Maia and Elise. When he finally rose from bed, he found that Valeria was already up and about, and the two wasted little time in starting up a discussion about enchantments—specifically, about the armor enchantments that Leon had been devising. His plans for what he wanted for his armor were growing steadily more advanced and practical, and Valeria had already expressed interest in a suit of armor of her own similarly enchanted.

Before that conversation could go very far, however, they were interrupted by a loud knock at the door. When Leon answered it, a Heaven’s Eye messenger relayed to him an invitation to return to the governor’s tower for lunch.

It seemed that Apollodorus, after having not spoken to him much the previous day aside from a couple of greetings despite having the opportunity to, now wanted some of his time.