

Storm King 531

Chapter 531: Values of the Old Clan

Leon sat in his villa staring at a wall, at a loss as to what he should be doing with himself. The King and Penitent had an enormous amount of work to do with the western revolts, so after agreeing to accompany any force sent out to track down Octavius, Leon hadn't stayed with them for long.

He consequently had a few questions that were left unanswered, mostly related to the whereabouts of people like August, Roland, Minerva, and the Sapphire Paladin, but he supposed these concerns weren't his, anymore. He was, in all practical terms, a mercenary, being paid to do a job and not having any official titles or ranks to go with it.

It stung a little bit that he couldn't demand more of their time, especially since Leon had gotten the impression that they hadn't wanted to end their meeting as abruptly as they did, but Leon held no regrets about resigning from his knightship.

But that didn't solve his immediate problem: what to do with himself now that he was back home. Elise, Maia, and Valeria wouldn't be back for days, and it would take at least that much time for the soldiers trying to find Octavius to send back any information, which meant that Leon had nothing else to do except sit at home.

He supposed he could be training. A little physical training was never a bad idea, and hitting something really hard sounded quite therapeutic, but again, Leon wasn't really in that kind of mood. His current frustrations weren't enraging him or filling him with adrenaline and killing intent. No, his anger toward Octavius had long since cooled from boiling rage to a cold hatred, not something that inspired much in the way of chaotic, physical violence. That wasn't the kind of release Leon needed.

Instead, he supposed he ought to be studying enchantments or replenishing his stock of spells. However, simple rote recreations of spells wasn't appealing to him at the moment. Rather, what he wanted wasn't so much something productive as something more informative. He wanted to know more about the ancient Clan, especially since he'd been thinking so many negative thoughts about them recently, because regardless of how despicable they may have been, or how accurate the impression Leon had of them thanks to Nestor was, they had still held the title of Storm King for millions of years.

And he had the perfect person to begin to ask.

Leon cast his consciousness deep into his soul realm, laying down on his sofa and closing his eyes while upon his throne in his Mind Palace, his eyes opened and he stood up. He'd left the Forest of Black and White about ten days ago, but now it seemed almost like he was back.

Leon took a moment to breathe in the cool air of his soul realm, letting it calm his mind and prepare himself for what he was about to do. Dealing with people he didn't like was a chore that took a serious toll on his mental energy, and he *despised* Nestor.

"Are you all right, young one?" Nestor called out from not too far away, jerking Leon out of his almost meditative trance. He almost felt embarrassed, for he'd been standing in front of his throne for long minutes, and probably with a completely gormless look on his face, too. But he felt more irritation than embarrassment at Nestor's interruption.

“Just thinking,” Leon responded through gritted teeth.

“Well don’t think too hard, you look like you’re about to burst a blood vessel!” the dead man shouted back.

Leon scowled, the thread of his previous thoughts suddenly being lost as he turned his attention toward the glowing ruby that housed Nestor’s magic body. He marched right on over to the gleaming stone and lifted hand, readying it to let loose with another gout of flame at Nestor for the obvious disrespect...

... But he caught himself. Nestor deserved so much more than a little bit of artisanal heating, but that was a separate issue.

‘Would this be something that Jason Keraunos would do?’ Leon wondered. ‘Dad and Trajan would certainly disagree with doing that...’

After taking a deep breath, Leon let his hand fall back to his side, not even a single spark exiting his fingers. He wasn’t going to be that cruel, his ego wasn’t that fragile.

“I have questions, Nestor.” Leon didn’t bother being polite, Nestor hadn’t any choice and Leon wasn’t interested in pretending that he did. Moreover, he was finding it fairly difficult to move past the possession. He shivered every time he thought about it.

Nestor, in a strange show that Leon didn’t expect, quietly replied, “I will do what I can to answer them. That was the agreement I made, no?”

Leon gratefully nodded, suddenly glad he hadn’t decided to roast the dead man. It might’ve been cathartic, but it could’ve shut him up or made him more reluctant to share information.

So, Leon went quiet for a moment after, silently contemplating what he wanted to ask, weighing what was most important for him to learn from Nestor. He still wasn’t in much of a mood to learn about enchantments, so that was off the table right from the start, but there were so many other things that Nestor could illuminate that he was finding it difficult to know where to start. Politics, administration, history, culture, Leon wanted to know all of it. He wanted to know what it meant to be a member of the Thunderbird Clan beyond merely bearing her power.

He’d resolved to not become them, or to at least not become the kind of person that Nestor was. But he was starting to think that maybe the legacy of the Thunderbird wasn’t solely invested in the mistakes of her Clan—was not House Raime a part of her legacy? And if there was any legacy Leon wanted to continue, it would be that of his more immediate Ancestors. But still, after some thought on the way back to the capital from Teira, Leon had realized that he would be a fool to blindly throw everything away out of disgust for one man.

He needed more information on the old Clan, if only to avoid their mistakes. The idea that the Clan had nothing more to teach him from its life and subsequent downfall was just as foolish.

Eventually, though, Leon realized that the best place to start would probably be when the Clan first came to Aeterna.

“What was the goal in coming here?” Leon bluntly asked as he sat in a nearby chair. “I know that it happened during a period of Reconstitution of the Nexus, so you had to go *somewhere*, but why here?”

Why did Jason Keraunos pick the Divine Graveyard? Surely, he had other places to go, other regions to rule from while someone else came here to deal with the Clan's business?"

"Yes, my father had all of that," Nestor quietly replied. "About a thousand years or so before the Nexus began to fall apart and prepare itself for Reconstitution, my father received word that a Universe Fragment was here. I wasn't too involved in politics, so I'm not sure *how* he received that information or why he trusted it, but received it and trust it he did. Due to the immense potential power of such an artifact, he decided that he had to claim it personally, but he also had great reservations about going to the Divine Graveyard to retrieve it, and so took the Clan's best and brightest with him. I, obviously, was included, as were all of my siblings."

"What about your mother?" Leon asked out of curiosity.

"My mother was a concubine of so little consequence that my father never told me who she was," Nestor explained so matter-of-factly that Leon was taken fairly by surprise.

"You... what about the rest of your siblings?"

"Same thing with them," Nestor said. "As far as I know, none of us knew who birthed us, only that we were the scions of our father. None of his concubines came with us, though, so I imagine that my mother, whoever she was, is long dead by now."

"And that doesn't bother you?" Leon asked, thinking of his own mother and the circumstances that separated them. He didn't even know her face, but he still felt pangs of loss when he thought about her—though, he had to admit that those feelings of loss stemmed mostly from the realization that something had been forcibly taken from him rather than specifically missing his unknown mother.

"It did, once. It doesn't anymore. It's been too long, I've quite stopped caring." Nestor's tone was emotionless, though engaged. Leon could hear in his voice that he truly didn't care all that much anymore that he didn't know who his mother was.

Leon sighed and moved on, recognizing that Nestor probably couldn't offer much more in this respect. But he supposed that was for the best. Learning that Nestor didn't care about the identity of his mother was just one more than that Leon could use to distinguish himself from the dead man.

"All right, then how about we get back to my original question? Do you know exactly what the Universe Fragment you were looking for was? Or any other information in that vein? How about anything else about this plane, or how such a powerful Clan met its end here?"

"As far as I was made aware, all of the planes in the Divine Graveyard are supervised by various Grave Wardens," Nestor began, his tone honest and matter-of-fact. Leon didn't get even a hint that Nestor was making any of this up. "These people were supposed to watch over the countless graves of the Primal Gods and Devils, appointed by the Great Lord Khosrow himself. It's been... *millions* of years since the Primal Age, though, and my father didn't believe that any of those Grave Wardens were still around, assuming that the stories of these Grave Wardens were even accurate. Still, we were after a Universe Fragment—of what form it took or what powers it might've had, I was never told. These Fragments were supposedly to power the wards that prevented any of the potent energies of the Primal Beings from leaking out back into the universe, but my father didn't believe that these energies were dangerous after so long."

"Looks like you paid for that mistake," Leon observed. Nestor had been poisoned to death by the light magics of the moon stone he'd been studying, which had carried a tiny portion of the power of a Primal God.

"Indeed I did." Nestor didn't run from that fact, he accepted his mistake and that of the Clan without any sign of unwillingness, which Leon appreciated. "We came here to take the Universe Fragment. My father wanted a third to add to our Clan, which would help us to rise above the other six Elemental Kings, who were steadily growing in power and were starting to ally against us. We needed that extra power, so my father decided while everyone was forced out of the Nexus to come here and take the Fragment."

Leon grimaced as this was explained, accepting it without thought. After what he'd seen, that the previous Storm King, upon realizing that the Clan's enemies were growing too powerful and too numerous, had decided to come here to plunder a mythical treasure rather than making friends of his own was something that he no trouble believing. Leon hardly blamed the man for it, he supposed it was something he would've done even as recently as a month ago.

Still, he'd hoped it had been for some other reason, something that might've restored a little bit of pride in his Ancestors. Instead, he consoled himself by letting it serve as greater motivation to change. It was just another thing that he could use to prove he wasn't Nestor, or Jason, or in any way the kind of person who was capable of possessing a wandering, lonesome kinsman just because said kinsman was weak and naïve, even if Leon for whatever reason needed a new body.

As his face fell in disappointment, Leon abruptly changed the subject, not wanting to hear any more of that.

"Nestor, I have another question..."

Nestor had fallen into explaining how the Clan had started setting up on Aeterna once they'd arrived—a subject that otherwise would've fascinated Leon, but in this moment he'd barely been listening to—but he didn't show any signs of aggravation at having been interrupted.

"I was told not that long ago about some of the crimes committed by the Clan..."

Leon proceeded to list off everything that Justin had accused the Clan of, the tyranny and unrestrained behavior that, if true, would've killed and otherwise destroyed lives beyond counting.

"Well, yeah, we did all that," Nestor said without a hint of shame. Again, Leon felt his heart sink in disappointment, but he wasn't surprised. "Most of those cities we put to the torch were rebels, and we had to make examples of them. After demonstrating our power in such a way, there would always be fewer rebellions. After a thousand years or so, though, the memories of these places would fade and we'd have to make additional examples as needed.

"Challenges to the authority of the Clan can never be tolerated, Leon, otherwise everything would be taken from us. The Clan is absolute, those who seek to rise above us are threats that must be dealt with. You should remember this, it is the doctrine that saw the throne of the Storm Kingdom pass between members of our Clan and *only* our Clan since shortly after the beginning of the Age of Man. These are the tools by which we retained our power where so many others failed to do so. The bottom line was that if our subjects refused to serve us, as was their lot in life, then they'd be *made* to serve."

Leon scowled as Nestor continued, his scowl only growing deeper with every word that Nestor said. Eventually, Leon had to interrupt again. He couldn't listen to any more.

"What was it like in the aftermath of Jason's death, then?" Leon asked. "If the authority of the Clan could not be questioned and all those who tried fell like wheat before a scythe, then how is it we were so quickly defeated? Why is it the man who founded my House, your own younger brother, had to change his name to Raime?"

That finally got Nestor to pause a moment, but only a moment.

"I was not there, Leon," Nestor said. "I can't say for certain, I can only relay what was told to me before I was abandoned. But apparently, enough people were killed when my father went to confront the Grave Warden and seize the Universe Fragment here that it left a power vacuum at the top, a vacuum that Demetrios was clearly unable to fill. Various heads of branch families and generals and advisors all jockeyed to see themselves or their factions on top. I never learned who won, if anyone, but even if someone *did* win, it wasn't enough. The Clan is not in charge here, anymore, and if our Ancestor's statement about you being the last of our line is true, then all of our Clan members were probably either killed, or so devastated that they were unable to awaken their blood anymore. Either way, our Clan here died, save for your House, and even then, the power of House Raime is not in any way, shape, or form the equal of the Clan."

Leon nodded, accepting everything Nestor said without further interruption. When Nestor had finished, Leon's face was marred by a deep scowl, and he was glaring off into the distance as if he could see the old members of the Clan whose power struggles had brought it to ruin after only a single reckless mistake and was ruthlessly judging them all unworthy.

But he supposed they'd all have judged *him* unworthy, as well, just as Nestor did.

'I suppose, then, that that leaves only one option for me,' Leon thought to himself as the knowledge of his ancient Clan's crimes finally began to light a fire inside of him instead of bringing out feelings of revulsion and unacceptance, *'I'll just have to prove to myself and to everyone that I am worthy!'*

With barely a sound, Leon spun on his heel and began walking out of the fort and toward the not-Forest of Black and White.

"Where are you going?" Nestor called out, surprised at Leon's sudden departure.

Leon paused and slowly looked back over his shoulder. "I think I understand why you did what you did to me, dead man. Our Clan is one of murderers, thieves, rapists, and slavers. Tyrants. You'd fit right in, though from how badly you lost to me, I think you were probably the runt of the litter."

Leon's voice was calm and even, his judgmental feelings having faded away almost as quickly as they had risen.

"As you said, the Clan is absolute. *Power* is absolute. As the stronger of us, I suppose I would've been obliged to hand over my body to you." Leon sighed. "But that won't be me. I may not entirely know what I want to be or what I want to build when the time comes, but I know for a fact that I don't want to be *you*."

Without another word, Leon walked down into the underground tunnel that led out of the fort, leaving Nestor there with no one—not even Xaphan, who was lost in meditation—to keep him company in the almost painful silence that followed. He didn't shout out for Leon to stop, or try to further explain himself, he simply went quiet as Leon vanished from sight.

Chapter 532: A Spark of Ambition

After his short talk with Nestor, Leon wandered the forest in his soul realm for a long time. He opened himself up to the sounds of nature, but since it was his soul realm, it was unnaturally quiet. Still, Leon reveled in that silence, feeling clear-headed for the first time in weeks. It had taken quite a bit of thinking and moralizing that even he found a little bit strange, but he felt like he was about ready to start coming to his own conclusions about who he was, how he related to his Clan, and how he wanted to proceed.

As it so happened, he found himself quite close to the tomb he'd built for the giants, so he easily stepped into the air and a moment later, alighted upon a small cliff close enough to the tomb even a mortal could've hit it with a rock.

It was a solemn place tucked away in a remote part of the mountains; not too far away for it to ever be hidden or for Leon to put it out of mind, but far enough away to not be disturbed by anything that might happen in Leon's Mind Palace.

With a sigh, Leon sat down cross-legged on the cliff, propped his elbows up on his knees, and rested his chin in his hands. He stared out the Vale of his soul realm for a while, his eyes occasionally wandering over in the direction of the tomb.

The giants had followed him out of loyalty to the Thunderbird Clan. Leon had never done a thing to earn their trust, they were simply acting upon old instincts instilled in their created Ancestors. Leon had thought their unconditional aid to be a great boon, but now he was rethinking that mindset. He couldn't very well hold himself to be better than Nestor if he also went and took advantage of the giants' ingrained servile attitude towards his blood...

... But he also acknowledged that if he continued to maintain that they were sentient, then they could make their own decisions. Nestor had shot down the idea that they were completely sentient the moment Leon brought it up, and in a way, Leon supposed he did the same, taking their support for granted.

Leon sighed again. He thought that maybe he was taking things a little too far—he supposed if he built golems and never intended for them to achieve sentience, then he might be a little skeptical if someone came to him claiming that they were fully sapient beings.

He groaned in frustration as he wished that he could just wipe the slate clean, erasing all evidence of the Thunderbird Clan from existence. At least that way he wouldn't have to deal with this shit anymore.

Though, now that he'd thought about it, he supposed the solution that he felt would work for him was deceptively easy.

As Leon continued to stare alternatively out at his soul realm and back at the tomb, he felt more than heard the Thunderbird's massive avian frame landing upon the cliff nearby, but he didn't bother to get

up or to try and make himself more presentable. If he did, it would go against what he was about to say to her.

He heard the Thunderbird approaching in her human form, her nearly form-fitting white robes gently blowing in the wind, her brown and gold hair pulled back into a loose braid, her yellow avian eyes relaxed and regarding Leon with curiosity and some slight worry.

If the Thunderbird knew what was in his head, she didn't let on. She waited a moment, seemingly for Leon to greet her or make the first move, and when he didn't, she asked in a calm and motherly voice that carried with it none of the same derision or subtle scorn that Nestor had displayed when he asked the exact same question, "Are you all right, Leon?"

"Thinking," he responded, offering no more explanation than that, his head still resolutely pointed away from the Thunderbird even as she slowly moved forward and stood next to him on the cliff just out of reach.

"What about?" she asked when it became clear that he wasn't going to elaborate.

"Thinking that I might've been overthinking these past few days," he replied, and again didn't offer much in the way of clarification. Of course, he also had little idea how to articulate what had filled his head these past few weeks, all of it was too confusing and too circular—it all looped back in on itself and prevented him from finding a good place to even start.

The Thunderbird didn't ask again, but she didn't have to, her piercing gaze demanded he continue.

Finally, after what seemed like long, awkward minutes of silence, Leon simply said, "Legacy."

"Whose?" the Thunderbird asked, her tone light and inquisitive as if she were asking him what he had for breakfast.

"Yours," he said. "Mine. My family's. The Clan's. How much of it I want, or even *can* carry forward."

"A heavy topic. What brought this on?"

"This, right now, specifically? An enemy I'd thought dealt with has escaped justice. I'm... conflicted as to how to handle it, or if any of it is even my business anymore. What it would mean if I were to pursue this to the bitter end; for me, for the future of my family, all of it. I suppose in a broader sense, though, this detritus has been muddling my head since Nestor jumped in here, and all that happened with him. I suppose you could also say that it's insecurity; an acknowledgment that I've done nothing worth being proud of, my advances have been made due to the Clan's lingering influence, and that at the end of the day, Nestor was right: I'm not worthy to be your heir."

"That's quite a bit to be thinking about, no wonder you're all the way up here looking like you've been dragged through the gutter."

Leon grimaced, though when he glanced down at himself, he had to admit that he didn't look all that great. He hadn't been too careful with how he'd wandered the forest and was covered in dirt, though given that it was his soul realm and magic body, all it took were a few brief thoughts to clean himself up.

"If you need to talk, then talk," the Thunderbird said. "I'll listen to whatever you have to say without judgment."

"I can talk, sure," Leon said as he stood up and finally turned to face his Ancestor. "But I think I've done enough thinking for a while, for I've reached my conclusion—at least, for now, until I reach the Nexus and get the lay of the land there. It's something that's been building for a while as I've tried to reconcile much of what I've learned recently as well as some mounting insecurities with who I see myself as and who I want to be. And with what I feel like I need to do."

"Do share," the Thunderbird said as she faced Leon, at least seeming to treat this exchange with all the seriousness it demanded.

Leon took a deep breath to steady himself, then jumped right in.

"Several times you've advocated that I kill my enemies without thought. Xaphan and Nestor, too, have recommended that I do such a thing. However, there's a fine line there between killing my enemies and killing those who merely inconvenience me.

"From what I've learned today, and what I've been starting to suspect for some time, the old Clan didn't understand that distinction. It led them to commit great atrocities and abuse their power in horrific ways. I don't want to bear that legacy. Justin Isynos told me that no one misses the Clan in the Nexus, and to be honest, I can believe it.

"Now, don't mistake my words—I'll kill anyone if I have to. But I don't enjoy killing. My enemies won't receive mercy, and I might enjoy the sheer act of testing my limits against them, or I might take some pleasure in seeing specific people dead, but I don't enjoy the act of killing itself.

"I suppose I'm hardly in a position to be judgmental, though. After all, I'm only some twenty-year-old shithhead barbarian from the ass-end of this plane. How could I compare to a being like Xaphan, who's lived and been in power for millennia? Or someone like Nestor, who might be even older? Or you, a being so old and venerable that I can't even comprehend the depths of your experience. That you all advocate for the same actions and push me toward my more ruthless tendencies tells me that there's wisdom there, that it's not an inherently bad strategy.

"Still, I don't like it. I need no reason; mindlessly killing anyone and anything in my way is not the way I want to handle my business. Yet I also acknowledge perhaps the most important truth that my father taught me living in the Forest of Black and White: killing and death is simply a part of life, and the struggle for power is eternal. I can't blame anyone for getting into conflict over power because, in the end, power is the exact same thing that I want.

"My goals haven't changed, though. If anything, I want to accomplish them even more. On the one hand, I want to throw away everything that your Clan left behind in order to prove myself, but on the other, I want to prove that I'm every bit as capable an heir as you could possibly choose and show that I've earned my place. You chose me over Nestor, and because I agree with Nestor that he's probably the better choice, I need to prove that I deserve your trust.

"So, I will hunt down Octavius and bring him back to the Bull Kingdom either kicking and screaming or in a tiny box, and then I will move on to the Central Empires. Once there, I will look to build up a network of support while I investigate the remnants of the Clan left behind on this plane."

With a snap of his fingers, Leon summoned the platinum card of Demetrius, the progenitor of his House, and held it up for the Thunderbird to see.

“With this, and with that network of support, I’ll seize control of Heaven’s Eye, and make their resources my own. From there, I’ll move on to the Nexus and press my claim to the title of Storm King. Sometime in there, I’ll find Kamran and make him pay in blood for the deaths of my family. But only for my family. As far as I can tell, the death of the Thunderbird Clan was undoubtedly justified in many ways.”

Leon couldn’t get any more detailed than that, but he didn’t mind. He didn’t know what the situation was like in the Central Empires, let alone the Nexus, so how could his plans be any more specific?

“I’ll finish this by saying that I’m going to choose not to judge you or the ancient Clan anymore. I wasn’t there when the decisions are made, and those who made whatever decisions and carried them out are long dead, as are the lion’s share of their victims. But I will say that I will do things as I please. I’ll happily ask for and accept your advice, but I will not go against my own beliefs. When I sit on the throne of my Ancestors, the throne of your descendants, I want to be able to look at myself and honestly say that I’ve done my father and Trajan proud. If the Clan’s history comes up, I’ll deal with it by proving that I’m not them, but other than that, I’ll leave the past in the past.”

Throughout Leon’s speech, the Thunderbird remained quiet, a pensive look on her face. She didn’t try to interrupt, and when she did, it was only after Leon specifically paused to give her some time to share her thoughts regarding what he was saying.

“That’s quite naïve, boy,” she said, though her tone wasn’t judgmental. “As you said, your father and your mentor are both dead. That would seem to point directly to the flaw in that way of thinking. Your enemies will not hesitate to kill you, you must respond in kind or else they will eventually win. No one reaches the level of Kamran has without being ruthless and more than willing to capitalize on every opportunity that presents itself. When dealing with a man like this, you can’t leave him *any* openings.”

“I understand what you’re saying,” Leon interjected, “and I’m sure that you and many others want me to be nothing more than a mindless killing machine, someone who slaughters without thought everyone that presents even a mild irritation. That’s not who I want to be. Were I not the only heir of your power, I think I would be more than happy to be left alone to study the runic arts and to build my family.

“But I *am* your only heir, and the ideas that you have helped to plant in my head about reclaiming lost glories, and the glories that I have already born witness to... I can’t just be what I think my natural inclination pushes me towards. I *will* see and experience the wonders and glories that you have conditioned me to expect. If my luck holds out and my skill proves itself, then I’ll even *make* some of those wonders and glories myself.

“Mark my words, Thunderbird: The next Storm King that rules over all of lightning shall be me. No matter what the Nexus might think about my heritage, I will claim that title for myself, and if they choose to reject me, then I will simply tear down Khosrow’s Law and build something else in its place.”

Leon straightened himself up and stared the Thunderbird directly in the eye, not blinking or showing any sign of hesitancy or weakness.

“Keep pragmatism in mind,” the Thunderbird cautioned, though there wasn’t a trace of disappointment or reproach in her tone. “I’m glad that you’re thinking like this, though. It might be a bit too soft, but I’ll reserve judgment until I see how you conduct yourself going forward. If I think you’re needlessly endangering yourself, then I won’t hesitate to let you know. But I will say that when I originally built my

Clan, I was hardly the slaving despot that you seem to hate so much. I made alliances, I found love, I even forgave some of my enemies.”

“That’s all I can ask for,” Leon replied as he glanced back out over the forest in his soul realm. “Make no mistake, though, if I feel that I must, I will kill those who threaten me without hesitation. That said, no matter what, the previous Thunderbird Clan is dead, and dead it will stay.”

“I suppose that’s all I can ask for, isn’t it?” the Thunderbird replied. “Your words don’t instill a great deal of confidence in me, but I can at least take some solace in the fact that you’re starting to put more thought into your future steps. Now, I remember you stating back in the archives of your House that you don’t plan on taking anything from the old Clan. Now that you’ve worked yourself through some of these thoughts, has that changed?”

Leon nodded. “Eh, not really. As I said, though, I’ll do what I want and what feels right. Blind murder doesn’t feel right, and neither does taking everything that isn’t nailed down in any Thunderbird Clan facilities I might come across. I’ll take what I feel right about taking, like this card. I found it, I unlocked the door that sealed it away. I feel like I earned it. But still, you started our ancient Clan from scratch, and I’m hoping to do the same.”

“You aren’t working from scratch, you have myself, Nestor, and much of the what the Clan left behind, including an entire library’s worth of books and enough golems to maintain them...”

“You also had two Universe Fragments—look, it’s not a perfect sentiment, but we all stand upon the shoulders of those who came before. It wouldn’t matter if I found those books in a library in the Bull Kingdom or in the Central Empires or in those archives, and I will use that knowledge as I see fit. If I wanted to *truly* start from scratch, I’d have had to have been born at the inception of the universe, when there were no legacies to bear and everything was pure and new and undiscovered. It’s the more material bequeathments of the old Clan that I’m more concerned about. Weapons, dangerous artifacts, any more prisons of horror, that sort of thing.”

“You also have material things here that you’ve inherited,” the Thunderbird replied. “You are my last real descendant, so while I approve of these sentiments—a truly powerful mage would stand upon their own merits, no matter how they acquired their power—I would also know how far you plan to take this mindset. My sword?”

“Hard to say,” Leon replied. “It was the blade of House Raime for thousands of years following the downfall of the Clan. Is that enough to cleanse the blade of the stench that its wielders in the latter days of the Clan infected it with? I can’t say. Of all the things I have, though, to lay that blade down would hurt. So I guess it isn’t hard to say, then. I won’t abandon it... at least unless I can make something better.”

“I can imagine,” the Thunderbird said with amusement. “You took a power crystal from Nestor’s lab, did you not? How about that?”

Leon frowned and shrugged. “Don’t know. Maybe I’ll give it to Emilie. Maybe I’ll give it to Elise as a wedding present. Shit, maybe I’ll just throw it into the sea the first chance I get with an explosion spell strapped to it. I won’t use it. I’d rather build my own wonders and relying upon old wonder would only tarnish my creations.”

The Thunderbird's mouth began to stretch upward into a smile. She took a few steps forward and laid one of her hands on Leon's shoulder, saying, "I hope that you stick to that conviction. I won't abandon you if you find something left behind by Jason Keraunos that you simply can't live without, but I hope that never forget this decision. It might take longer to reach the level you must, but you'll be stronger for it."

"And don't forget the Universe Fragments! You needn't worry about what it says about you in claiming them for yourself, they'll never bow to anyone unworthy. But they cannot be destroyed, nor be allowed to fall into anyone else's hands!"

"I understand," Leon said. "The Storm Diamond's part of the Storm King's crown, which is locked in the Clan's old vault, I think, and then there's the Iron Needle, I don't have the faintest clue where to look to find that thing."

"I might..." the Thunderbird replied with a look of intrigue on her face. "I detected a few faint wisps of power that felt a *lot* like the Iron Needle as we passed by that canyon in your home Vale."

Leon blinked in surprise, his thoughts turning to the Divine Scar. "Wait... what?! Why didn't you tell me?! I could've tried to go and get it!"

"You *could've*, but I doubt you'd have survived the trek down there. Do yourself a favor and don't even try to venture into that canyon before you reach the ninth-tier. If I'm not mistaken and the Iron Needle is down there, you don't have to worry about it going anywhere. No one will take it, it will wait for someone worthy to find it. And none will, until you go down there to get it."

Leon clenched his jaw so tightly that he started grinding his teeth. He supposed he was grateful that the Thunderbird hadn't told him that when he was still in the Vale; he already had far too much on his mind to add that to the mix, as well. But as he forced himself to relax, he thought about the Divine Scar and how long it might take him to reach the ninth-tier. Years, probably, and who knew how many. He needed to devote more time to brushing up on his enchanting expertise, too.

There was a lot he needed to keep in mind, but he knew that sooner or later, he'd be heading down into that canyon. It wasn't an idle curiosity anymore. The thoughts he'd been having recently, constantly comparing himself to the Thunderbird Clan of old, the words that Nestor had told him right before he briefly stole Leon's body, had all lit a fire of ambition within Leon that he hadn't felt in... well, he couldn't say. He wasn't sure if he'd ever felt something like it before. Now the key was just to follow through on that feeling.

And right now, he had the perfect accompaniment to that motivation—namely, Octavius and the need to bring him back to the Bull Kingdom. He had to prepare for that, so as his conversation with the Thunderbird died down and she transformed back into her avian form and vanished into the mists, Leon took off from the cliff and made his way back to his Mind Palace.

He'd said his piece to the Thunderbird, and while he wasn't so sure about how well he got across his intent, she seemed to approve of his mindset. He would never be Leon, heir of the Thunderbird Clan, and neither did he want to continue to be Leon Ursus, the barbarian from the savage Northern Vales. He was ready to reclaim his true name, and to wear it proudly for the rest of his days.

He was ready to start being Leon Raime.

Chapter 533: An Unexpected Request

Leon felt immeasurably better when he left his soul realm than he did when he entered it. He knew what he did and didn't want to be, and he had the next few moves of his life planned out. He would build a new family, a new Clan, out of House Raime, and he would run it as he saw fit. No slavery, no using sentient creatures as magic power generators, and no needless and selfish conquest. Hopefully, if the day ever came when he wore the crown of the Storm King, any stigma associated with the old Clan would've been washed away.

From what Justin had told him, he had a *lot* of work ahead of him if he wanted to redeem the descendants of the Thunderbird in the eyes of the people of the Nexus—assuming that he ever could, given their apparent disdain for those with Inherited Bloodlines—but despite that, Leon still felt lighter and freer when he awoke on his sofa than he did when he'd closed his eyes.

He had the framework of a plan, something to work toward, something that wasn't just 'find person who wronged me and kill them'. And it felt good.

He was still left with two or three days alone in his villa, though, with Elise, Maia, and Valeria still on their way from Teira. Just because he had a good plan for how to proceed with his life didn't mean he had a good plan for what to do with himself for the next few days.

To that end, he decided to spend as much of that time in his enchantment workshop as he could. He'd get some lessons from Nestor, but for the moment, he wanted to restock on his spell stockpile and read through some of the books he'd taken from the archives below Argent Palace.

So that's what he immediately started doing. For two hours, he pored over spell paper, pen in hand, a book open not too far away with useful references and explanations regarding spell theory. He made some good progress, but that progress was interrupted when he heard some muffled knocking at his front door.

At first, he wondered if he was hearing things correctly, but a moment later, once his attention had been fully torn away from the spell he'd been working on, he heard it again: the unmistakable sound of knocking. His seventh-tier senses were too sensitive to mistake it for anything else once he was focusing on it.

With a profound sigh, Leon set aside his work and left his workshop, his mind now refocusing slightly on the fact that he had yet to fully re-implement the suit of enchantments that had once filled his home, but that he'd destroyed the night before breaking August out of prison more than half a year ago.

When he reached the door, he found a fairly pleasant surprise waiting for him: Marcus and Alcander were both there, waiting for the door to be opened. They seemed slightly nervous and were looking around at the villa and the surrounding grounds, but not in a particularly sinister way; rather, Leon felt like they weren't entirely sure if they ought to be here or not.

Regardless, he felt like they wouldn't have shown up without cause. He hurried over to the door and opened it, doing his best not to show his mild irritation at their disturbing his work.

"Ah, Sir Leon!" Marcus said as Leon revealed himself. "I wasn't sure if we had the right house!"

"Indeed, it's good to see you," Alcander added with a wide smile crossing his face.

"You too," Leon replied. "What brings you two out here?"

"We've, uh, we were in the capital and decided to pop in for a little while," Marcus said. "You know, catch up on everything that's happened over these past few weeks, and all that..."

Leon saw that Marcus wasn't entirely comfortable standing there in his front courtyard, so he ushered the two young noblemen inside. Calling upon all of his social graces, he offered them something to drink before leading them into the central living room.

"This is a nice place," Marcus said politely as he sat down.

"Thank you," Leon responded with as much patience as he could muster—he was still in work mode, and suddenly switching gears to hosting guests wasn't easy. "So, how have you two been?"

"Ah, well, you know, we've been all right," Alcander said. "Not too great, but things can't be perfect, can they? Especially not in these times."

"What's making things not great? Surely you two would be doing all right since your families supported the King, no?" Leon couldn't imagine what the problems these two might have could be, but he was certain that they weren't doing nearly as badly as they'd implied.

"We were kicked out of the Legion in all practical senses," Marcus explained. "What's more, with the King's recent focus on revoking the titles of landed nobility and overhauling inheritance laws to make the Bull King, whoever that may be, the sole beneficiary of landed titles, it's pretty much a given that we're not going to inherit our family's titles. Our parents are young, so they won't be passing on those titles anytime soon, not before the King legally ensures that those titles will be his or August's."

"I see..." Leon said, though he didn't feel that much sympathy for them. Maybe it would've been different a few weeks ago before he'd decided to eschew the direct legacy of the Thunderbird Clan in favor of building something new, but right now, he didn't think it was all that bad of a situation. "Your families are still quite wealthy, though, so it's not like you're being thrown out onto the street..."

"Not going to lie, kind of feels like we are," Marcus said.

"And we're not alone, a lot of nobles who were in the Royal Legions are being 'encouraged to resign' just as we were," Alcander added. "It looks like the King doesn't want people who would benefit from his orders *not* being followed to be the ones also charged with enforcing those orders."

"I can understand that," Leon said, still not feeling too sorry for the two.

Marcus took a deep breath and sighed, then said, "It's not that great of a situation, but like you said, we're not exactly going to be turned out onto the streets; our families are still quite wealthy even without their titles and associated lands. We'll live. But please don't mistake our intentions, we didn't just come here to bitch!"

"Oh?"

Alcander suddenly leaned forward, his fourth-tier aura starting to roil and churn with uncontrolled excitement. "Sir Leon, is it true what the people are saying about you? That you're a long lost son of House Raime?"

Leon smiled in amusement.

'I suppose that rumor's spread far and wide by now, hasn't it?' he thought. He didn't want to be Leon Ursus anymore, and with Justin in hand, he didn't have to be.

"Yes," he said with hardly any hesitation. "My real name is Leon Raime. My father was Artorias Raime, the second son of Kyros Raime, the last Archduke of the Great Plateau."

Alcander's smile widened and he began to laugh to himself, while Marcus stared at Leon with a thoughtful smirk. "I wondered about you, Sir Leon," he said. "I always doubted that you were *really* just a Valeman, though I have to admit, I never imagined your real background to be so... *illustrious*..."

"I am going to choose to take that as a compliment," Leon replied. It sounded a hell of a lot like Marcus was insulting the Valemens, who Leon still identified a little more with than the people of the Bull Kingdom, but he didn't seem to mean anything malicious by it.

"It *was* a compliment," Marcus said good-naturedly. "You know, there's a *lot* of people talking about you. I mean, who you are isn't just a rumor going around, there are people in the Northern Territories who have been trying to set up a meeting with you."

"*Really?*" Leon asked exasperatedly, his face contorting with displeasure. "I haven't heard anything about that, and to be honest, I'd rather they didn't even try."

Alcander raised an eyebrow in surprise. "Why is that? You don't want to be the new Archduke? Though, I suppose the King wouldn't give away that title when he's getting ready to take away everyone else's titles..."

"Even if he wasn't, I wouldn't want it," Leon answered. "I won't be long for this Kingdom. I plan on traveling south toward the Central Empires just as soon as all this business with Octavius is finished."

"Are you...?" Marcus whispered, a strange look coming across his face. "Listen, Sir Leon—"

"It's just 'Leon', please. I resigned my knighthood."

Marcus smiled a little awkwardly, but he took it in stride. "Very well. Leon, truth be told, Alcander and I didn't just come here for a friendly chat, though a friendly chat is always something nice to have..."

Leon imperceptibly tensed up. He didn't once think that they'd come here on a whim, and now that they were getting to the heart of their purpose, he wanted to be ready for anything they might say.

"We actually want to go with you," Marcus said, sending Leon almost physically recoiling backward in surprise. He expected many things to fall from Marcus' mouth, but that statement was not one of them. Marcus continued, "Without the guarantee of our titles and our removal from the Royal Legions, our prospects in this Kingdom are looking a little bleak. I know a lot of other nobles are looking to leave, too, but we don't just want to go to another Kingdom, we want to go to *the* center of power on this plane. We want to go somewhere new where we might be able to start completely fresh. And if that's where you're going, then we would like to ask you if we could accompany you there as your partners."

"Besides," Alcander added, "you're independently wealthy, yes? And you're *heavily* connected with Heaven's Eye. You have no cause to fear your assets being taken away, and you'll always be able to pay those who sign on with you. Now, I don't want to make it seem like these are our only concerns with

wanting to follow you to the Central Empires, but I wouldn't quite feel right if we didn't address them. We want to see the limits of power on Aeterna, and we'll follow you there if you'll have us."

Leon stared at the two young noblemen, his mouth hanging slightly open, his eyes squinting a bit in surprise. "Uh... I don't... I don't see a problem with that," he said. Marcus and Alcander had fought quite well during the civil war, and much of that time had been at Leon's side. They'd earned his trust, especially after fighting alongside him during his worst moment, the battle which had seen his company of giants all killed.

But while he'd tentatively agreed, Leon had some other questions. He couldn't just let them come with him without ascertaining exactly what they wanted and what they expected.

"When you say that you want to accompany me, what are your expectations? A knightly contract to follow me as official subordinates, or just as co-equal friends?"

"Ideally, just as friends," Marcus said as Alcander vigorously nodded. "I can only speak for myself here, but I don't really want to become someone's knight."

"Neither do I," Alcander added. "But that isn't to say we wouldn't follow you, if the need arose. You're still much stronger than we are, and you're a Raimé to boot! I, personally, don't have a problem following your lead!"

Marcus nodded in agreement. "We would like to be your friends, Leon. If you're going to the locus upon which this plane turns, where the magics that can be learned are at their most potent, where the most powerful people in the entire world gather, then that's where we'd like to follow you."

"That... doesn't sound too impossible," Leon said with a sly smile. "I could use some friends, I wouldn't mind having the two of you come with. However, I can't leave anytime soon, at least not until this Octavius business is over."

"Right," Marcus replied, his tone dropping just a little bit as he averted his gaze in displeasure. "Can't believe that traitor got away. His Majesty asked you to join the party that goes out to execute him?"

"King Julius asked me to bring him back," Leon explained. "One way or another, that's what I'll do."

Marcus nodded again, and Alcander asked, "If you're going to go out there, too, would you have room for two more?"

Leon softly chuckled. "Are you sure you're not asking to be my subordinates? It kind of sounds like you are..."

"Maybe a junior partner, or something," Alcander replied.

A paltry distinction in Leon's mind, but he accepted. The three of them had little other business to discuss, with Leon merely setting up their communication strategies so that when the time came, he could call upon them to join him in pursuit of the errant Prince, and a quick negotiation for payment—it wasn't much, less even than what Valeria was being paid, but it was more about the sentiment, neither of them were going to go so far away without at least some guarantee of a livelihood.

Once all that was out of the way, they spoke about many other things. Leon learned that they'd been looking for him for a few weeks, now, and that it was Alix who had given them his address, which also

reminded him that he had to check in on her, as well. He couldn't very well leave the Bull Kingdom before he heard her answer about whether or not she wanted to join him beyond the Kingdom's borders.

Leon also learned that he and Marcus were distantly related—Marcus' great-great-grandmother had been from House Raime, and though from what he said, Leon knew that she had never had her blood awakened, by the Bull Kingdom's laws, they were still distant kin. Leon took that news with as much grace as he could, for he didn't truly consider Marcus to be kin. Marcus seemed to agree, for he quickly mentioned that he wasn't out to start calling Leon 'cousin', but the two of them still spoke a little bit about that. It seemed that Houses Raime and Aeneas were close friends, being two serious-minded Houses that were quite devoted to the well-being of the Kingdom.

But, after a few hours, Marcus and Alcander said their goodbyes and departed. Leon didn't immediately return to work after that, simply sitting back down in front of his villa's central hearth and lost himself in thought.

Elise, Maia, Valeria, maybe Alix depending on whether she decided to join him when he left the Kingdom or not, and now Marcus and Alcander. He was starting to have the makings of a good group of followers to support his endeavors. He'd just have to make sure to support theirs, in turn, whatever they may be.

Chapter 534: Rounding Out the Retinue

Following Marcus and Alcander's departure, Leon found himself unable to immediately return to work. He simply sat in his living room idly twirling the cards they'd written their contact information on between his fingers, his thoughts lost in speculations about the future. He had his lovers, and now he had two nobles—soon to be former-nobles, if what they had told him held any water—and he wanted Alix on his side, too. It had been more than a month since he'd last spoken to her, so, about an hour after the other two left, Leon almost leaped up from his sofa and left his home, a new conviction in his heart. He needed supporters, and he needed to know that his friend that had been through two wars with him was going to come south with him or not.

He wasn't entirely sure where Alix was, especially since she'd entered into a kind of 'limbo' following his resignation where she wasn't entirely part of the Legion, but she wasn't his knight anymore, either. He knew where she had stayed before the civil war, but that undoubtedly changed after all that had happened. So, he figured a good place to start would be at the Legion headquarters near the Knight Academy.

It took Leon about an hour to reach the Legion headquarters after getting Anzu ready to go, but fortunately, things proceeded much more quickly after his arrival. The Legion Headquarters was a massive, if rather dry and boring building. It had an ostentatious façade, with the lower third of the building painted in Legion red, and a huge marble pylon leading into the front courtyard decorated with thousands of reliefs of Legion soldiers winning battles. The place was large enough that Leon had been seen long before he dismounted Anzu at the pylon's entrance, and there was already a Centurion waiting for him.

"Hail, Leon Ursus!" the man called out as Leon slid out of Anzu's saddle. "Do you have business with the Legions?"

"I do... I guess..." Leon replied, a little taken aback. He'd spent essentially the entire ride over wondering just how he was going to ask for the information he needed and who he'd need to talk to and dreading the bureaucratic hoops he might have to jump through, but he hadn't once thought that someone would greet him outside.

The Centurion quickly waved to a few second-tier mages who took Anzu to the huge nearby stables, then said to Leon, "Follow me, please. I've been ordered to see to whatever you need."

"Thanks..." Leon hesitantly replied as he followed the Centurion inside, this reception taking him off-guard more than a little.

For a short while, the two spoke about the current situation, during which Leon learned that the previous Consul of the Central Territories, the old noble named Avidius, who had been replaced by the Duke of Valencia during the civil war, had been executed by the King, and his post had yet to be filled. As a result, when Leon finally steered the conversation in the direction of finding Alix, it was to a Legate that the Centurion brought him.

The Legate was a serious man who seemed to be busy when Leon arrived, so after a brief exchange of pleasantries, he had Leon and the Centurion sent to the appropriate offices to be given the information.

As a result, Leon left the Legion Headquarters barely half an hour after he arrived with the location of Alix's assigned barrack. He was practically numb from surprise as he retrieved Anzu from the stable and began riding off, frequently turning in his saddle to stare in light disbelief that the Legion had been so quick and helpful. As someone who wasn't in the Legion, he wasn't sure if they were going to give him what he needed, but he was grateful that they did. He supposed being a seventh-tier mage, a prominent knight that fought on the winning side of the civil war, and correctly rumored to be last member of the most powerful noble House in the realm had something to do with it.

Regardless, he arrived at the barracks that Alix supposedly stayed in only about two hours after leaving his villa. Much like most Legion buildings, the barracks were quite uninspired, architecturally speaking, with little notable about them. The only way that people could find their way through them was by the numbers attached to every building to indicate where they were.

Leon lucked out and was seen again as he slowly rode in. He'd barely even paused long enough to dismount Anzu when Alix appeared from the front door.

"Leon!" she called out as she waved at him with surprising cheer. Such a mood was not reflected in the handful of others lounging or walking around who could see the two of them, most of whom were giving Leon a wide berth.

Leon smiled and met Alix in front of the barracks, clasping her wrist in greeting as she did the same.

"It's been too long," he said. "How've you been?"

"It hasn't been *that* long," the brown-haired woman replied in a warm tone. "Barely been more than a month."

"Long enough to feel your absence," Leon replied, his tone nothing but friendly. "Have you been here the entire time?"

"I haven't..." Alix replied as she led Leon back inside, though not before giving Anzu a quick head pat. The griffin was forced to wait outside, but at this point, Leon knew he was more than well-behaved enough to be left on his own for a while. Besides, he was a fifth-tier war beast, so he doubted anyone would make too much of a fuss about him.

As Alix showed him into her barrack, she quickly summarized what had occupied her time since leaving Leon's service shortly after the civil war. She'd actually headed north not long after Leon had, visiting her parents for a few days before returning to the capital. She'd actually only beaten Leon back by a few days, though upon entering her rooms, Leon found that the vast majority of her things were packed and ready to go.

"I've been thinking a lot about where I want my life to go," Alix said as she drew attention to her packed things with a wave of her hand. "I love my family, and I enjoy being a knight in this Kingdom, but staying here forever isn't something I want to do. I didn't join the Legion to serve the Kingdom, I joined it to get the hells out of my home village. I want to experience new things, visit new places, see all the wonders that this world can offer. So, if you'll forgive me the time it took to finally come to this decision, and if the offer is still open, I'd like to re-enter your service. When you go south, I want to come with you."

Leon's smile widened considerably. "I wouldn't even think of leaving one of my best friends behind," he said as he almost pulled her into a hug. The only thing that stopped him was instinctive aversion to physical contact. Instead, he held out his fist, which Alix quickly bumped with her own in solidarity.

"So, how much will you pay me?" she asked. "I'm hoping for a significant salary, I *am* giving up just about everything in my life to follow you, I might not even come back here for years..."

Leon chuckled, and the two quickly hashed out a contract similar to what Leon had with Valeria. Alix was a fourth-tier knightess and that meant she could command a good salary from just about anyone. But Leon had significant resources at his disposal, so by the time he left Alix's barracks about half an hour later, Alix had committed to resigning her knighthood to follow him. Their time together had also given him ample time to explain what their immediate future may hold: hunting down Octavius, which Alix was only too willing to help with.

Over the next week or so, Alix would be moving her stuff out of the Legion barracks and to a small apartment she'd scouted out the day before. Leon had enough room in his villa for her to stay there, but both of them were a little hesitant about that option. They were friends and nothing more, so her moving in might've been a little awkward with four other people in the villa all in some kind of relationship with each other.

Assuming Valeria was going to stick around, of course, which Leon wasn't sure she was going to do. He hoped she would, but he wasn't going to count on it happening, despite everything they knew about each other.

So, with no more business to take care of outside, Leon and Anzu quickly made their way back to the villa. Leon had to restrain the immense urge to simply fly there, but that had given him plenty of inspiration for how to fill his time when he got back.

Practically as soon as he was through the gates, he let Anzu play in the backyard while he got set up in the workshop going over his flight suit designs. He still had to reapply the defensive wards to his villa, but there was a burning in his blood that demanded he focus on flight, first.

He didn't get too far, merely copying down the enchantments onto paper and evaluating their advantages—of which there were few based on how he'd built the flight suit—and shortcomings—of which there were many. Still, by the time he went to bed, his instincts had been satisfied.

The next couple of days passed by almost in a blur. He received no word from the King regarding Octavius' whereabouts, and was only interrupted in his work once when Alix popped in for an hour or so to update him on her living situation. Other than that, he spent nearly all of his waking time either in his workshop or in his soul realm.

He gritted his teeth and started to buckle down into Nestor's enchanting lessons. The man was infuriating in attitude and arrogant about his abilities, but Leon had to admit that when it came to enchantments, he knew exactly what he was talking about. He was so well-versed in the art that even after two days, Leon had learned enough to make reapplying the enchantments on his villa almost child's play.

He also learned how to make a small offensive enchantment that would blast anyone he touched with gloves so enchanted with a tremendous amount of lightning for far less magic power than would be required to do it 'manually'—a useful thing to keep in mind for whenever he got his armor back.

Nestor promised a great deal more, and even helped Leon to refine a few of his spell designs. Leon's spell supplies weren't exactly replenished, but with Nestor's help, the spells he made during this time were a little more potent than those he'd made on his own.

However, for all this, Leon wasn't going to take everything that Nestor had to offer. After all the thinking and reflection that he'd done over the past couple of weeks, he couldn't just let Nestor and their Ancestors do all the work for him. He'd never have full confidence in himself if he did that.

So, when Nestor offered to pass along some of the more dangerous or esoteric spells that made full use of Leon's Thunderbird blood, Leon refused. It was enough to know that such spells existed, and he felt certain that, given enough time, he'd be able to figure them out on his own. Nestor wasn't so sure, but Leon wasn't so dependent on Nestor's opinion that such an opinion hurt him too much.

It did sting a little, though.

Regardless, Leon proceeded with his lessons, going over many of the basics of enchanting with a master of such skill that even just that much was enlightening. So absorbed was he in his work that he didn't even realize that someone had entered his villa until the door of his workshop was flung open.

Leon whipped around, dropping the pen he'd been using to carefully draw runes upon spell paper as he conjured his blade from his soul realm. He was startled that it wasn't until the blade began to spark with lightning magic that he finally realized who it was that now stood in the workshop doorway, the outside light giving her an almost angelic halo: Elise, one hand on a cocked hip, an amused smile on her face, her piercing green eyes mirthfully narrowed despite Leon's violent reaction.

"I knocked several times, you know," she said, her silvery voice calming Leon down until he laughed at his own reaction and stowed his blade.

"Sorry about that," he said as he strode forward and took his fire-haired lover in his arms. "Welcome home."

Chapter 535: Two Happy Weeks

Elise led Leon into the villa, and despite the fact that he was deep into his enchanting work, he had no issues immediately setting that aside to follow her inside. There he found Maia and Valeria waiting for him, along with a host of Heaven's Eye personnel leaving after carrying their things into their rooms.

"About time," Valeria quietly said with a cheeky smile as Leon stepped inside. "I almost thought we were going to have to haul you in here kicking and screaming."

Leon cocked an eyebrow in amusement. "Really? How long have you all been back?"

"A couple of hours," Valeria replied.

Leon's heart almost stopped at the thought that they'd been back that long and he hadn't noticed, but Elise almost immediately said, "No, we've been back for about ten minutes. The only reason it took me this long to come and get you was because we almost couldn't believe that you hadn't heard us..."

"You didn't have to let him on that quickly, we could've had a little bit more fun with it..." Valeria murmured as she cast a mock-resentful glare at Elise, though her playful smile betrayed her.

In fact, Valeria looked happier than Leon had seen her in a long time. He hoped that meant good news from her, but he wasn't going to hold his breath. If she needed more time, he'd be happy to wait.

Leon smiled at all of them as he caught them up to speed on all that had happened since he'd gotten back from the meeting with King, to Marcus, Alcander, and Alix now formally signing on with him.

"I never thought *those two* would've done that..." Valeria whispered when Leon finished, while Elise's focus was locked on the events surrounding Octavius. Maia, meanwhile, hardly seemed to be paying attention; she'd latched herself onto Leon's arm once he'd sat down on the sofa and just laid there with her legs over the armrest and her head resting on Leon's shoulder.

"Have there been any updates on the traitor Prince?" Elise asked.

"None," Leon replied. "Or, at least none that have been significant enough for the King to send word to me. So I've just been spending the past few days here, thinking and studying enchantments."

Elise seemed to notice something peculiar that he said, for she cocked her head slightly and asked, "Is that all you've done? You haven't been to see my mother?"

Leon rubbed the back of his neck with his free hand a little sheepishly, but when he replied he had a little more iron in his voice than the gesture would've implied. "No, you were only a few days behind, and I had other things on my mind. I suppose I had the time after all of that, but she's the local Tower Lord, I'm sure she was busy. Besides, we don't have to keep her informed of *all* our comings and goings, do we?"

Elise looked about ready to respond a little angrily, but Leon saw her catch herself and take a deep breath.

"No," she said with a bitter and slightly apologetic smile. "I suppose we don't. Still, it would've been polite, but at least this way we can go together."

Leon grimaced lightly, but he didn't push the point. It wasn't like he was trying to avoid Emilie for any reason, he just hadn't thought about going to visit her without real cause. But, at least this way, he'd be able to check in on how his armor was being—

Suddenly, bare minutes after the Heaven's Eye caravan departed from the villa, someone knocked on their door, and with a brief pulse of magic senses, Leon saw that it was Emilie.

"Huh," he murmured. "Speak of her and she shall appear, it seems." He rose from the sofa, disturbing Maia enough for her to shoot him a reproachful look, and went to the door to see in his future mother-in-law.

"Emilie," he said with a smile as he showed her in, Elise right behind him with a wide smile of her own.

"There you two are," the Tower Lord said as she walked in, her shoes disappearing into her soul realm once out of the atrium. "I *can't* believe that I had to learn about the two of you coming home from our delegation!" She pulled Elise and Leon into a tight hug, and when she released them, she added, "It's good to see you back here safe and sound."

"Thank you, you're looking well yourself," Leon said a little woodenly.

Elise echoed his statement, though hers was much warmer, "It's good to see you, Mother, we had a successful trip!"

"So I heard," Emilie replied. "I would love to hear more of it later, but unfortunately, I can only spare a few minutes. I only came here to check in and to drop something off..." Her eyes found Leon for a moment and winked as she walked over to the nearest available table and waved her hand, conjuring a large package from her soul realm.

Leon, intrigued, immediately went to open it while Elise made some small talk about how they were planning on going to see Emilie later. Emilie sounded like she was agreeing that Leon didn't need to see her, even if she was disappointed that was the case, but Leon was too absorbed in opening the package to hear much more. His heart was thumping in his ears, drowning out all other sound. He felt like he knew what was in this package, and he'd spent far too long without it.

The package itself was just plain brown wrapping paper tied with string, but Leon could see its basic shape from its contours. Leon swiftly pulled the string and began to unwrap his armor from the package, the gleaming black metal and dull charcoal gray Skyflax padding soon revealing itself.

His breath caught in his throat, the emotions of finally reuniting with his armor almost as great as his reunions with Elise or Maia. This armor had saved his life on many occasions, it was an invaluable tool that was as sentimental to him as his family's sword. He hadn't realized just how naked he'd felt without it until he ran his hands along the repaired Magmic Steel and felt the silver griffin emblazoned on the chest of the cuirass. All of the enchantments he'd placed upon it were still broken, but this was still *his* armor. It was back in his hands, ready for his use, as loyal as the sturdiest of steeds.

Leon wasn't one for crying, but his vision still started to blur as he reveled in reclaiming this lost armor that he'd gone so long without.

After what seemed like an eternity, Leon finally turned back to face Elise and Emilie, whose conversation had died in favor of watching him, and he said to Emilie, "Thank you. I've been too long without this."

"Don't mention it," she whispered with a quick wink. "I know you're going to be hip-deep in this Octavius thing soon enough, and I can't send you off without making sure you come home to my little Butterfly."

"The Old Gods and the Ancestors themselves couldn't keep me from coming back," Leon said with a challenging smile.

"I'll hold you to that," Emilie replied.

Following that short exchange, Emilie brought Elise up-to-date on some of the things that she'd missed that were of consequence to Heaven's Eye, and then left. She still had work to do, and so did Leon. He spent a few more minutes catching up with the ladies before returning to his enchanting workshop.

Unfortunately, it didn't seem that Valeria was yet ready to give him an answer, especially since she, too, left once they were finished catching up. Apparently, her father was being brought to a Heaven's Eye hospital for rehabilitation, and she wanted to be with him for a while.

Leon couldn't help but wonder if she was just trying to avoid him, but he recognized that thought as uncharitable and stamped it out as much as he could. Still, he occasionally wondered...

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Over the next two weeks, Leon spent a significant amount of his time cooped up in his workshop, hunched over his writing desk scribbling on spell paper or preparing his armor for re-enchantment. He made great progress in his skills and knowledge thanks to Nestor, but two weeks was hardly enough time to bring his gear back up to the standard it was at shortly before the civil war, let alone raise that standard higher with his new skills.

He also spent a great deal of time training to keep his skills sharp and his body ready for whenever word came down with results of the manhunt for Octavius. Much of his time in his soul realm was devoted to trying to help it to grow, but doing so slowly enough so as to not injure himself as the King had done. The last thing he wanted was to keel over and only wake up ten years later.

About the only times he was able to pry himself away from training or studying was when Elise or Maia dragged him away—oftentimes literally, in the latter's case. The pair, even when they didn't say anything, could be more than persuasive enough to get Leon to come to bed, and it was almost only for them that Leon was able to set aside everything else. Besides some time spent between the sheets, Leon always made sure to carve out a little bit of time to spend with his lovers every day without fail.

The only other way he was able to tear himself away from his work was when Alix, Marcus, and Alcander all showed up about a week later to finalize their formal induction into Leon's... well, he didn't know what to call it. They weren't his knights, he wasn't of high enough rank to knight people and they'd all either resigned or been stripped of their titles.

'Maybe faction?' Leon had wondered. 'Nah, sounds too much like an organization, it might come with undeserved expectations...'

He wasn't sure what to call them. Friends was too informal, especially since he was the acknowledged leader, but faction or organization went too far in the other direction. In the end, Leon and Marcus managed to settle on 'company', though one of a more civilian bent rather than Legion. That would imply that they were all social equals, even if in formal matters Leon was expected to lead them.

Leon liked that name, but he put off putting a name to whatever it was they were. Names could come later, after they'd done something to earn one and solidified their association through battle or something else equally strenuous.

The group only met once. Leon wasn't too keen on enforcing his leadership, so once everyone was on the same page, he was content to let everyone be until it came time to head off after Octavius. He occasionally thought about heading out and trying to forge some kind of meaningful friendship with Marcus and Alcander, at least, since they were the two he was most unfamiliar with, but he always found himself back in his workshop instead, studying, or making more spells, or planning out how he was going to re-enchant his armor with his rapidly-advancing knowledge.

And then, finally, the day came.

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"There, that's it," Nestor said from the ruby as Leon poured over a large sheet of spell paper on the same desk. "Don't overthink it, your muscles remember what to do, so let them guide you."

Leon almost tuned the man out completely. His advice was useful, but Leon was in the zone and didn't need the distraction.

The sheet of spell paper he was working on was covered in hundreds of runes, rapidly approaching thousands. The entire enchantment was built around three triangular glyphs of lightning runes, with the rest of the runes written to form lines that arced away from them in the fractal patterns of lightning. Many of these arcs collided and merged with each other, forming what Nestor described as a 'storm' of runes.

Leon wasn't even finished, and it already looked as chaotic as a thunderstorm. But he could see the pattern within, he could see the logic behind the enchantment. Many of the intersections between the three near-distinct 'clouds' of runes acted as either enhancements or checks upon the power of the others; in other words, if he wanted to, Leon could raise or lower the power applied to every function of this enchantment with barely more than a thought. All it would require would be a slight deviance in how he channeled his magic power into it—assuming the enchantment was ever applied to something, of course. What he was making wasn't meant to be practical, not in the shape that it took, but it was of Leon's design, and he hoped that by making it at least functional on flat spell paper, he'd eventually be able to adapt the same design to his armor.

When it was finished, and assuming it worked, Leon's armor would have a built-in system for absorbing lightning magic, amplifying the strength of his attacks for almost no additional magic power, and make him stronger and faster at the same time.

Nestor had inspired Leon to create this enchantment design when he spoke at length of ‘magic engines’ and ‘magically powered armor’ that went beyond the simple scope of a few enchantments on armor. If Leon could make this work, he’d be taking his first steps toward building a suit of armor that could do so much more than simply protect himself. In fact, he was barely half done with his current design and he’d already thought of a possible way to include light runes in order to use the armor to aid his natural healing capabilities.

The biggest problem, however, lay in the power supply. The Bull Kingdom had many smaller accessories that could store magic power, but nothing with the sort of capacity that Leon would need to make his armor something truly special. The power crystals of Nestor’s lab or the prison would’ve sufficed, *if* he could cut them down to size a little and mount them on his armor, but he’d already resolved not to use them.

With all of this, Leon’s hand moved steadily and relatively slowly as he drew perfect runes on the paper, but his mind was firing on all cylinders, going a mile a second as he thought about how to apply new enchantments to his armor, and where and how to build a host of other things. In this, he was, perhaps, in the middle of one of the happiest moments of his life.

Sure, Octavius was missing and he hadn’t heard anything about the man in a couple of weeks, but he went to bed every night with Maia and Elise, he was studying something he was passionate about, and the direction he wanted his life to go in after leaving the Bull Kingdom was becoming clearer and clearer in his mind.

So, of course it was in this state of mind that Leon found himself being shaken back into the physical world by Elise, vanishing from his soul realm and leaving Nestor and Xaphan alone. Vaguely, both of them could hear Elise telling Leon that the Penitent Paladin had come to the villa, but neither particularly cared about the troubles of the Bull Kingdom. Xaphan was simply meditating and keeping an eye on Nestor, while Nestor used what little magic power his ruby prison was capable of providing him with to look over Leon’s work.

“Careful there, dead man,” Xaphan rumbled from his pavilion not too far away. “Touch anything of Leon’s and I’ll tear your magic body a new asshole.”

“What a wonderful turn of phrase,” Nestor haughtily replied. “I’m not sabotaging my kinsman’s work, I’m simply looking it over. I *am* his teacher, after all. And a damn sight better one than *you*, by the looks of things. I daresay Leon has learned more in the few weeks I’ve been with him than in the *years* he spent with you. I mean, I almost think I ought to thank you for leaving Leon so unknowledgeable about the art that I don’t even have to correct any bad habits.”

Xaphan’s fires briefly flared in impetuous anger. “You focus on lightning too much. When Leon moves on to showing what he can do with fire, he’ll show off what I’ve taught him. The skills that I’ve taught him in that higher element are nothing to dismiss...” The demon felt strange saying those words out loud—he’d certainly *never* share them with Leon—but the ghost had impugned his honor and questioned his teaching skills. He was a Lord of Flame, his knowledge of fire was nearly unparalleled in the universe. Leon had a damn fine knack for enchantments, to be sure, but Xaphan took pride in knowing so much about fire magic that he could explain it in a way that made sense even to a five-year-old.

“Somehow, I doubt that,” Nestor shot back. “I mean, Leon *is* quite prodigious with this art—almost as good as *me* back in my prime! *Almost*. But I can’t imagine he learned anything of substance from your useless tinder box!”

Xaphan’s bright yellow eyes started to burn a little bit brighter, almost turning white with their heat. He had to almost literally force his jaw to remain closed in order to not rise to Nestor’s insults.

“We shall see, dead man,” Xaphan replied, resolving to wait until Leon could show off his learned skills and then shoving them in Nestor’s face. “We shall see.”

Chapter 536: Beginning the Pursuit

Leon met with Penitent in a private room of his villa. Leon expected him to be as stoic and rock solid as he usually was, but when he walked in, he found the Paladin staring out of one of the windows with a look of such deep melancholy on his face that Leon almost froze in shock.

But the moment passed and Leon got the Paladin’s attention. The two gave quick greetings and got right down to business.

“Leon, we finally know where he’s going,” Penitent stated with little preamble, a look of such grave seriousness on his face that Leon neither asked who he was referring to, nor celebrated the information’s arrival.

“Where?”

“We tracked him through the south, where he was loaded onto a ship and taken out into the Gulf. Based on who he was with and the ship that he took, we believe he’s heading for the Serpentine Isles...”

“You speak as if you know who he was taken by...”

“I’ve heard of the man who took him, the man who fought with me. A pirate named Jormun. Claims to be a survivor of one of the shattered islands of the Serpentine Isles and has used that reputation to gather many other disillusioned or expatriated Serpentine Islanders under his aegis. We’ve gotten scattered reports and complaints that this guy has been raiding up and down the western and southern coasts of Aeterna for decades. He’s powerful and bold, and the people he brought with him were hardly much inferior...”

Leon frowned as he listened to Penitent describe the attack on the dungeon from his perspective, and the focus he gave to the man who led the raid and the powers he commanded. He was strong enough to go toe-to-toe with Penitent, arguably the strongest of the Paladins, so Leon paid as much attention as he could. When Penitent was finished, Leon quickly called up what he knew of the Isles.

The Serpentine Isles were, at least on paper, tributaries of the Bull King, but before that, they had supplemented their meager wealth with piracy. Their islands couldn’t sustain much human life, so they had to resort to other means of procuring what they needed. Eventually, their raids became too much for the Bull Kingdom to bear with its usual defensive and isolationist foreign and military policies, so they put together a task force under Penitent and sent it out to deal with the pirates.

The campaign was a success, and the Jarls of the Serpentine Islands became Earls, vassalized under the Bull King. They provided sailors and lumber as tribute to the Bull King since their islands were too poor

to give gold and silver, but the recent instability caused by the King's injury had left them with rapidly growing autonomy, and they hadn't paid their due tributes in years.

A fleet had been sent out shortly before the civil war to try and reassert the Bull Kingdom's dominance and to prevent the Islanders from returning to their ancient ways of piracy, but it had been more than a year since and Leon hadn't heard anything about that fleet. He couldn't imagine anything good had happened to it if disappearance was the outcome.

But he didn't for a moment think that King Julius was going to refrain from pursuing Octavius. "When and how are we going after him?" Leon asked. He wasn't about to let the man who had Trajan murdered go free just because he'd been a bit depressed and in his own head for a few weeks.

The Paladin gave him a deep, incredibly somber sigh. "You'll be the only seventh-tier going after these pirates, Leon."

Leon cocked his head in surprise, though not, perhaps, for the reason that the Paladin might've guessed. "I... always assumed that was going to be the case," he said. Bronze and Brimstone were in the west dealing with nobles who hadn't quite realized that they'd lost already, Penitent needed to remain here to protect the King, and Sapphire was likely never going to leave house arrest again unless it was for her execution.

"You would've been forgiven for assuming otherwise," Penitent replied with a shallow smile of amusement. "Leon, the subjugation of the Serpentine Isles is not... a thing I look back on fondly. I destroyed three of their islands and left the others depopulated. More than half a million people died during that campaign, and each one of their ghosts haunt me. I am an old man, and I have started to weaken in my age. I no longer have the strength to return there to face my demons, let alone fight against that pirate again."

Leon nodded in empathy and understanding. The Penitent Paladin had to be penitent about something, after all. Leon certainly had his own regrets, though none of such scale and magnitude. More than that, though, he was reminded of the crimes that Justin had accused his family of, and which Nestor had confirmed. He hoped he would never grow too comfortable with such things.

He almost asked how the Paladin had destroyed those islands, but from how lifeless and beaten down the old man looked relaying this information, Leon refrained. He didn't need to know how to destroy islands just to kill some pirates and retrieve a Prince.

More important than any of that, however, was the Paladin admitting to his weakness. His aura was just as vigorous and powerful as Leon would've expected from a man thought to be the Bull Kingdom's strongest Paladin, but he knew that the strength of an aura and the actual strength and power that a mage could command weren't necessarily all that related. If the Paladin didn't believe himself physically capable of pursuing Octavius, Leon wasn't going to argue with him; he'd feel some sympathy, and then he'd move on. Leon wasn't going to let the Paladin's inability to accompany him detract from his current goal.

But he also had to keep his expectations in check. Maia would be accompanying him, he was sure about that, and he couldn't let that go to his head. As powerful as she was, the ice wraiths and the Gorgon had shown that she was hardly invincible.

Leon refocused on Penitent. There would be a time and place for those thoughts and the setting of expectations later.

“The people there are not going to support your search,” Penitent continued. “Those people he was with him are pirates. Pirates notorious for their cruelty and... *effectiveness*, too, if what little information we can dredge up on them is accurate. Why they’re interfering up here, I have no idea. Perhaps they finally decided that we’re weak enough that their admittedly considerable power is enough to buy them revenge for the destruction of their islands. We can hardly say, myself most of all, without questioning them.”

“As far as I’m concerned, their justifications don’t matter or change anything, I’ll still go and retrieve the Prince one way or another,” Leon confidently stated.

“Don’t be so quick to assume victory, young Raime,” Penitent whispered. “They have three seventh-tier mages. I am old and tired and starting to wane in strength, and they had more than enough power to practically take Octavius out from under my nose, and I could do little to stop them. These people are skilled and ruthless, and they have the power to do essentially whatever they want outside of the Central Empires. I would understand if you were to back out of this...”

Leon smiled. He could still see in his mind’s eye as if it were right in front of him Trajan’s cold lifeless body lying on the ground of the warehouse in which he was murdered. His anger at the Prince’s death wasn’t as white-hot as it was then, but it was enough that Leon didn’t think himself capable of turning away right now. He’d bring Octavius back one way or another, and there was a not-so-small part of him that was dearly hoping Octavius would resist when Leon caught up to him, just so that vengeance and justice would be the same. He couldn’t turn away from this now. He couldn’t leave this unfinished.

Getting to the Prince would be the hardest part in Leon’s estimation. There were three seventh-tier mages in his way, for sure, but Leon had Maia, and with his resumption of training with the Thunderbird and his education under Nestor, he could almost feel himself growing stronger every day.

“I appreciate the words of caution, Paladin,” Leon said, his tone genuine. “I will take heed and act with caution. But I will bring Octavius back here. The Gods of yore themselves couldn’t stop me.”

Penitent nodded, clearly wanting to say something more about this, but thinking better of it.

Instead, Penitent quickly informed Leon of how the Bull Kingdom was going to respond: three fleets were going to be combined into a single task force to go to the Serpentine Isles and reassert the Bull King’s authority. Leon’s specific job was to find Octavius, for which he would be working with one of the Fleet Legates who would also be dedicated to that task.

The Paladin also gave Leon some instructions on how to link up with that fleet. Since the Gulf of Discord was, ironically given the name, quite peaceful, the fleets would come from there, leaving the fleets of the Endless Ocean intact enough to continue providing support to the Legions in the west. Leon had two days before he and whoever he was going to bring with him would have to catch a transport south along the Naga River, which would take them to the task force.

Leon was suddenly grateful that he had his armor back, and he resolved to set aside all other work until he got it fully re-enchanted. However, in the back of his mind, he was starting to think about the pirates

that Penitent had told him about, and the powers they commanded. Leon had a few ideas about how to deal with them, but he'd need to consult with Nestor before doing anything about them.

When all the information had been relayed, the Paladin departed, leaving Leon with his sincere wish that the younger man's journey to the Serpentine Isles would fare much better than his had more than fifty years ago. As he said this, he looked every bit the aged man who had served the Bull Kingdom for more than two hundred years that he was. He was old, he was weak, he was filled with regrets, and he couldn't do more for Leon.

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Leon felt strange as he watched the capital disappear behind the ship. Saying goodbye to Elise had almost become routine at this point, though it wasn't a routine he enjoyed. The two days since Penitent's departure had been a whirlwind of passion from her, though she made it abundantly clear that she wasn't happy he was leaving *again*, especially so soon.

What had surprised Leon, however, was being informed that Valeria was going to stay behind. It hurt a bit to hear that, but he trusted her, and if he were to be honest with himself, he was kind of glad. Things between them were still awkward, and it was clear enough to him that they still needed more time. Hopefully, when he returned, they could finish working themselves out, but for now, he was glad that they could get away from each other for a while, even if he felt guilty about it.

He comforted himself by thinking about those who *were* coming with him. Marcus and Alcander had been reluctant to leave just like that, but they'd signed on with Leon, and so it didn't take long for Leon to get them ready to accompany him. Alix, too, had come with, though she was far more excited about the prospect of seeing the mysterious Serpentine Isles she'd heard so much about.

Finally, Maia was with Leon, and so was Anzu. He would never head out to sea without her, just as he doubted she'd ever let him leave alone, and the prospect of leaving his griffin behind was not one that he would ever consider. Even if Anzu wouldn't be able to fight on land, his abilities to fly would still be invaluable at sea.

He was grateful to all of them for following him in ways he didn't think he could articulate properly. He had some ideas on how to thank them for following through with their decisions to follow him, but for the time being, he resolved to use this time spent traveling to finish up some of his work. He had a whole host of things to enchant, chief among them his armor.

Over the course of the several days that it took them to sail south along the Naga, Leon remained cooped up in his cabin on the transport carefully inscribing the proper runes on silver bands that he'd had installed on the inside of his armor. He knew he could do better than use the designs he had, but he'd quite run out of time to innovate. Fortunately, all it would take to remove most of those enchantments would be to take out those silver bands and install new ones, so whenever he was ready, he could give his armor an upgrade.

The enhancements to his speed and strength were nice, but the power boosts to his fire and lightning attacks were what he was truly proud of. He regretted that he hadn't yet had the time to do something related to air or water, especially since he was heading out to sea, but the journey west toward the Serpentine Isles was going to be long, so there was at least that.

In the latter case, though, Leon spent the last few hours of the journey back south throwing together mock-ups of a couple things he'd been thinking about since his talk with Penitent. His designs weren't much, fitting onto a pair of standard sheets of spell paper, but they were still quite complex and advanced by Leon's standards. Once his armor had been re-enchanted back to its pre-civil-war state and his designs were complete, Leon dove into his soul realm.

Xaphan was continuing to meditate, reminding Leon that he could very well create something to help the demon regain his power, but for now, Leon headed straight over to the table on which rested Nestor's ruby.

"Dead man," Leon said, "I have some things that need looking at. How feasible would you say these designs are?"

"My, how brusque, not even a 'Hello!' or 'How do you do!'."

"I'm on a time crunch, and quite frankly, I don't think you deserve much of my politeness."

"Fair enough." Leon felt Nestor's weak magic senses emanate from the ruby and sweep over the spell papers he'd laid on the table. "Hmm, this looks like a design for moving underwater, and this... Ahhh, that makes sense, I was wondering if this would occur to you after you took those books."

Leon hated Nestor, but he couldn't help but smile in pride at the man's pleasantly surprised tone. He'd taken some of the books that were being maintained by the archive golems relating to the countering of certain magics. The Penitent Paladin's description of the power of the pirate leader had given Leon some pause—fighting such a powerful water mage at sea was bound to be a nightmare—but he felt like he had arrived at a reasonable solution.

"Are weapons with these enchantments common in the Nexus?" Leon asked.

"Relatively so. I wouldn't say that they're widespread enough to *be* common, but I would also assume that every major player there has something in this vein..."

Leon stared down at the spell paper, upon which he'd inscribed a rather crude but, at least in his amateur opinion, effective weapon enchantment that could disrupt magical attacks. If it worked as well as Leon envisioned, he could break the pirate's hold over whatever water he hoped to use in his attacks. Unfortunately, it was Leon's first design, so he had little faith that it would work as intended.

Still, that Nestor recognized it at all was a good sign. It ought to be useful to some degree, at least.

"In the upper right," the old ghost said after a few seconds of examination, "the third amplification glyph is redundant. You'll receive so little benefit to cycling and amplifying your magic power more than twice that it's not even worth bothering. The magical bleed-off, especially in enchantments this unrefined, is too great. See here on the fourth wing in the upper left? Along the bilateral and trilateral glyphs, where your magic power is going to be slowed and diluted to flow along these much finer lines, you'll lose most of that added amplification..."

Nestor proceeded to lay out several of the glaring flaws and inefficiencies in Leon's design, and there were quite a few he could mention. Even Leon was able to see some of them without Nestor's input, but he hadn't had the time to correct them before consulting with his long-dead kinsman.

He had to admit that Nestor was quite a teacher—or at least, his teaching methods perfectly meshed with what Leon wanted from a teacher. Nestor simply pointed out flaws, he didn't suggest improvements, leaving the actual creation and innovation to Leon. Nothing would ever erase Nestor's attempt to steal Leon's body, but as a fellow, if amateur, enchanter, Leon couldn't help but have some measure of respect grow for Nestor over the past few weeks.

He still hated the dead man, but his skills were real, and he seemed more than willing to share them.

"What of the water enchantments?" Leon asked, indicating the other enchantments he'd brought Nestor to inspect.

One of the books he'd taken to reading in the past couple of days was a journal of one of his Raime Ancestors named Themistocles, who was the founding father of the Bull Kingdom's navy over a thousand years past. The journal was more technical than personal, documenting his personal innovations regarding movement in water. Most of the engines that powered the Bull Kingdom's bigger ships were based at least partially on Themistocles' work, though that work was far too finicky and complex for the smaller ships that comprised the bulk of the fleets' ships, most of which still relied on wind power to sail.

Leon had taken those ideas and combined them with the work he'd already done on his flight suit, as well as with some of the knowledge he'd gained from Nestor to design underwater 'booster jets' for his boots.

"Hmm, not bad work, though kind of a flawed design. Such propulsion methods are inefficient when placed on extremities. This will work if properly applied and you took some time to learn them. *If*. But if I could be a little presumptuous, I would recommend something else, something that won't horribly backfire on you or cost so much magic power that it won't be worth it."

"Oh? You've done some research into these areas before?"

"One of the most common requests for enchanters is for locomotion; everyone always wants to get to where they're going faster. Most of this research is devoted to flight since few people live in the seas, relatively speaking, but many of the same principles apply. Go speak with the Librarian, seek out Cleopatra's *Principles of Aerodynamics* and Nestor the Fool Sage's—not me, I assure you, one of our *much* more distant Ancestors, who I was actually named after—*Fun Tricks and Games*. Honestly, how your 'House Raime' ever forgot its lineage is beyond me when they had these books in their archives..."

One of Leon's eyebrows almost shot past his forehead and into his hair his skepticism was so strong. Those hardly sounded like the kinds of books he needed if he wanted to move quickly in the water. But he kept his doubts to himself; Nestor had, if nothing else, proven his knowledge of and seriousness about enchanting. Leon didn't think he'd try to have any fun at Nestor's expense when it came to this topic.

Nestor could see Leon's doubt written all over his face, though, and explained, "The former is much more technical, though as I said, it's more of a flight manual. Some of its principles for self-reliant flight without the aid of personal wind magic to keep you in the air is useful in the water, too, and besides, it's basically required reading for anyone who wants to build a *proper* 'flight suit', as you call it."

Leon could hear the scorn in Nestor's voice, but he accepted it without argu

Chapter 537: Fleet Legates

"I have to say, this feels good," Marcus said as he stretched a bit on the deck of their transport ship.

"Yeah, I've been cooped up in that damn thing for too long," Alcander added as he mirrored Marcus' movements.

"I feel the same way, but that's not what I was talking about..." Marcus said as his eyes drifted over toward Leon and Alix, who were leaning on a nearby rail staring out into the Gulf of Discord as the transport left the Naga River and started following the coast west. They were only an hour or two away from the task force that was going to go after Octavius. They were close enough for the sharper-eyed among them to be able to see the massive ships so far in the distance that they looked positively tiny.

Sensing his gaze and hearing the pause, Leon glanced at Marcus. "What do you mean, then?" he asked.

"Ah, it's just that even though it wasn't that long ago, and it was kind of a terrible situation, I enjoyed running around the south with all of you," Marcus said. "I don't think I ever would've experienced something like that back in Aventino. Not fighting against giants. Just felt good, you know? Like, I know we were killing our countrymen, and that's terrible, but it was also a lot like back in the Knight Academy, testing ourselves against each other. The only one we're missing is Valeria."

Leon grimly nodded. He didn't much want to talk about her right now—at least, not with Marcus.

"I suppose I get that," Alcander replied. "The *ultimate test*! Ha! How can anyone who calls themselves a mage not relish battle!"

Leon almost agreed with Alcander. He wasn't so fond of killing, though he by no means shied away from it—killing was just a chore like any other, if it was necessary. But the exhilaration of battle was delightful. Like Alcander said, testing himself against other powerful mages was a thrill unlike any other, even with the knowledge that one wrong move could leave him dead. Coming out the other side of a terrible battle intact was a high that Leon wasn't sure could be matched.

At least, that was the case when he wasn't leading people. The responsibilities he'd had to take on during the civil war had prevented him from doing what he thought he did best: go off on his own, testing his abilities against those of a group of his enemies. The battle he'd fought against the Talfar warriors after leaving the walls of the Bull's Horns and after he'd met Maia was, in his mind, the best he'd ever fought. It had just been him against hundreds of men and women who wanted him dead, and yet he'd won. Or at least, he'd gotten away, but that was his objective at the time.

Being in charge of thousands of people instilled far too much pressure for Leon to feel like he could enjoy such tests.

As he lost himself in contemplation, the conversation soon moved on, and when Leon dragged himself back to it, he was kind of lost.

"... that's all?" Alix asked with a look of amusement on her face. "When Leon found *me* to drag me on this little expedition, I was chatting up this cute guy I live next to. Things might've gone somewhere if Leon hadn't swooped in and practically dragged me away."

"Terrible," Marcus said with a playfully reproachful glare sent in Leon's direction, who shrugged with only a modicum of embarrassment. All three of them had been busy when he'd gone to retrieve them, and he hadn't given them much time to prepare for the journey.

"Yeah..." Leon whispered. "Sorry about all of that, I was in a hurry and I had a lot on my mind."

"Don't apologize to me, I don't mind," Alcander said with a sly grin. "You should probably apologize to that girl you practically pulled off me. She was *shouting* and *kicking* and *screaming* that she was being separated from me..."

"Untrue," Leon replied with a look of utter seriousness, though his cheeks began to redden. "I barely even stuck my head into your room."

"... Ugh, you were such a *brute* to her! You practically threw her across the room! I half expected you to take her right then and there! She certainly seemed willing enough after you showed off some of your strength..."

"Again, *untrue*, I didn't even see her face, and I *certainly* didn't touch her! I didn't even enter the room!"

Marcus smiled as Leon's face started going red. "Interesting, I had no idea you were into such *rough play*, Leon! That certainly explains why you almost carried off those I was with..."

Leon flushed even brighter red. He'd been in such a hurry to get Marcus, Alcander, and Alix together so that they could get ready to head south that he'd practically barged into Marcus' personal apartments where the young man had been in the middle of a veritable orgy. Several beautiful couples had been naked and doing their thing on a platform while Marcus watched, a pair of pretty and androgynous people burying their faces between Marcus' legs as he did so—whether they were boys or girls, Leon neither knew nor cared enough to ask. Leon had been mortified with his intrusion, but he'd taken shelter in boldness and simply walked over and told Marcus what was going on, then ordered him to get ready to move as soon as possible.

Fortunately, none of them had been too put off by Leon's actions, even if he burned with embarrassment when he remembered his rushed actions.

"Listen, Leon," Alcander said as he walked over and wrapped his arm around Leon's shoulders, ignoring Leon's momentary tense reaction, "I get it. You're with several beautiful women, but sometimes you just need something else to get the blood pumping, know what I'm saying? But you don't need to barge in on people in the middle of the act; if you want to join, you just have to ask, I'm sure something can be worked out."

"I... have no idea... what you're talking about..." Leon responded, his face somehow turning even redder as he stumbled on his sentence, uncertain as he was how to respond. He meant what he said, he wasn't sure what Alcander was getting at.

"You're a pretty good-looking guy, if you don't mind me saying, and while I'm not really attracted to guys, I don't mind sharing... Hey Marcus, you think we should invite Leon the next time we get a party going?"

"Sure," Marcus replied, not hesitating in the least. "Might be fun, I can imagine a seventh-tier mage can go for quite a while."

Before anything else could be said, one of the transport ship's crew members quickly ran forward and called out, "Uh, Leon Ursus?"

Leon scowled a bit, but he was grateful for the distraction. He hadn't made any public announcements that he was taking back his old name, so even if he preferred to be known that way now, most people still only knew him as a Valeman.

"What is it?" Leon responded.

"There's a rowboat to take you to shore, Si—uh, Good Sir," the young sailor replied. He couldn't have been more than twenty years old, and barely radiated the power of a first-tier mage. Leon could understand the anxiety of being sent to find a seventh-tier mage, and his nervousness with Leon's strange status in the task force.

Leon could've asked what was waiting for him at the shore, he could've asked quite a few questions. Instead, he merely sent a quick notice to Maia of where he was going, swiftly pushed Alcander's arm off his shoulder, and said with a telling amount of eagerness, "Let's get out of here!"

He felt like he could still hear Marcus, Alcander, and Alix laughing at his expense as he was taken to shore. He didn't blame them, though, and even had a light smile on his face as he managed to calm himself down in the rowboat. It had been a while since he'd last spent time with other people like that, and while he wouldn't want his entire life to be spent in that kind of company, it was nice in relatively small amounts.

—

On the shore of the Gulf of Discord, not too far away from where the fleets were massing to finish preparing to advance to the Serpentine Isles, a large camp had been established. About a mile down the coast was the Legion harbor that was servicing the ships, but Leon could see why the camp was all the way out here: the terrain between here and the walls protecting the harbor was nothing but swamp, while there were just too many people in the task force to have them all stay in the harbor's stone structures while their ships were serviced.

Leon was escorted through the camp and shown into the command tent. There, he found about half a dozen sixth-tier mages and at least two dozen fifth-tier mages all pouring over maps and quietly talking amongst themselves. The half-dozen sixth-tier mages were all assembled around a table in the center of the tent staring and pointing at several maps of the Serpentine Isles.

The woman Leon assumed to be in charge looked up as he approached, her eyes warm and brown, her shortly-cropped hair a similar shade. She was tall and well-built, and from the almost imperceptible scars on her face that didn't mar her natural beauty, Leon could tell that she was no stranger to battle.

"Ah, Leon Ursus," she said in a confident and authoritative bark. "Thank you for coming."

"Sure thing," Leon replied. "However, I'd prefer Leon 'Raime', if you please."

To everyone's credit, only a few of the fifth-tier mages acted at all surprised. The Legion professionalism that Leon had missed after having to wrangle the noble armies during the civil war was something that he missed more than he'd have expected after all this time.

"Very well," the woman replied, her voice smooth, yet hard and clear. "I am Legate Basina. His Majesty and the Consul of Discord have seen fit to name me the leader of this expedition." She then nodded to the two men to her right and left, one short but stocky and the other of average height and average looks. "These are the other two fleet Legates, Theuderic and Sigebert. Theuderic will be my second-officer while Sigebert will lead the manhunt for Octavius. Now, I assume you have questions?"

Leon nodded. "I assume all of this isn't just to recapture one runaway Prince?"

"No," she responded. "We also need to reestablish the Earldoms of the Serpentine Isles, but you don't have to worry about that. That'll be my job, and if I'm incapacitated, then Theuderic will take over. You and Sigebert will be heading up the charge for Octavius and the pirates that have stolen him."

"Stolen him? Do we know that's what happened?"

"We don't," Basina replied. "However, by all our reports, they've headed to the Serpentine Isles, and so far as anyone can guess, there's no reason at all for them to do so if they were working for someone else. None of Octavius' ministers have confirmed that he was working with pirates, so we have no idea why the pirates decided to kidnap him. We're completely in the dark."

"Here's hoping the Earls can shed some light," Leon said as he stepped up to the map. "The Penitent Paladin told me the man who did this was named 'Jormun'. Do we know anything at all about his activities in the Isles?"

Basina shook her head. "Our first destination is a city that the locals call 'Kraterok', which we translate as 'Serpent's Fang'. The most powerful of the Earls rules from there. Assuming everything there is normal, then we'd be able to get some information from him. Jormun can't be working alone, he'll have to have people in that city, and the Earl will likely be one of them."

"We can't assume everything's normal though," Theuderic added, his voice a little high-pitched and nasally. "The fleet we sent months ago hasn't sent back any messages telling us their status, and that's making all of us *very* nervous..."

"Indeed," Sigebert spoke up, his voice much deeper, almost incongruously so with his fairly thin and averagely-muscled frame. "That fleet was headed by Sir Fabius, a stalwart sailor and highly competent admiral. They had a fleet of several hundred ships, more than ten thousand sailors and at least half as many marines. Three dreadnoughts were counted among them, each with two Flame Lances. Such forces do not just disappear, especially without a trace."

"And yet, this fleet did," Leon ominously stated as he turned his eyes back to the map.

"And yet, this fleet did," Sigebert echoed.

"Something had to have happened to Sir Fabius," Basina said. "We have to be ready for a violent welcome."

"I understand," Leon replied. "What kind of resources do we have, if you don't mind me asking?"

Until recently, Leon was a Legate and a knight in the Royal Legions, and now that he was back in this kind of atmosphere, he found it difficult not to slip back into the kind of attitude that such a rank instilled. But he was a mercenary now, and these Legates didn't necessarily owe him answers. They'd be

well within their rights to keep him completely in the dark and only call him out when they found the pirates.

Fortunately, his strange status as a Raime, a former Legate, a seventh-tier mage, a mercenary, and a personal acquaintance of the King meant that the Legates were, as far as he could tell, perfectly willing to answer his questions, if only to make it easy upon themselves.

“We have three fleets, each with two dreadnoughts. That means twelve Flame Lances, a little over thirty thousand sailors, and about ten thousand marines.”

“A sizeable force,” Leon said with appreciation. The Flame Lances alone could do some serious damage, but he had to keep in mind the fact that the previous fleet had six of its own, and it had completely disappeared.

“Maybe not sizable enough; they have three seventh-tier mages,” Basina said.

“That’s why I’m here,” Leon confidently stated. “I also have a comparably powerful mage in my party. So long as we can engage the enemy personally, I believe that we won’t come out the lesser.”

“Really?” Basina said in surprise and intrigue. “That’s heartening to hear.”

“A little more than heartening I’d say,” Sigebert said, a wide smile blooming on his face.

Leon nodded and moved on. He didn’t want to linger too much on Maia’s abilities, though he didn’t see the point in keeping them too secret. “Are we expecting much cooperation from the Earls? Or the Serpentine Islanders as a whole?”

Theuderic answered, “No. From what I understand, the Islanders are generally opposed to the Bull Kingdom. Keep in mind that the Penitent Paladin killed thousands of their people and shattered three of their islands.”

“How *did* he do that, by the way?” Leon interjected, regretting somewhat that he didn’t ask the Penitent Paladin himself, though from the way the man had acted at the time made it seem like a sensitive topic that he hadn’t wanted to broach.

“From what I understand—and this is hearsay, mind you, the Penitent Paladin ordered the records of his deeds sealed, and His Majesty agreed—the Serpentine Islands formed from the lava pushed up into the sea by volcanos. Most of them haven’t been active in centuries, but the Penitent Paladin used some kind of fire and earth magic ritual to awaken some of them when the Serpentine Islanders refused to surrender. This ritual caused enough volcanos to violently awaken that most of the final three islands in the chain were completely destroyed. I’m told that the explosions were so massive that even the Central Empires sent people into our little corner of the world to find out what caused them.”

“That must’ve been a hell of a thing, then,” Leon murmured. If the Central Empires were as powerful as people say, then he found it difficult to imagine the kind of power that would be required to get their attention. So far, not even Maia’s displays had gotten them any obvious attention.

“I remember it well,” Basina replied. “I was just getting out of the Knight Academy at the time. It was a series of explosions over the course of about two weeks that were accompanied by light earthquakes and a couple months of cloudy days.”

"Damn," Leon muttered in both awe and appreciation.

"Anyway..." Basina said as she turned back to Theuderic, who got the message.

"We're not expecting much support from the Islanders. The Earls, on the other hand, have received quite a few benefits from working with the Bull Kingdom, so they ought to be more amenable to our requests for information."

"Let's hope so," Sigebert whispered as he stared back at the map of the overall Serpentine Isles. "Those who are too far removed from the centers of power will lose respect for that power. These people haven't paid their tribute in years. Even if everything there is fine—and everything else very much *isn't*, otherwise Fabius wouldn't have vanished like he did—they still wouldn't readily cooperate. Whatever is happening there is big enough that a force led by three seventh-tier mages were able to launch a raid on our *capitol island* and seize a Prince. It's possible that if they wanted to, they might've even been able to assassinate His Majesty."

"A disturbing thought..." Theuderic said.

An awkward few seconds passed as everyone stared at the maps. They were incredibly well-detailed, containing every major and most moderate population centers on each of the islands. There were even maps old enough to still have the three shattered islands upon them, places that newer maps called 'The Broken Tail'.

"Leon Raime," Basina said, breaking that awkward silence, "what are your intentions for this mission?"

Leon gave a curious look and took a few minutes to think. "I mean... I want to find Octavius and bring him back to the Bull Kingdom. In pieces or not doesn't really matter, but that's my intention, and the job that King Julius asked me to perform."

Basina tilted her head in an assenting way, but her eyes remained locked on him. "Good to know, but that's not entirely what I'm asking. You're no longer a member of the Royal Legions, correct?"

'*Ahh, is this where we get to all the authority horsehit?*' Leon wondered.

"Correct," he replied out loud. "In that respect, you don't have to worry about me trying to pull rank—I don't know the first thing about fighting at sea, and I won't pretend that I know better than you. I can throw lightning and stab people pretty well, so that's the lane I'll stick to. Far as I'm concerned, I'm muscle. Just here to fill in any power gaps when it comes to on-land combat."

"That's even better to know," Basina replied, a look of mild relief spreading across her face. "Rumors about you have spread far and wide across the Kingdom, I'd imagine, and they've certainly reached the ears of our sailors and marines. But what we need right now is unified purpose and a singular leader. I don't want them to get confused about who's in charge, and so long as you acknowledge our authority, we won't have any problems."

"Sounds good to me," Leon replied.

"All right then," Basina replied, the look of relief appearing a little more strongly on her face before vanishing entirely as she turned her attention back to the map. "Now, here's what's going to happen once we arrive in Kraterok..."

—

Once the meeting finished, Leon made his way over to Sigebert's flagship. He accompanied the Legate on his personal boat, making small talk and being reassured that his people had been transferred over from the transport ship they'd taken south.

The mood was a little intense; they were already several weeks behind Octavius, and no one wanted to lose any more time. It would take at least a month of sailing through the open ocean—a dangerous prospect even in the best of times—before they'd reach the Serpentine Isles, and t

Chapter 538: Rematch

Leon watched for a moment in shock at seeing someone so familiar in a place he least expected, laughing and exchanging friendly banter with Marcus and Alcander, looking happier than he'd seen the man in... well, *ever*, really.

After that moment was over, though, Leon picked his jaw off the floor and walked on over, Legate Sigebert right behind him.

"Hey," Leon said just loudly enough to draw their attention, while Sigebert decided to be a little more boisterous. Marcus, Alcander, and Alix, who'd been hovering nearby, all nodded to Leon in greeting and walked over to stand next to him.

"Tullius! You finished with your duties already?"

"I am, Sir," Gaius cheerfully replied, giving the Legate a wide, confident smile.

"Good on you," Sigebert responded. "You know Raime, then?"

Gaius blinked about a thousand times as he turned his attention back to Leon.

"... Raime...?" he asked aloud.

"Ah, yes, Gaius, haven't you heard?" Alcander loudly exclaimed. "Our good friend Leon, here, is actually a long-lost scion of House Raime! The grandson of Archduke Kyros himself!"

Gaius stared at Leon, his smile frozen, his eyebrows risen about as far up his forehead as they could manage. Leon could almost see Gaius' preconceptions about him fighting to stand tall, and failing.

Not that he wasn't a little entertained by it, Leon just smiled and said, "It's true. My father was Artorias Raime, the second son of Archduke Kyros."

"That's... that's..." Gaius sputtered, unable to complete the thought—assuming, of course, that the thought was actually complete in his head.

"Don't worry about it," Leon said, clapping the man on the shoulder, smiling as if their rivalry during the Knight Academy had never happened. "Not like I'm suddenly going to go live in Teira and lord my status over everybody. I'll likely not even stay in the Bull Kingdom for long once all of this ugliness with Octavius is over."

"... Right," Gaius replied as his brain almost visibly cleared its jam.

Unfortunately, that revelation just about killed all momentum the conversation Gaius, Alcander, Marcus, and Alix were having, but after a couple of awkward seconds, Sigebert came to the rescue.

"Tullius, to my office. We make way tomorrow, and we have a lot to go over before then!"

"Yes, Sir," Gaius replied, taking the proverbial lifeline to escape this situation. He quickly scuttled off into the central tower of the ship, making for Sigebert's office.

Sigebert himself stuck around for a brief moment, just long enough for him to say to Leon, "That boy's the best damn assistant I've ever been assigned. If he's a friend of yours, you keep him close. Boy's a bit rough, but he's got integrity."

And with that, Sigebert followed Gaius into the tower, leaving Leon alone with his squad.

"Damn, high praise from a Legate," Marcus said, not even appearing upset that the man hadn't recognized him. He was the son of an influential Marquis—for a little while longer, at least—and Leon knew many who wouldn't be so charitable.

"Yeah," Alcander agreed. "Funny running into Gaius here, isn't it?"

"That it is," Leon replied, though as he scanned the deck of the ship, he was consumed by another question. He quickly scanned for Maia, using his connection with her to ascertain her location—she was only a single deck beneath him, closer to the ship's stern, where the officers were given private cabins.

[Maia,] Leon whispered into her mind, [are you with Anzu?]

[Yes, he fell asleep as soon as he was brought to his cell.]

[Thanks.]

Leon didn't disturb her anymore. He could feel that she was in a bit of an anti-social mood, so he left her to her own devices.

Turning his attention back to the rest of the squad, he quickly informed them of everything that he had learned during the meeting with the Legates, including their current schedule. They'd sail out of port the following morning and reach the first island of the Serpentine Isles about four weeks later. There was likely to be some excitement on the way there, but nothing three Bull fleets couldn't handle.

Rather, the more important job for them was to wait for when they made landfall near Kraterok. The fleets weren't foolish enough to simply try to sail into port without any scouting first; instead, they'd check the place out and find a good spot to land a few thousand marines. Leon and his squad were to accompany these marines as they secured the outlying parts of the city, including the Earl's palace, while the fleet would create a good distraction, and take the port if feasible. Of course, there was no chance in any hell that they could do this stealthily, the Serpentine Islanders would likely be able to see them coming at least a few days before they made landfall and then watch them like hawks for the rest of their approach.

"Sounds a bit like the ships aren't going to be doing much if we're relying on the marines to take the city," Alcander observed with a slight scowl.

“We’ll get some fire support from them if needed,” Leon said. “We’re not anticipating much in the way of resistance until we get to some of the farther islands. Still, ‘not much’ isn’t ‘none at all’, so stay ready. The day we arrive at the island, we’re probably going to be in for a bit of a fight.”

“Got it,” Alix replied. “Won’t be the first scrap we’ve been in. We’ll be ready.”

Leon gave her a nod of appreciation, and everyone went below deck to finally check out their assigned quarters. For a Legion ship, they weren’t half bad: a bed apiece, private rooms, enough space in each cabin to stand up and to have a chair and dresser. Leon even had a room big enough to have a writing desk, which he fully planned on using for his enchantment work. Unfortunately, they all had to share a bathroom, but after fighting alongside each other during the civil war, none of them were too upset about that.

Maia, too, had been assigned a room of her own, but Leon had a feeling that she’d be sleeping with him more often than not—not that he was complaining. Anzu, meanwhile, had been given a comfortable cell in the same compartment. Leon was momentarily curious as to why their compartment had a cell for war beasts, but Marcus explained that they had been given the quarters usually assigned to high nobles who might require lodging. Many high nobles had war beasts and were loath to leave such expensive animals behind or in more common storage places.

Whatever the reason, Leon had his griffin nearby, and for that, he was happy.

Fortunately, they all had a common room, as well, that came complete with a mini-kitchen, letting them be truly independent from the rest of the crew if they so chose to be. Leon wasn’t sure if his three companions would, but he was grateful—at the very least, he knew he wouldn’t be leaving too awfully much, and he felt Maia wouldn’t be, either.

He and his squad got themselves situated as best as they could in their assigned quarters. Leon, wanting to get to continue his work on some of his enchantment projects, secluded himself away in his cabin for about an hour before a knock came at their common room door. A few seconds later, Leon was disturbed from his work when Alix informed him that Gaius had shown up.

Leon was surprised, but not too upset. He’d been wanting to catch up a bit with Gaius since he’d seen the nobleman, and especially to play another game of keeps.

And so it was that Leon found himself sitting with Gaius in the small common room, the others having given them a bit of space when Gaius indicated that he wanted to speak with Leon privately. They sat with a table between them, another game of keeps set up, but neither had touched the pieces for long seconds after Leon sat down.

They stared at each other, unsure how to respond. Their last time speaking to each other had been fairly cordial, though neither were even close to considering the other a friendly acquaintance, let alone an out-and-out friend, regardless of how warmly they treated each other in public.

Gaius broke the silence first, speaking to the business that had brought him to Leon’s door.

“Sir Sigebert wants me to accompany you and your squad whenever things kick off.”

As he spoke, he leaned forward and started the game, moving one of his infantry pieces forward.

"Any particular reason why?" Leon asked as he mirrored Gaius' move.

"He just wants me to be a liaison to your squad. The two of you aren't going to be in the same place when things kick off. Or probably *ever*, really." As he spoke, he and Leon took quick turns moving their infantry pieces across the board. Gaius chose a more cautious, defensive advance, making sure his pieces were properly supported by others. Leon, however, advanced quickly with a few pieces, taking a much more aggressive approach, but seizing quite a bit of ground as he did. He'd already started moving his missiles before Gaius had finished his initial advance, ensuring that if Gaius wanted to switch tactics, he'd have to pay a price.

"What exactly are you going to be doing, then?" Leon asked. "I hope you're not going to be hovering around us trying to tell us what to do..."

"No," Gaius replied as he stuck to his strategy, keeping a slow advance against Leon's aggressive moves. "I think he just wants to make sure he's got eyes on you at all times. Since we know each other, I was an obvious choice for him to pick."

"Am I that untrustworthy?" Leon asked, a trace of sarcasm in his voice.

"Yes," Gaius replied as he made the first kill of the game by unexpectedly taking one of Leon's pieces.

"... I suppose I can't argue with that," Leon replied as he started moving his line to compensate for the loss.

"It's something that would've happened anyway. This way, we can ensure a secure line of communication between you and him, so long as we remain within signal range."

"What signals are we going to be relying upon?"

"Probably horns, flags, and flares. There aren't enough comm stones to keep us in proper contact when we make contact with the enemy, but I've spent most of the past month memorizing the fleet's communication scheme."

"Does that mean we need to carry a horn and a bunch of flags with us wherever we go?" Leon asked as he finished moving his pieces and set himself up for an obvious counter-attack.

"No flags," Gaius replied as he shifted to reinforce his flank that Leon was setting up to strike. "I will have a small horn and a bunch of flares, though."

Leon paused their game for a moment to give the blond man a long, searching look. When he turned his attention back to the board, he suddenly struck at a different angle than he'd led Gaius to expect, taking three of his pieces. "That's fine by me. I have to say, though, I'm quite surprised to see you here. Marcus and Alcander were both pushed out of the Legions, I assumed that you would've been, too."

"I kind of was during the civil war after Prince August ransomed me back to my brother," Gaius replied, unperturbed by both the question and the loss of his pieces. He simply moved again, shifting around so that Leon couldn't continue the slaughter. "It seems that my fate, however, is to be the pawn of Royals, for a few weeks ago I was ordered to return to the Legion. Specifically, to come here. My job here is essentially the same as my squireship to Prince Octavius. I was a hostage then, and I'm a hostage now. Only this way, I'm also out of the way and put in a place where my family can't try and rescue me if

things turn sour. Even my and Gratian's brother, Nicomedes, was reassigned all the way to Clear Ice Fortress, keeping him about as far away from my family's lands and any trouble he might get up to as he can be."

"Does the King expects your family to revolt when he gets around to confiscating their land and titles?"

"He's already promised us that we could keep a significant amount of our private lands, but what we stand to lose is... *significant*. I don't think my elder brother intends to rebel, we threw in too much for August to do so now. Besides, we're still going to be *quite* wealthy even without the titles, and without the financial responsibilities of caring for the Duchy, I think we're actually going to see an *improvement* in our quality of life."

"Were things that bad in Lentia?" Leon asked as he prepared another assault, though this time Gaius didn't respond to it quite so readily out of caution, simply concentrating on reinforcing his front line. He didn't want to fall for another of Leon's feints.

"Lentia has never been the most economically prosperous of the Kingdom's many Duchies," he explained. "Keeping everything moving and properly funded has always been a challenge. The way things are turning out, Lentia will probably be a drain on the Kingdom's resources, and I wouldn't be surprised if it slowly depopulates over the next few decades as opportunities dry up. But I suppose that's what's going to have to happen. Part of the reason why Lentia survived for so long even before the Bull Kingdom was united was because of its utter lack of resources that might attract greedy eyes to our lands."

"You sound pretty OK with all of that," Leon replied as he launched another assault on Gaius' forces, taking two pieces but losing one in the process. Still, Gaius' slow, ponderous advance continued and despite the disproportionate losses, Leon's line was forced to retreat a couple of spaces.

"I am," Gaius said. "I never would've been the Duke, I would've been relegated to *maybe* a poor barony somewhere, living out the rest of my life in a small, cramped wooden castle, trapped by my name and lineage. I think I prefer things this way." He launched his second attack on Leon's retreating pieces, managing to take another without eating more loss. "How's Valeria?"

"Still hung up on her a bit?" Leon cheekily asked as his retreat slowed, and he took another of Gaius' pieces.

"Maybe a little bit," Gaius replied, his advance not stalling at all and finally coming into proper contact with Leon's pieces, ending their small skirmishes with an immediate loss of four pieces to Leon's five, evening the score by a small margin. Leon was only ahead ten to eight. "I don't love her as I did back in the Knight Academy, but I can't deny that I feel some type of way about her, still. She and I will never be, and I'm ready to move on. But, I told you once before that I would kill you if ever did anything to harm her, and I still stand by that statement even if my ability to follow through is laughable."

Gaius swiftly took another piece, bringing his deficit down to only one.

"I think Valeria's doing much better than she has been in months," Leon replied as he widened the deficit again by taking two of Gaius' pieces. "We found her father, though he was injured. She wanted to stay with him during the early stages of his recovery, which is why she isn't here right now."

"I see," Gaius replied as he took another of Leon's pieces in retaliation. He began to spread out a little bit more, trying to force Leon's flanks to bend, but Leon's missile pieces kept that from happening.

The two continued playing in silence for several more minutes, not saying a word, simply focusing on the game. After a few dozen more moves, they'd each whittled the other down about half their pieces. Leon was still two pieces ahead of Gaius, giving him a slight advantage, and with every exchange that slight advantage grew more pronounced even if it didn't grow.

Still, it was looking more and more like the game would end in another draw, and Leon couldn't let that stand.

"Ugh, you're being quite vicious, aren't you?" Gaius complained with a somewhat bitter smile as Leon suddenly took three of his cavalry pieces in a single move. During the start of the game, Gaius' defensive posture had allowed him to push Leon back a bit, but Leon's aggressive strategy was paying off as he bled Gaius enough to push the line much closer to his keep than to Leon's.

"I'm not fond of losing," Leon replied as he took advantage of the gap in Gaius' line that now presented itself.

"I think I'm one of the people most familiar with that side of you," Gaius said as he barely managed to close the hole in his line before Leon was given a straight shot into his keep, which would've won him the game.

"Right, I suppose I *have* fought you more than anyone else," Leon replied as he swung wide on his right flank, which Gaius had weakened in order to seal his breach. It seemed more and more like he was on the verge of winning and proving his worry about another draw false. "I didn't kill anyone you were close with, did I?"

Gaius rapidly blinked in shock that Leon would ask like that, but held off his assault admirably, his left flank only retreating a little bit before Leon's assault.

"Some people I knew," he answered. "When you stopped us cold in the Eastern Territories, I'll admit that I knew a few of the noblemen in that army. I wasn't particularly close to any of them, and I lost little sleep over their loss once I returned to Lentia, but I won't pretend that you didn't really screw me up. I don't think I've had a single meaningful victory since I took your banner back at the Knight Academy."

"Doesn't seem to be due to lack of ability," Leon responded as his assault fizzled out, both he and Gaius losing an additional four pieces in the process, though that still left him five ahead of the other man.

"I appreciate the sentiment," Gaius whispered. He then launched a sudden bold maneuver that cost Leon nine pieces, while he lost only six, and managed to push the line back almost to the center of the board.

Leon scowled, but he consolidated his pieces as best as he was able, and over the next minutes, managed to batter Gaius back towards his keep. It cost Leon five more pieces, but Gaius lost nine of his own.

At this point, they'd lost enough that it was clear that Leon had won. He was six pieces ahead of Gaius, there wasn't much of a way for Gaius to recover from that. But Gaius didn't end the game. He held on right to the end, managing to narrow Leon's lead enough that by the end of the game, when he lost his

last piece, Leon was left with only three on the field: a mere two missile units and his most powerful lord piece. All of his infantry, cavalry, and artillery pieces had been taken by Gaius.

“Well, that was a hell of a game,” Leon said as he sat back in appreciation, the warm sense of victory settling in his stomach. It was tainted a bit by the fact that his win was so narrow, but it had been a thrilling game from start to finish, so he wasn’t particularly upset.

“It truly was,” Gaius replied, nodding to Leon as he did. He took a moment to appreciate everything that had happened in the three-hour game—the moves he and Leon had made were far more brilliant and inspired than they had been in their previous match, with both being less wary of the other and more willing to take risks. It felt good to him to let loose like that, and his performance, while ultimately unsuccessful, was still something he could take some pride in. “Thank you for the game, Leon Raime. I look forward to working with you in the battles to come.”

“You too, Gaius Caecilius Tullius,” Leon replied as he stood and saw the other man to the door.

“I’ll be in touch frequently over the next few weeks,” Gaius said before Leon showed him out. “I’ll try not to intrude, but expect to see me a lot more, especially after we make landfall at the Serpentine Isles. If possible, I would also like reports regarding your

Chapter 539: Weeks of Creation

The task force sent to find and retrieve Octavius and reassert the Bull Kingdom’s authority over the Serpentine Isles moved swiftly over the next month. Once it was fully stocked, it moved with all haste to the narrow mouth of the Gulf of Discord, stopped at the Fleet Headquarters on Taurus Island a few days later to fill up on their needed supplies, and then sailed out into the Endless Ocean.

Everyone was nervous. Even if they weren’t heading out with the knowledge that an entire fleet led by three dreadnoughts had gone missing after leaving on this very same mission the previous year, there would’ve been many a heart beating faster than usual in the task force. This journey wasn’t the safest even at the best of times, with pirates looking for easy pickings; flocks of harpies living out on barren rocks in the ocean; roving schools of kraken that can split even a mid-sized ship in half and drag its entire crew down into the briny deep; and ocean nymphs so beautiful that even those with little interest in women could find themselves hopelessly entranced and drawn into their carnivorous embrace.

The task force was enormous, more than enough to deal with these threats if they came up, but many were still worried. Leon wasn’t, but that was mostly because he stayed in his cabin for almost the entire four weeks, only venturing above deck to get Anzu some exercise. Otherwise, he stayed in his cabin working on his enchantments, in his soul realm training with the Thunderbird, or on rare occasions, heading into the common room to spend some time with his squad when he needed the break. Only Maia was able to get him to stop working at will, and even then, she didn’t disturb him too awfully much.

His dedication saw quick results. He finished reapplying most of the enchantments to his armor that had been there before it had been utterly trashed, and they were better than ever. His rapidly advancing skill meant that he was able to refine the enchantment designs enough to use barely more than half the space the old enchantments did, and use less magic power to maintain, to boot, along with the added power and strength that they would bring to his abilities.

His more innovative designs took more work, however. He read every book that Nestor recommended, and diligently attended the old ghost's classes. Given their circumstances, Leon was grateful that both Nestor and the Thunderbird spent their time mostly brushing him up on his knowledge of water magic, which he even took to occasionally practicing with Maia when she was in the mood—for the most part, however, Maia spent her time reading whatever she could get her hands on, reveling in her new skill, though Leon noticed that she mostly asked for and enjoyed the more fantastical adventure stories that he had in his soul realm than anything more practical or informative.

Leon's reading was decidedly drier and more technical. He read manuals and scientific reports, even a series of textbooks meant to train younger students in the arts of the Clan. In those textbooks, he found an extremely simple enchantment meant to measure magic power with some degree of accuracy. It consisted of a single light rune modified by two more runes that heavily restricted its output. Channeling in enough power to make the light rune glow was considered by these textbooks to be one 'aetos', and through that a mage would be able to, with some degree of accuracy, measure and quantify the magic power they had at their command.

He almost expected a dry and boring name, like 'magical unit' or something, but Leon couldn't help but laugh when Nestor explained its history: the aetos had originally been named after the man who pioneered that kind of measurement, but his name was so long and complicated—and even had a hidden euphemism for penises that wasn't pronounced—that the powers-that-were in the Thunderbird Clan of the time eventually renamed it to the much simpler 'aetos' that was now described in Leon's textbook. The entire system eventually came to be known as the Democritus Scale, after the man who popularized it rather than its actual codifier.

It took him a few tries, but Leon eventually successfully wrote a spell for that enchantment, using it as soon as he could. It took only the tiniest fraction of his power to make the rune glow, but he was so expectant that it would take more that he accidentally overloaded the enchantment and burned a hole right through the spell paper.

Such measurement enchantments, as Leon subsequently learned from Nestor, were more frequently built into rings or inscribed onto the surfaces of crystals—both far more durable than paper—for that exact reason.

Eventually, though, Leon managed to get the enchantment working after putting it on a stray piece of junk armor that he had found in a corner of his soul realm, a discarded leather bracer that he'd used in his experiments to build his flight suit.

After using the enchantment and consulting with Nestor—who told him that an aetos could be roughly equated to the amount of magic power in one cubic foot of air in his soul realm—Leon did some calculations and eventually reached the conclusion that, by these standards, if he filled his soul realm with every scrap of power that he possibly could, and it didn't grow in response, then he had the room for almost five quintillion aetoi within himself, and millions more within his blood.

Of course, he didn't have even a fraction of that stored up, but his eyes couldn't help but bulge out after doing that math. He'd only continue to grow, after all, and being able to place even a moderately accurate number on where he was now was mind-boggling. Nestor tempered things just a little bit when he said that Leon's magic power was more likely in the higher trillions rather than the quintillions, but

that still left him reeling. Fortunately, he wouldn't have to worry much about aetoi in his day-to-day magical activity, only when enchanting.

For that, he was grateful, but he could already sense a great deal of frustration in his future if he had to deal with that kind of tremendously fine scale to improve his enchanting skills. Math wasn't his greatest strength, and the prospect of constantly doing these calculations worried him greatly.

His curiosity wasn't so easily dissuaded, however, and he eventually took a day to try and calculate how much power his armor's enchantments required to operate. He was surprised to see that even without any additions and with the refinements he made, his armor still devoured magic power at a prodigious rate by the Democritus Scale. Channeling his magic as he usually did when wearing his armor cost him millions of aetoi per minute.

He could restrict that expenditure with more efficient use of his power, of course, but it helped him put what he was doing into some kind of perspective—some of the enchantments described to him by Nestor had power requirements in the septillions per minute, such as the engines that powered the great arks that were powerful enough to fly through the Void, or the weapons many of these great metal beasts were equipped with, which would require sextillions of aetoi for every shot.

Just thinking about that kind of power made Leon's head hurt, but he did his best to try and keep things grounded. He'd need a lot of time to wrap his head around those numbers. If everything proceeded according to his desires, however, then he'd eventually be working at that scale.

For now, he just needed magic power in the millions, and to try and solve some of that, Leon visited one of the Legion blacksmiths that maintained the gear of the sailors and marines on the dreadnought. The man was gracious enough to attach one of Leon's emeralds to a silver band for a modest fee. It wasn't pretty, but Leon didn't need it to be, he just needed something that he could attach to his armor that would be able to store magic power.

When he was finished, he'd managed to jury-rig together a small magical battery onto his armor that could allow him to independently power some of his new enchantments with the power the battery would siphon from the air, namely a pair of wrist weapons and enchantments on his boots and helmet to help him swim faster and keep his helmet waterproof. He'd probably burn through that power quickly, but it was better than using his own reserves.

When all was said and done, he couldn't help but be proud of his work, even if the inside of his polished black armor was a mess of tangled silver bearing his many enchantments. It was horrid enough to his eyes that he vowed to find a better solution when he returned to the Bull Kingdom, but it all functioned well enough that he left it as it was.

His one regret, however, was that he couldn't easily test the enchantments he'd devised to move and survive underwater. The entire task force was hardly going to stop for a few hours every few days so that he could go swimming in the Endless Ocean—not that he much *wanted* to, given the kinds of dangers that swam within—or so that he could test and calibrate his new enchantments. Not even Maia went out into the ocean, with her telling Leon that she was a *river* nymph, not an ocean nymph and refusing to elaborate.

The last few days of the journey were fairly quiet for Leon, though. He finished with his work and spent those last days resting and preparing for the task force's arrival at Kraterok. He caught up with Alix, Marcus, and Alcander, listening to them go a little stir crazy from all the time they'd spent at sea, while also rendering a small amount of assistance with their own enchanting needs.

Finally, he gave everyone, Maia included, a small stack of healing spells along with another small stack of more dangerous spells. Marcus, Alcander, and Maia didn't have bows, but Alix did, so Leon also shared with her some of his spell arrows. With so much of his time having been spent on his own equipment, he unfortunately didn't have all that much time making sure that they were as well-equipped as he was, but he was more than willing to share his spells, at least.

On the second-to-last day before they were scheduled to arrive, the first of the Serpentine Isles started to become visible in the distance, perhaps some fifty miles away or so. The haze of distance that rendered everything into a distant gray and brown line started to expand into the volcanic mountains that formed the Isles, their slopes painted a deep, vibrant green from the jungle that covered them.

As it came into view, Leon was invited to a meeting with Sigebert and Gaius to go over their plans one last time. Sigebert would lead the task force on a relatively close pass by the city as a show of force, then he'd lead the landing a few miles down the coast from the city of Kraterok, with Leon using his powers to lead from the front. The rest of the task force would then move on to the city's port, letting them assault the city from land and sea.

The task force had taken a few light casualties on the way—mostly from a school of hungry krakens snatching a hundred or so sailors off the decks of the ships as they swam past—but they weren't nearly debilitating enough to call the attack off.

Worryingly, they hadn't found any trace of the previous fleet anywhere. Not a single plank floating in the water, no signs of the magic in the air having been disturbed by a great battle, and the scouts reported no signs on any of the small barren islands they passed of any wreckage or survivors. After weeks at sea, however, many of the task force's anxieties had abated in favor of boredom, and, at least those that Leon was able to overhear, seemed more than willing to fight if only to break up the monotony of their voyage.

Leon, however, wasn't too bothered by that monotony, and spent the remainder of the journey resting in his cabin and ensuring that the rest of his small squad were just as well rested.

—

Jormun took a deep breath, savoring the clean, if humid air of the first island in the Serpentine Isle chain, the one his people knew as Serpent's Head. It was a hot day, but the sun was shining, there wasn't a cloud in the sky, and the seas were calm. The water itself was a gorgeous light blue, while the way the sun reflected off the nearby jungle trees and plants made their leaves practically sparkle.

It was a fantastic day, the perfect backdrop for Jormun to finish up his work.

He and his crew weren't in Kraterok, the de facto capital city of both the first island and the Isles as a whole, but rather were deep in the jungle, far enough away from the city that they weren't going to be disturbed. The privacy was nice, but it wasn't why they were so far away from the ocean. Instead, most of the pirates were there watching Jormun carve hundreds of glyphs into the face of a cliff.

It might've been boring to watch for anyone else, but for almost all of the pirates, it was a riveting sight. This was the culmination of years of work, and they were entranced.

Only a handful of people weren't so into watching Jormun's art, but none were willing to voice their discontent or ask why they had stopped in their other duties for this—not that Jormun would've minded explaining. Each of the Serpentine Isles were like locks on a cage; they each had to be unlocked before the Serpent's final seal could be undone.

The Penitent Paladin had, years before, done some of Jormun's work for him when he destroyed the three southernmost islands in the chain. It was a crude, but effective method, but one that Jormun wasn't too keen on reproducing. Most of his crew followed him out devotion to the Serpent, viewing him as its prophet, of sorts, but they were also from the Serpentine Isles and likely wouldn't react well if forced to choose between the Serpent or their homes and families.

And Jormun still needed his crew, at least for a little while longer.

As Jormun was putting the finishing touches on the massive, frighteningly complex enchantment he'd carved into the small cliff, one of the local aristocrats from Kraterok came running into the circle of praying pirates, followed by almost three dozen guards. A strong force, but not enough to challenge Jormun's crew, so he wasn't worried that this was an attack. Instead, he assumed that the guards were simply there to protect the aristocrat from the dangers of the jungle, something which seemed to be confirmed when the guards appeared to relax once they'd joined with the pirates. A few even seemed to know some of Jormun's crew, if the greetings they gave each other were anything to go by.

The aristocrat, however, was less than happy to see Jormun—or maybe was just less than happy in general; he always seemed to wear an expression on his face like he'd just smelled something terrible, at least in Jormun's experience. He was a fourth-tier mage, but soft around the middle by fourth-tier standards, with smooth hands that had likely never seen a single day of physical labor in his entire life, a round face, and beady black eyes. His hair, normally perfectly braided down his back, seemed to have come loose during his journey through the jungle, being now barely held together in a slightly twisted ponytail.

"Captain Jormun!" the aristocrat called out.

"Dene," Jormun replied as he plastered a good-natured smile all over his face. "What brings you all the way out here?"

"One of your krakens returned bearing the arms and armor of a Legion sailor!" Dene shouted back, his high-pitched and nasally voice slightly panicked and nervous. "We started getting the defenses ready as you instructed, but we've just got sight of their ships a few hours ago, they've sent at least two fleets! By our estimates, there could be as many as three or four! We won't be able to hold off that many, especially not after—"

Dene caught himself right before he made a mistake, but Jormun's eyes narrowed in suspicion and subtle glee.

"Not after *what*, exactly?" the pirate asked as he wiped his hands down to get rid of all the dust that had accumulated during his carving. His smile remained unmoved on his face, but he began to threateningly advance on Dene, his mere presence enough to intimidate even without a more menacing demeanor.

Dene visibly gulped and said, "It's nothing. But we don't have the manpower to hold off that many people. We'll need the support you promised if we're to hold back these tyrants!"

Jormun simply walked over and gave Dene a friendly clap on the shoulder, the man flinching as his face went white with terror. Jormun reveled in that reaction; he'd had to make quite a few examples in Kraterok in order to bring it out in people, and he always loved to see his hard work paying off.

"Don't be so nervous, my friend," he whispered as if Dene were an old friend. "I'll follow through with my promise, I am a man of my word! The recent unfortunate turmoil in the city due to my ascension as Lord of the Serpentine Isles shall not impair its ability to defend itself!" Jormun held his hand up to his chest as if he were swearing upon his heart and gave the aristocrat a beaming smile. "You don't need to hold off for long, I assure you of that! When the time is right and their fleet commits to their actions, my fleet will rush in and rip the horns right off this Bull! Make no mistake about that, Kraterok will not fall while I'm around!"

It took a few more platitudes for Dene to calm down, though he never quite relaxed in Jormun's presence. After a while, though, he obviously noticed something strange, an absence of a certain notable individual.

"Where's the Prince you stole from the Bull's dungeons, if I might be so bold as to ask? I don't see him around here..."

Jormun's smile widened a tad. He'd wondered if Dene would notice. "I can't help but wonder why you're so curious?"

'Probably just wants him as a hostage or bargaining tool for the battle to come,' Jormun thought to himself.

"Such a person ought to be held in Kraterok, wouldn't you agree?" Dene replied, his eyes darting around nervously as a bead of sweat formed on his brow.

"That young Prince will stay with me, so you needn't worry about his safety," Jormun replied. "Though I *will* pass on the sentiment that he's greatly missed in Kraterok. I'm sure he'll be *very* pleased."

"Yes, yes, thank you," Dene responded, clearly not assuaged but at least sufficiently intimidated to drop the line of questioning.

Jormun stood there staring at the aristocrat for a long moment, waiting for anything else he might have to say. When the aristocrat said nothing, Jormun asked, "Do you not have the defense of Kraterok to see to?"

"Yes, of course," Dene said, and he turned on his heel and left as fast as he could without breaking into an all-out run.

Jormun watched him leave with amusement written all over his face.

'These fucking people,' he thought to himself, *'utterly pathetic. It'll be fun to watch that one in particular die.'*

As if having the same thoughts, one of his oldest comrades, Rolf, the giant of a man, walked over and whispered to Jormun, "We don't need him, why do we indulge his whims and those of the other corrupt nobility?"

Jormun merely smiled and replied, "I don't like throwing away tools unless they've been used to the point of worthlessness. The people of Kraterok will serve our needs well. If they hold the Bull Kingdom here for a few days, then that gives us a few more days to finish out work."

"Is not the work already finished, though?" Rolf asked, his voice rising in volume to an angry whisper that most of the other pirates could hear. "We didn't have to go around carving runes

Chapter 540: Kraterok

Before the fleet lay Kraterok, the only settlement in the Serpentine Isles large enough to be called a city. By most standards, it wasn't too impressive, being inhabited, at least according to the Bull Kingdom's records, by a scant fifty-thousand people, the limit of what the area's farms and fishing trawlers could support.

But, as Leon stood on the deck of Sigebert's flagship staring at the long, thin city filled with brightly colored buildings that stretched across the rocky cliffs along the long, curving beach; the sparkling white sand at the foot of those cliffs; the startlingly green jungle framing it; the clear blue skies; and even clearer blue waters, he couldn't help but marvel at its proud majesty.

The city was raised off the beach, for the most part, having been built on the cliffs with only a few narrow stairways leading up and down from the beaches and the port. The port itself was quite large, though, stretching for almost two-thirds the length of the city in a wide crescent shape. This half-moon was almost made into a full moon with a long rocky sea wall that jutted out of the depths like the hand of an earth deity protecting the city and its harbor from the harsh weather of the Endless Ocean. At the center of that sea wall, where it was thickest, was a clearly built-by-earth-mages semicircular outcropping, upon which had been built three enormous statues. The curved wall below those statues that jutted out to sea was perfectly smooth, lacking even seams.

For as large as the bay was, it wasn't nearly big enough to accommodate three Bull Kingdom ships trying to enter. They only had two narrow entrances to choose from, at both places where the crescent of the port almost met the sea wall. Unfortunately, both of these locations had large towers erected on both sides with grooves on the sides facing each other that Leon guessed was there to allow a chain to be raised, which would block the port from intrusion.

Kraterok was surprisingly beautiful, and surprisingly well-defended, at least as far as Leon could see. If this was all they had, it wouldn't stand up to the Legion for even a matter of hours, but it was still surprising, nonetheless. Sigebert, who was standing right next to him, seemed focused on something else entirely.

"That city looks completely trashed," he whispered. "Something definitely happened here. That sea wall's been raised, I'd say, and there certainly weren't towers defending the entrances to the port. We would've been briefed on them if they had been."

"So, the Islanders have been fortifying themselves?" Leon asked.

"I would say they have been," Sigebert replied. "That 'Jormun' guy that the Penitent Paladin warned us about sailed in this direction. If he's as dangerous as Penitent says, then I'd say it's possible he could've seized the city. Look around, you'll see signs of battle. The Earl's palace further up even looks like it's been burned down..."

Leon did as Sigebert suggested, his magic senses sweeping across the surface of the water to examine the city from their ten-mile vantage point, and the closer picture he got of the city was a far cry from the one that its profile suggested.

The streets were essentially deserted, many of the candy-colored wood buildings looked like they'd been burned or knocked down, and as Sigebert observed, sitting on a cliff high above the city were the burned remains of what had clearly been a large and opulent mansion.

Furthermore, with most of the buildings lacking any enchantments to stop him from seeing within with his magic senses, Leon could estimate that only about half of the city was inhabited. Even accounting for the fact that the city looked like it had suffered a mild sacking, Leon wouldn't have thought there would be so few people around.

Sigebert sighed next to him.

"We'll find out what's going on. Get ready, we'll be doing a quick pass by a mile or two out from the city to give them a good scare, and then we'll land a few miles to the south. The rest of the fleets will get close enough to hit that sea wall with artillery if they have to, but they won't engage until we're in a better position to begin our assault, or until some hostiles reveal themselves."

"Got it," Leon replied, though he'd spent the better part of the past two days making sure he and the rest of his squad were prepped and ready for a fight. They were all on deck not too far away, watching the city slowly crawl closer and closer. Even Maia and Anzu were topside, waiting and ready.

But Leon was fairly relaxed. The amount of power on their side was absolutely overwhelming. Even with three seventh-tier mages on the other side, they had twelve Flame Lances and tens of thousands of fighting men and women. He couldn't believe that a few hastily-constructed defenses were going to be able to put up a meaningful defense.

He joined the rest of his squad, and a few minutes later, Gaius did as well. Sigebert's fleet then began to turn toward Kraterok, speeding toward it at decent clip. The smaller ships went first, covering as much of the sea as they could, with the larger war galley escorts flanking Sigebert's marine transports and pair of dreadnoughts. Sigebert's flagship was near the front of their roughly wing-shaped formation, cutting through the waves as its magic engines pushed it toward the city.

"I thought we were going around to land in the south?" Alix said as the fleet pushed directly for the city.

"We are," Gaius replied. "But there's not a lot of places to hide at sea—whoever is defending that city has seen us coming for days and has had more than enough time to prepare a warm welcome, so we're going to make a quick pass some distance off the coast of that sea wall. Probably land a few marines on that sea wall, too. We need to seize those towers to control the port."

"So, what, this is a parade?" Alix asked.

“Something like that,” Gaius said. “We’re going to give them a good look at just who’s come calling. We have more than enough force to take that city, and if their Ancestors taught them well, those Islanders will surrender without a fight.”

“If,” Leon whispered, a frown gracing his face as he leaned up against the Heartwood railing. He could sense the magic powering the ship, the hundreds of sailors keeping it floating, and the hundreds more marines who would defend the ship if the need arose. His glance briefly scanned the closer of the ship’s two Flame Lances. It was kind of ugly to his eyes, being a large hollow cylinder raised on a rotating platform, but he could appreciate the sheer ingenuity it represented. It could be raised and lowered to fire at just about any needed angle, and the enchantments upon it were tightly and expertly woven so that if it needed to fire its payload of molten stone, the cylinder would be left perfectly intact.

‘I’ll have to ask Nestor about these things later...’ Leon thought to himself. He’d seen the destructive power of these weapons during the war with the Talfar Kingdom—even if they’d failed to kill the seventh-tier vampire that had fought on Talfar’s side—and while the weapons themselves were ugly, he held great respect for their power.

Over the next hour or so, Sigebert’s fleet gradually pulled within range of the sea wall. The Flame Lances had an effective range of up to two miles before the molten stone they fired cooled and broke apart into not-so-dangerous flying pebbles, so it was only when the dreadnoughts pulled within that range that the fleet began to turn southward. If anything happened, Sigebert’s dreadnoughts, and those of Basina and Theuderic’s fleets following closely behind them, could bombard the sea wall into oblivion.

Suddenly, Leon sensed an alarming spike in magic power coming from the sea wall, drawing his attention and causing him to instinctively summon his armor from his soul realm. Fortunately, the rest of his squad were already decked out in their gear, because he saw the smooth wall below the statue platform slide open like bay doors, revealing a large chamber just below the statues, within which were a pair of Flame Lances.

They were already aiming straight at Sigebert’s flagship, and judging by the aura Leon sensed, also prepared to fire.

“GET DOWN!” he shouted, unable to get out any more words before the Flame Lances flashed with magic power and a pair of glowing orange-hot projectiles sliced through the air toward the flagship.

With the dissonantly quiet impact sound of molten stone, each hit the ship’s Heartwood hull with enough force to tear right through it. Wood was set ablaze, dozens were instantly killed, and one of Sigebert’s own Flame Lances was ripped free of its anchors to the deck and partially slagged by one of the shots.

Leon saw little of this, for the other shot practically exploded against the hull barely more than twenty feet from him. He was the only one of his squad that had been leaning on the railing, fortunately, but they were all thrown across the deck like ragdolls, while Leon himself was thrown backward with such force that he sailed clear across the deck and crashed into the opposite railing. But that didn’t stop him; instead, Leon went right over the railing and spun ass over teakettle at least a dozen times before he hit the waves.

From the suddenness of the attack, the immediate white-hot pain, and the disorientation of being thrown around and landing face-first in freezing ocean water, Leon practically blacked out for a second or two. He came to underwater, the weight of his armor and body causing him to sink down deeper as Sigebert's flagship cut through the water above him, soon to leave him behind if he didn't somehow get back aboard.

He felt more than heard the answer of Sigebert's remaining Flame Lance and the sudden rise in volume as sailors and ships across the fleets raised their alarms, but as he took stock of his surroundings, he realized he wouldn't be able to easily climb back aboard the flagship.

This area of the sea was relatively shallow, with the sandy sea floor being close enough to the surface to be lit by the sun. Down there, Leon saw the wrecks of countless ships littering the sea floor, at least half of which he recognized as being Legion ships from the Bull Kingdom—nearly all appearing to be freshly and violently sunk.

Emerging from these many hundreds of broken hulks were thousands of men and women, all armed, and all at least second-tier or stronger. Leon could feel their killing intent, though it was muted by the water, and he knew without a shadow of a doubt that these people weren't friendly.

His thoughts were confirmed when a nearby fifth-tier Islander about fifty feet blow Leon hurled a harpoon at him. The man moved with such speed and strength through all of that water that he could be nothing but a water mage, and the harpoon cut through the water toward Leon as fast as an arrow loosed from bow.

The harpoon, fortunately, wasn't particularly well-enchanted, if it was at all, and glanced right off Leon's cuirass, but it packed enough punch to knock a little bit air out of his lungs, of which Leon hadn't any to spare. He was a seventh-tier mage and so could hold his breath under water for hours if need be, but that presumed a full breath before submersion. Leon hadn't the chance to prepare himself, and so in shock had hit the water and lost nearly all of his air.

But now, his shock had worn off, and as the harpoon scraped against his armor, Leon sprang into action, and in that action, he felt a momentary burst of elation as the silver lining of the situation crossed his mind—he now had the opportunity to test his new enchantments, though hardly in ideal circumstances.

With a burst of power that immediately drained his small magic battery attached to the inside of his cuirass, runes on the inside of his helmet flared with a dull gray light, and all the water was forced out of it as a pocket of air replaced it. A few runes on the inside of his cuirass activated at the same time, and the water pressure on him was immediately reduced while his strength was augmented. Finally, as magic power entered the enchantments upon his boots, the water around them froze into a crude pair of large flippers—the best he could do without greater understanding of water magic to help propel him in the same way his flight suit did with wind magic.

Leon eagerly filled his lungs with his helmet's air and summoned his family's blade. With one smooth motion, he called upon the Thunderbird's lightning, and silver-blue flashed across his blade and armor. He was slightly dismayed to see much of his power dissipate and radiate out into the surrounding ocean, but he put it out of his mind; he was still strong enough to fight.

With a kick of his feet, Leon's propelled himself straight down faster than the water mage could react. The man was in the midst of raising his hand to do something magical when Leon's sword was thrust deep enough into his chest to impale his heart, killing him instantly.

[Maia!] Leon roared into his mind as dozens more Islanders all around him began to point their harpoons in his direction. [Enemies below the waves!]

He didn't have much time to elaborate, for a moment later at least half a dozen harpoons were thrown in his direction from a group of powerful fourth and fifth-tier Islanders.

The water seemed to let them pass without resistance, and Leon was forced to use the water mage's corpse to give himself some cover. His armor had protected him from one harpoon, but he wasn't going to take his chances. Five of the harpoons lodged themselves in the dead Islander, while the sixth missed completely, flying straight off into the deep.

Leon summoned his magic power again, and, controlling himself as much as he could to prevent himself from roaring in anger, he slashed with his blade, sending a wave of lightning at his enemies. His magic power bled off into the surrounding ocean, greatly enlarging his attack, but also weakening it at the same time. What normally would've killed or seriously injured the group of Islanders that had attacked him instead only killed two and left the rest only mildly injured, but still in fighting condition.

Upon the backs of every Islander were bundles of additional harpoons, and as Leon spread out his magic senses—a much harder thing to do underwater than above, limiting his range to a fraction of what it was normally—he watched as the dozens of Islanders that surrounded him hurled more harpoons at him.

He kicked with all he was worth, pushing himself further down toward the sea floor and the countless wrecked ships that might give him some cover. He could see that a handful of those who had surrounded him seemingly decide to ignore him in favor of continuing to swim upward to harass the ships, or so Leon assumed, but at least a dozen of the more powerful mages did not follow suit.

They instead pursued him, with four proving themselves water mages, as well, as harpoons of ice started flying around Leon and the water around him started to churn and constrict around his armor. His heartrate skyrocketed as he began to experience the dangers of being stuck underwater with water mages.

First, before Leon even managed to reach the sunken ships, he felt the enchantment alleviating the water pressure start to fail as what seemed to be a massive hand of dense water enclosed around him. A moment later, as his speed began to fail under this pressure, Leon felt a pair of water blades slice into his armor, scratching it but not doing much damage. A few more icy harpoons glanced off his armor, as well.

Leon's heart was starting to panic, his eyes darted from hither to thither in search of good cover where he could get a hold of himself. He was in the water, completely out of his element, and submerged in that of his enemy's. He couldn't help but panic as water clamped down around his helmet, searching for any way in, the enchantments Leon had placed upon it having more than a little bit of trouble keeping all of that water out and his head secure. As lightning magic surged through his system, heightening his senses and speeding up his thoughts, however, he started to force himself to calm down.

These were four fifth-tier mages, and maybe a dozen fourth-tier supporting them getting ready to throw more harpoons. If they were on land, Leon wouldn't have ever considered this group to be all that threatening in such a straight-up fight. But he was underwater, fighting in a way that he was unfamiliar with, and with that uncertainty came fear.

But he was still a seventh-tier mage.

'I'm better than this!' Leon roared into his mind as he slowed and turned back to face his enemies, now a few dozen feet away and about twenty feet above him. *'I will not run from these people!'*

One of the water mages was still trying to grasp him with his water magic, with Leon's enchantments barely keeping him at bay. The other three were preparing more attacks, and Leon could tell that they would be coming in only a second or two. That was how long he had to act.

And act he did. With a bellow that sent a cloud of bubbles rising to the surface, Leon let loose with his silver-blue lightning, letting it explode out of him instead of concentrating it into a specific attack like a lightning bolt.

As he expected, his lightning immediately surged through the water, reaching up toward the less dense water—and Leon's attackers—with barely even a need for Leon to direct it.

Arcs of silver-blue lightning flashed between Leon and the Islanders as his power connected them, vaporizing water, and causing strange-looking bubbly explosions all around Leon. Superheated water roiled away from him, reaching even those who hadn't been hit by his lightning.

Of Leon's attackers, all but two reacted with silent screams of pain and terrible convulsions as lightning tore through them. Few of them were armored, and none of those that were had enchanted armor, so they had next to no defenses against him. Half of the fourth-tier mages had their bodies torn apart in red clouds, most of those remaining were horrifically scalded by the superheated water. The four fifth-tier mages joined their fellows in screaming in pain as Leon's lightning ripped through what little leather and cloth armor they had, painting their bodies with black and red burns in fractal lightning patterns.

A moment later, those who survived Leon's strike practically vanished as a water dragon took shape just above them and swallowed them all in an instant.

Leon reeled back in primal, instinctive panic, only to immediately relax as he realized what had just happened. He used his helmet to take another breath as he felt the arms of Maia coalesce around him from behind. A smile bloomed on his face as he turned his head to see the familiar bronze face of his river nymph lover grinning back at him.

[Good timing,] he said Maia.

[Could've been better,] she replied. Her tone then turned deadly serious. [What now?]

[I need to get back up there,] Leon said, indicating Sigebert's flagship. [Can I ask you to stay down here and clean up this trash?]

[You can ask me for anything,] Maia replied as she kissed the side of his helmet. A moment later, Leon found himself carried out of the sea and back to Sigebert's flagship on the back of one of Maia's water dragons, which immediately dissolved as he leaped down onto the deck.

What awaited him was a strange mix of utter chaos and deadly precision. His magic senses pulsed as he took everything in: it looked like the enemy Flame Lances had sunk a pair of smaller war galleys, but when Sigebert's three undamaged Lances answered, the 'doors' of the sea wall snapped shut, keeping their Lances safe. What was a little more concerning, those few thousand Islanders from beneath the surface had already leaped out of the water and started boarding the Legion ships, and on dozens of ships throughout Sigebert's fleet, marines were fighting for their lives as sailors did their best to keep the ships moving through the sudden chaos.

On the deck of Sigebert's flagship, Leon found relatively few Islanders fighting. He guessed that some of those who were supposed to board it had been dealt with by him and Maia