

Storm King 541

Chapter 541: Taking the Sea Wall

Leon scowled as a sense of impotence rose up from within him. All he could do right now had already been done: he'd fried several dozen Islander mages as they attempted to board the Legion ships. Maia had done much more, but even she hadn't done much more than dent their numbers before she returned to the flagship. All of the Islanders in the water had either boarded the Legion ships, or they'd died in the water at the hands of Leon, Maia, or the various complements of marines scattered around the fleet.

There was still some scattered fighting around Sigebert's fleet, but for the most part, the boarders had failed in their attempts to do damage. Rather, the more pressing concern were the ships that were now on a course to collide with Sigebert's fleet, and the Flame Lances in the sea wall that still hadn't been taken out. Since the boarders had been largely dealt with, the doors of the sea wall had opened four more times, allowing the Islander Flame Lances to sink seven more of Sigebert's ships, leaving the total losses at eleven ships, and significant damage to others.

But Sigebert was adapting. Leon watched as several of the smaller and faster ships in the fleet began rescue efforts for the crews of the sunken ships, while the bulk of the force shifted in formation to engage the Islander fleet that was bearing down on them. Multiple marine transports, meanwhile, were sailing full speed for the sea wall, clearly intent on landing and storming by land the statue platform beneath which sat the Flame Lances and securing the towers at the entrances to the port. Sigebert's two dreadnoughts, however, couldn't join either group, for they were still trying to take out the Islander Flame Lances.

Basina and Theuderic behind them were getting into position, though, so in only a few minutes Sigebert would be able to devote his entire attention to the Islander fleet and leave the Islander Flame Lances for the other two fleets to deal with.

Leon, however, wasn't so keen on that plan. So far, the Islanders had proven able to open and close those bay doors quickly enough to let their Flame Lances fire and keep them protected. It was a rather surprising show of discipline and training, and while Leon was certain that the marines on course for the sea wall would eventually silence those Lances, he doubted it would happen before significant damage could be done to the fleets. Already, it was becoming clear that the Legion's Flame Lances weren't able to immediately deal with them, for the Islanders were able to wait until the doors opened to fire their own Flame Lances, then immediately close the doors. Getting the timing right on return fire was essentially impossible.

'We're going to have to take that island by land,' Leon thought to himself with a frown. There had to be a way down into that chamber, and he felt like if he could get to it, then he could eliminate those Flame Lances from play.

Of course, with the marines on their way, he didn't feel like he *had* to go, but heading over there would be a damn sight better use of his time than staying on board the flagship and watching the battle happen elsewhere, hoping that the Islanders didn't target the flagship again. The ship had taken some serious damage, but nothing even remotely bad enough to put it out of commission, which Leon assumed was the reason why the Islanders were now targeting smaller and weaker ships.

"Gaius," Leon growled, his tone startling the other man.

"Yeah?" Gaius asked.

"Can you send a signal to Sir Sigebert? Or would you have to act as a runner?"

"I can send a signal," Gaius answered, sounding almost affronted. He'd told Leon that he had a horn and flares and could signal Sigebert if needed, but that had been almost a month ago.

"Then tell him I want to join the assault on the sea wall." Leon glared at the statue platform that housed the Islander Flame Lances with a dark look. He needed to get in there and silence those weapons. Their task force would only continue to take casualties the longer they remained operational. He acknowledged that there was some risk in heading over there, but he couldn't just sit back and do nothing while the Legion ships were slowly whittled down. The Islanders, at their current rate of fire, would probably get off at least a couple dozen shots with each Lance before the marines even reached the sea wall.

Gaius looked for a moment like he wanted to argue, but when Maia stepped up to Leon's side, and Alix, Marcus, and Alcander all did likewise a moment later in a show of support, he refrained from speaking. Instead, he gave a quick blast on his horn, waited for a moment as he stared at the central tower, and when the fifth-tier Tribune that had earlier communicated with him via hand signals reappeared, Gaius did the same. After making a few gestures, he said, "I sent the message. We'll see if he agrees to let you go."

"He will," Leon replied with confidence. He felt like Sigebert would realize that sending him in was the best course of action. With Maia and Anzu, his squad could reach the sea wall in a matter of minutes.

A moment later, his confidence was vindicated when the Tribune returned and communicated Sigebert's approval of Leon's proposal.

"All right, then," Leon said as he smiled at his small squad. "Let's not waste any more time. Marcus, Alcander, you two on Anzu. Naiad, can you carry Gaius and Alix underwater?"

Maia nodded, while Marcus and Alcander each went a little green around the gills.

"Let's do this," Leon said, not taking any time for suggestions. Barely even five minutes later, he was wearing his flight suit and taking off from the deck of the flagship, Anzu just behind him with Marcus and Alcander clinging to his saddle for dear life. Maia, meanwhile, had simply grabbed Alix and Gaius and tossed them into the water like she was skipping stones, and dove in after them.

Hoping that there weren't many archers defending the sea wall, Leon led Anzu straight up, wanting to clear at least seven or eight hundred feet before making his way over. Maia would likely beat him there, but that was fine, he'd had his taste of water combat and found it not to his liking at all.

Leon didn't waste any time enjoying the flight. He and Anzu flew as fast as they could without separating, heading straight for the shore of the sea wall. Sure enough, when he was barely even halfway there, he saw Maia pulling Alix and Gaius out of the water and onto the rocky beach of the sea wall. In response, he saw the floor of the sea wall's statue platform open up between the three large statues to reveal a wide staircase out of which streamed dozens of Islanders dressed in leather and mail armor and wielding longbows.

These Islanders didn't need to move too far to try and intercept Maia, Alix, and Gaius; they simply had to post up at the top of the ridge that formed the sea wall and loose their arrows.

Leon's heart stopped for a moment in irrational panic even as he pumped his magic even faster into his flight suit to tease out just a little bit more speed, but a moment later Maia showed that he needn't have worried. The three were still on the beach, and that meant Maia had all the resources she needed to shield them. A water dragon erupted from the sea and surged forward, wrapping itself around Leon's people through which no arrows were able to penetrate.

After a few seconds, the dragon twisted its body a little bit, and Alix's top half almost comically poked out of its side. Everything below her waist remained anchored in the dragon, however, and she had her own bow out along with a handful of arrows. In five seconds, she loosed five arrows and then was sucked back into the dragon before the Islanders could shift their aim, and Leon smiled as he saw three of her arrows strike true, while the other two were deflected off of armor.

But then the stronger of the Islanders stepped forward, half a dozen mages that appeared to be roughly fifth-tier in strength. Four of them were fire mages, as they revealed when they launched sizable fireballs at the water dragon, while the other two were earth mages that broke off chunks of the ridge and lobbed them down the steep cliffs of the sea wall.

These attacks had about as much effect on Maia's water dragon as the arrows, however, for which Leon was relieved.

During all of this, Maia and her water dragon had effectively monopolized the attention of the sea wall's surprisingly few defenders. None of them glanced up to see Leon and Anzu flying into position directly over them. Leon momentarily contemplated showing off his own archery skills to these Islander archers, possibly even with some spell arrows to spice things up a bit, but he decided against it. Just like Alix before him, who used completely mundane arrows, he didn't think these people posed enough of a threat to break out finite weapons, not when none of them were stronger than the fifth-tier.

"Get ready!" Leon shouted to Alcander and Marcus, who still looked quite woozy from the flight, but who drew their weapons anyway.

Then, Leon and Anzu dove, streaking across the sky like a pair of lightning bolts. Leon, in a flash of light, swapped out his flight suit for his armor and hit the ground with all the power of a lightning strike, sending arcs of silver-blue lightning erupting from him to fry the nearest dozen Islanders, including one of the fire mages. Anzu came in just behind him, cushioning his landing with a burst of wind magic and viciously swiping at the nearest handful of Islanders with his sharp talons. His already blood-streaked fur and feathers immediately became even more so.

Alcander and Marcus slid out of Anzu's saddle and joined the battle, diving into the small horde of Islanders without fear, while Leon noted Maia, Alix, and Gaius making use of his sudden strike to swiftly advance up the beach under the cover of Maia's water dragon.

Leon, not wanting to get too distracted, let loose with another blast of lightning that tore through the Islander defenders. He didn't direct it as a lightning bolt, but instead used a new technique that he learned from the Thunderbird during the past month: he let lightning spill from his fingers, using his will to direct it instead of compressing it into a single violent spear. His lightning bathed the three nearest

Islanders in its power, instantly tearing flesh from bone, then went on to the nearest Islanders after that. Leon's lightning chained itself between another dozen Islanders, immediately killing or incapacitating eight of them.

The remaining two were the stronger mages, who had begun to turn to face the new threat that Leon posed. They were horrifically burned, but this attack was more about breadth than power, and so wasn't strong enough to even take them out.

But Leon didn't even blink. As lowly as he regarded their power, he still took this fight completely seriously. He lunged forward, the lightning magic in his body letting him appear in front of them so quickly he appeared to teleport. With two quick swipes of his blade, the two remaining mages he'd targeted lost their heads.

Leon didn't take the time to revel in this death, or to admire how much stronger he felt with his new refined enchantments on his armor. As powerful as he felt, he couldn't let himself get complacent. The Islanders had already caught the fleets off-guard with the reveal of their Flame Lances, they could have more surprises planned that could harm him, or even Maia. Without pause, Leon let loose with another blast of lightning at the remaining Islanders, holding little back.

It didn't take much longer for Leon and his group to finish tearing through the sea wall's defenders. Marcus and Alcander each took out a few, but Leon and Anzu had done the lion's share of the work. By the time the others managed to scale the ridge and join them, they were only able to help clean up.

"All right, what now?" Alcander asked as he wiped the blood on his ax onto one of the dead Islanders, his eyes landing upon an injured but still alive Islander who was moaning in shock and pain at the lightning burns that covered his body.

"We move on," Leon replied, ignoring the small handful of Islanders that remained alive. All were terribly injured and posed no danger to them, but as they were fighting, Leon had watched the Islander Flame Lances pick off two more Legion war galleys. The marine transports on course to the sea wall were still more than a mile out to sea. They didn't have the time to deal with the wounded Islanders, and while it might've been safer, he couldn't wait for the marines. "If you're injured, use a healing spell, but we can't screw around. Let's go."

Leon swiftly but with all due caution led his squad further up the ridge to the statue platform, his magic senses bathing the sea wall, watching for any and all threats to his squad. He ignored completely the three statues that stared out at the sea in various poses, focusing entirely on where he'd seen the 'doors' to the staircase open. There weren't any actual doors, though, but that made a degree of sense to Leon; the Islanders had a couple of earth mages with them, they didn't need handles or hinges to make a door, nor to close one.

Without missing a beat, Leon conjured a fire spell in his hand and tossed it onto the ground, letting his magic power fill and activate the runes on the spell paper. As his people ducked down into cover, the spell detonated, blasting a huge pit into the platform. Leon was a little sad to see that it severely damaged the statues, but was sadder to see that the spell hadn't managed to punch completely through the platform. Instead, he was left with a crater about six or seven feet wide and a foot deep, and innumerable cracks spider-webbing out from the crater throughout the platform.

With just one more identical spell, the stone 'door' was blasted into pieces, its shattered pieces falling back down the staircase into the chamber beneath. A hole big enough for even Anzu to go down was opened, but the first to dive into it was Maia's water dragon, its head about as large as Anzu's entire body and its serpentine form at least fifty feet long. Leon followed only a moment later, with everyone else following closely behind.

The stairs led straight to the surprisingly spacious firing platform for the Flame Lances, and from what Leon could glean from his magic senses, there weren't any other passages leading out, implying, at least in his mind, a hasty construction. He also saw about the same number of Islanders still in the chamber as had come out to defend the sea wall, though most were busy manning the Lances or staring in horror as Leon's party surged down the stairs.

Those looks were vindicated when Maia's water dragon reached the bottom of the stairs and began rampaging through the chamber. Leon followed suit, but given that the chamber was, while relatively open and devoid of clutter, not exactly cavernous, Maia's water dragon ensured that it was all over before the weaker members of his squad could really join the action. The water dragon had swept through and crushed dozens of Islanders, and Leon had cleaned up the rest with a few well-placed bolts of lightning.

And so were silenced the Islanders' Flame Lances.

"Was... that it?" Marcus asked, lightly panting.

"Looks like it," Alcander replied with a hint of disappointment in his tone. "Damn, I was hoping for a little bit more. Would've figured that these people would defend their weapons better."

"Maybe they didn't have the numbers, or counted too heavily on their boarders?" Leon mused aloud, relieved that his hasty assault hadn't hit a metaphorical brick wall. If Jormun or his other two seventh-tier mages had been here, or if they'd stole a third Flame Lance and was using it to defend the platform, this could've ended much differently, and, at least for him, much more tragically.

"We ought to signal Sir Sigebert," Gaius stated. "Let everyone know that these Lances have been knocked out. There's still a battle going on there with the Islander ships, they need to know they can focus entirely on that."

"Good point," Leon replied. A minute or two later, he and Gaius were back on the statue platform firing off a couple of flares. From that vantage point, Leon could tell that the Legion ships were doing work against the Islanders, consistently pushing them back. The Islanders had dozens of ships, but most were small and couldn't carry many people. It was only a matter of time until the Legion won this.

The marine transports were also closing in on the sea wall, but with Gaius' signal, adjusted their course to bring them in closer to the Islanders' towers.

The response Sigebert soon sent made it clear that they couldn't rejoin the fight and assist in the final defeat of the Islanders. They'd taken the Flame Lances intact, and Sigebert both wanted to keep them that way and prevent them from falling into the hands of any Islanders who might try to reclaim them if Leon were to leave.

So, everyone could only watch as the Legion forces slowly finished the fight over the course of another hour or so. The Islander fleet was beaten back, and only about a dozen of their ships managed to successfully break off the attack and sail away. In this, their smaller size and crew complement gave them an advantage, because they were much faster than most Legion ships. A few of the task force's smallest and fastest ships gave chase, but most turned in the direction of Kraterok once it became clear that the battle had been won. A company of marines also eventually relieved Leon's squad, allowing them to finally rejoin the fleet and continue on to the city. However, given how long it took, they'd missed the first push, and only entered Kraterok by the time that Legion marines had already secured most major points of interest.

Still, Leon was proud of what they'd managed to achieve given their circumstances, and he made no secret out of it. In his eyes, everyone had performed admirably during the battle. Now, it was just time to link back up with the Fleet Legates and figure out what the next step would be. They'd have to adapt to the possibility of Jormun having at least four more Flame Lances, a possibility that Leon knew had been floated a few times by the Fleet Legates and so shouldn't be too difficult to adapt to, assuming they weren't caught off-guard again like they were here.

But still, even for all the resistance the Islanders had put up, the Legion had taken Kraterok quite quickly and easily, with only the Islander Flame Lances doing significant damage to Sigebert's fleet. Leon hoped that those low casualties would hold for the rest of the campaign, but this was only the first battle for the first city of the first island. There was plenty of time for Jormun to shake things up.

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From deep in the jungle, high on a cliff where he might as well have been invisible, Jormun initially watched with dispassionate interest as the Legion forces smashed the defenders of Kraterok. The Flame Lances they'd pulled from the fleet they'd destroyed earlier bloodied the Legion a bit, sinking about thirty ships of varying size before being taken, but Jormun wasn't too concerned about their loss. He'd taken the rest of the salvaged Flame Lances further into the Isles, where they could be put to better use. He'd only given Kraterok those two as a bribe and 'show of support' to resist the Bull fleet.

But what did capture his interest was the young man who took the Lances. At first, Jormun had been no more than mildly intrigued at the strange-looking lightning the man had displayed that flashed so brightly even a mortal could've seen it from Jormun's perspective. He'd heard tales from the Sky Devils far to the south east of such colored lightning, but he'd never actually seen it before. Still, as powerful as the young man was, he wasn't enough to raise Jormun's proper interest.

At least, until he began to hear the slithering in his mind, telling him to watch that young man and not to let him out of his gaze. And as the slithering continued, it told him other things, too, ancient histories and secrets which served as the proper catalyst for Jormun's interest. He saw brief flashes in his mind, glimpses of monsters and powers beyond his imagination, all bowing to a great eagle, its coat of feathers a deep lustrous brown flecked with gold, flashing and sparking with silver-blue lightning. He saw that same eagle striking down a titanic serpent with a huge ivory horn protruding out of its skull and curving back along its body, the eagle's potent lightning tearing scales from the serpent, ripping stomach-turning gashes in its flesh, and scorching its body. And he saw many more things, the Serpent telling him of many glories won by the one who bore the power of that young man who seemed to replicate them on a much smaller scale down on the sea wall.

The last thing the Serpent told him was to bring that young man to the ritual sites before the slithering ceased without further explanation.

"Captain?" Rolf asked from behind, pulling Jormun out of his silent staring and alarmed contemplation.

"Hmm? What is it?" Jormun replied with an instinctive smile, letting on absolutely nothing of what he had just been told, or even that the Serpent had visited them at all. He turned to face the other man, any irritation he felt at being disturbed quickly concealed.

"It looks like the defense of Kraterok will fail. We should leave soon."

"Yes, yes we should," Jormun agreed as his eyes turned back to the sea wall. "All of you go on ahead. I'll catch up in a day or two."

"Is... that wise?" Rolf asked, pointedly staring at the retreating Islanders. None of the pirates directly under Jormun's command had fought in the battle, despite his promises. Jormun had let the people of Kraterok fend entirely for themselves.

"I don't give the tiniest of shits if it's wise," Jormun serenely replied, his eyes locking on the young lightning mage who'd attracted the Serpent's attention. "I've found something I simply *must* investigate. Besides, after all of this, the Bull will be here for days reasserting their dominance, it's not like losing a couple of days is going to be too harsh a loss. If all of you leave now and get a head start on that ritual, we won't even lose anything at all."

"Very well," Rolf said with an uneasy tone and a shallow frown as he took a moment to watch the Bull fleets start to file into Kraterok's port, and he turned to the rest of Jormun's crew that were still around and began barking orders. They'd take small longships down a nearby river to the southern coast about ten miles away where their ships were anchored, and then they'd be out to sea before the Bull could even realize who they were or what they'd been doing.

Jormun, however, continued to stare down at the battle, watching as the last of the Islander ships retreated. He felt nothing for them, no pity or sense of kinship, no regret or anger. They'd resisted the Bull because he said he'd support them, but he'd given them naught but two Flame Lances and empty promises. The people of Kraterok had served their purpose, he had no other uses for them.

What would come next would concern the survivors none. Once this was all over, they'd be just another people under his scales. Assuming, of course, that they'd survive the birth of his new world.

Jormun smiled as he thought about what a glory that would be. Not even the mightiest fleets of the Central Empires would be able to stop him, not when the seas rose and fell at his command, not when his power expanded beyond theirs, not when the Serpent finally made good on its promise to him, just as he was making good on his promise to it.

But those thoughts could wait. He had to concentrate on the tasks at hand above all else. He had to succeed here and now or lose his chance forever. But so far, everything had gone perfectly according to his design. With a quick pulse of his magic senses, he checked on the cliffs where he'd carved his glyphs and saw them shining brighter and brighter red as they slowly filled with the power in the spilled blood of those who fell in the battle.

'They're really making this almost too easy,' he smugly thought to himself as he stood up and began to leisurely walk down the mountain toward Kraterok.

Chapter 542: Nestor's Thought Experiment

Leon had to admit as he walked through its streets that Kraterok was a beautiful city. Pleasant climate, beautiful beaches, and nice aesthetic of wood painted in solid, simple, and bright colors of all kinds. Many of these buildings in the more affluent neighborhoods also had quite inspired architectural designs. However, no building in the entire city exceeded four stories, and no more than a bare few were even lightly enchanted. Those that were enchanted were concentrated in a separated district further up the cliffs, closer to the Earl's palace than the rest of the city.

That district, where the noble's and any other elites of the city lived, was where Leon and his group were making their way. Following the battle, resistance elsewhere in the city was near nonexistent, so Leon had little worry about. He could see with his magic senses that the Legion marines were having no trouble at all pushing into the city, with most of the remaining Islanders remaining indoors and not interfering.

So, it didn't take long for Leon and his squad to catch up to Sigebert and the leaders of the marines, who'd occupied one of the empty noble mansions while a few marine companies went on ahead to secure the remains of the Earl's palace.

"Leon!" Sigebert called out as Leon and his squad were shown in. "Good timing, we were just finishing up here!"

The mansion was laid out in a fairly standard design by Bull Kingdom standards, with several wings all branching off a central peristyle courtyard, only smaller to account for the significantly less available space on the cliffs. A huge table had been set up in the center of that small courtyard, around which Sigebert and a dozen other Legion knights had gathered, with several dozen more Legion members rushing about making sure the occupation was properly organized.

"What's the word?" Leon asked as Anzu leaped forward and began rolling around in the grass of the courtyard. Leon himself had gone over to the table with Gaius, Marcus, and Alcander, while Alix and Maia both held back.

"The city is ours," Sigebert happily exclaimed. "We took some losses, but they were fairly light all things considered, and with the fall of Kraterok, there's no longer any place on this island that can resist us. For all intents and purposes, we've taken the entire island."

"It can't be that simple, though," Leon observed as he glanced at some of the worried and utterly serious faces of the Legion knights.

"Few things rarely are," Sigebert admitted. "However, with the city's current state, it shouldn't be too difficult to set things right. We need to re-establish order and set up a provisional authority, while also leaving a garrison to keep the peace. That's going to take a lot of work and figuring out just how much of the island's old power structure remains."

Leon nodded. "Sounds like it's going to be a hell of a challenge."

"It will be," Sigebert said with a strange amount of cheer. "Personally, I'm *extremely* happy that I'm not the one who's going to be doing it! You and I are to focus on finding Prince Octavius. It doesn't look like the Prince is here, so we'll be conducting patrols and scouting missions to see if he's been hidden away somewhere on the island—"

"Ah, don't bother with that!" shouted a voice from the entrance of the mansion, drawing everyone's attention.

Walking over, being led over by a fifth-tier Legion knight, were a small handful of Islanders, all dressed in plain white that revealed quite a bit of their tanned skin. Leon knew that the man in front was obviously the one who'd spoken, if only because he was the only person among them who didn't look particularly cowed or nervous.

His strange confidence was remarkable to Leon, immediately marking him as someone he ought to remember. He wasn't overly attractive, but the confident swagger he walked with had a certain charm. Other than that, his facial features were rather plain, as was his brown hair and eyes. Emanating from his body was what Leon identified as fifth-tier power, though there were a few oddities that Leon could detect, some slight wavering and, for lack of a better term, 'cloudiness' in the man's aura that he couldn't identify.

"And who are you?" Sigebert loudly asked, his eyebrows rising as his smile died, a sure sign in Leon's eyes that he was throwing up mental defenses and wasn't going to give the Islanders the same warm greeting that Leon had received.

"You may call me Turiel," the man said with a smirk and pat on his chest. "These people with me are essentially all those of the city's elite that remain following this bit of... *misunderstanding*."

"Calling what just happened these past few hours a 'misunderstanding' is almost insulting," one of the nearby Legion knight said.

Turiel simply glanced at him and said, "I mean no disrespect by it, I'm sure all of you knew exactly what you were doing and why. The misunderstanding was more on the side of *my* people than yours, I'd say. They were duped and misled by that pirate who came through here a couple months ago."

"So, then, am I to assume that you've come here to share information with us, if that's your attitude?" Sigebert skeptically asked.

"Assume what you will, I won't stop you," Turiel replied. "If you were to make that assumption, though, I would like to prove you right. I hold no love for this pirate and would love to see things return to normal around here."

"Eh, sounds more like you're currying favor and angling to be named the next Earl," another knight whispered, though not nearly quietly enough for anyone to mishear.

"Maybe I am," Turiel admitted with a good-natured smile and without a shred of hesitation, "in which case would it not be incumbent upon myself to make myself useful and to be as honest as I can? How would it look if the Bull King were to know that I misled his representatives? He would certainly not look too kindly upon me, and likely deny me the Earldom."

Sigebert just dismissively waved, though at no one in particular. “Just forget about that. If you’ve come here with information, then out with it.”

“Very well,” Turiel responded, Sigebert’s curt reply apparently not fazing him at all.

Over the course of the next few minutes, Turiel narrated the events of the past few years or so, from the Earl’s initial small rebellion in not paying the Bull Kingdom the agreed-upon tribute, to when the previous Bull fleet had arrived and began securing the island, when the pirates came and lured the fleet away, and when those pirates came back.

They were led by a man named Jormun, the son of the last Islander Jarl and only survivor from the destruction of the Serpent’s Rattle, the final island in the Serpentine Isle chain. From the way Turiel spoke of Jormun, Leon guessed that the man was fairly well-known in the Isles, though he didn’t go into too much detail. Continuing, Turiel described how Jormun had called all the elites of the city together to convince them to work with him, to name him the ‘Pirate Lord’ of their Islands or something in order to throw off the yoke of the Bull Kingdom. The Earl of Kraterok had vacillated, only for the pirates to bring the Bull fleet back—apparently smaller then, and the remnants partially damaged—and utterly ruin it within and just without the city’s bay.

By then, however, the violent and petulant—in Turiel’s own words—Jormun had the city sacked and the Earl murdered, then took direct control over the island, with few objections. He left not long after, only to return a couple months later with Prince Octavius in tow. The Prince was alive and in good health the last Turiel had seen him, but Jormun hadn’t stayed long in the city. He’d taken the Prince further into the Isles, further down the chain.

“Do you know which of the Isles the Prince was taken to?” Sigebert asked.

“I do not,” Turiel clarified. “I was not the most... *enthusiastic* supporter of Jormun’s, so I was never made privy to that information, or invited to many gatherings with the Prince in attendance. However, word does spread around here, so I know that he was taken on.”

Leon then stepped forward and asked, “Do you know why the Prince was taken? It seems strange to me to kidnap a Prince mere hours before he was to be executed, only to then bring him back here where he doesn’t seem at all useful. *Why* would Jormun do this? Is he trying to take over here as a new King and use Prince Octavius as a hostage? For leverage? Is he trying to make a statement about his power?”

“Again, I can’t say, though I imagine that for a man like that, seizing power and making statements *does* sound like a significant motivating factor,” Turiel replied. “I have, however, heard some pretty terrible rumors about Jormun. Things like performing profane blood rituals in hidden corners of the world, rituals that require the blood of those who possess Inherited Bloodlines.”

Leon’s eyes narrowed in displeasure. That sounded almost *demonic* in nature. ‘*Could this have something to do with Amon? Or maybe some other demon that’s roaming around this plane?*’ he wondered.

“Describe these rituals,” he demanded.

“I’ve not seen them personally, all I’ve heard are rumors,” Turiel replied.

"Then describe these rumors," Leon pressed as he took another step toward the Islander, his voice dropping to a dangerous pitch.

Turiel, however, seemed utterly unperturbed. "I've heard a few, and they're hardly consistent. I heard a rumor that Jormun spends his days kidnapping those with Inherited Bloodlines, sacrificing them on bloody altars to dark gods, and then violates the corpses. I've heard rumors that the man has traveled all over the world, adding those of such descent—both male and female—to his personal harem, 'sacrificing' their virginities as a way to express his power over them. I've heard that he raids cities specifically to seize these people, for their blood is sufficiently powerful enough to open the locks sealing away some long forgotten beast. To be honest, I've not put much stock in such rumors, myself, but if I had to guess, I'd say that the latter is most accurate."

"You think he's working to unleash some long-forgotten beast?" Leon asked completely seriously, though Turiel seemed to take it as a mocking joke.

"Oh, heaven's *no!*" he replied, reeling back as if Leon had just given voice to something profoundly ridiculous. "As I said, I put no stock in such rumors. As far as I'm concerned, Jormun is but a power hungry pirate looking to take control of his homeland by exploiting the Bull Kingdom's current apparent weakness."

"That still hardly explains why Jormun took Octavius," Sigebert observed.

"I suppose it doesn't," Turiel agreed. "Truth be told, I don't really know why Jormun did what he did. Seems kind of foolish, to be honest, for all it did was provoke the Bull Kingdom into coming back here earlier than it might've otherwise planned. Still, Jormun did quite well for himself, destroying that previous fleet. If nothing else, you might want to keep yourself from getting too complacent."

"Whoever said we were going to get complacent?" Sigebert asked. "If anything, we'll be incredibly careful going forward to avoid being surprised by any other Flame Lances Jormun may have stolen."

"I wish you luck in the battles to come, then," Turiel said, his smile, unchanging upon his face, now seeming almost mocking and pitying with the way the conversation had gone.

Sigebert and Turiel then began speaking more about the situation in Kraterok, specifically, and how some semblance of order might be restored that would leave the fleets free to move on. Leon didn't pay much attention, too disturbed as he was by what Turiel had revealed. Even as the other fleet Legates arrived to join the meeting, Leon was too busy thinking about just *why* Jormun had seized Octavius. There had to be *some* reason, and Octavius' awakened blood was as good a reason as any that Leon could see.

[Hey Nestor, Xaphan,] Leon whispered into his soul realm, quickly relaying to both what Turiel had just said. [... Can either of you think of any rituals or uses that fit this description? I honestly can't fathom why this pirate would do such a thing without at least the possibility of significant reward...]

[There are many reasons why someone might want the blood of an Inherited Bloodline,] Nestor said, surprising Leon exactly not at all that he knew of some.

[Indeed,] Xaphan agreed, though he didn't sound happy about it. [There's more power in awakened blood like yours than there is in regular human blood. There are many demons I know of that will

bestow great gifts upon someone who can procure a descendent of an Ascended Beast for them, let alone someone like you, who has the blood of both an Ascended Beast and a Divine Beast.]

[I'd agree with the demon, kid, stay away from this pirate if possible,] Nestor added. [It's entirely possible that something is seeking power and speaking to this pirate to manipulate him into providing that power. Though, I can't imagine why he'd need *awakened* blood, specifically, regular human mana ought to be sufficient for just about any use, so long as the quantity is high.

[However, remember that this is the Divine Graveyard. This plane is one of the oldest in the universe, and I'm sure the secrets buried here are beyond counting. Maybe this pirate has stumbled onto something.]

[Thanks,] Leon said, only partially meaning it. All they'd told him was that what Turiel had alleged was *possible*, but he supposed asking for any more specific information from them wasn't entirely reasonable. They didn't necessarily have the in-depth knowledge of the plane that was needed to make a more concrete statement. [Is there any way I might be able to detect what he's doing? I don't know, like if there's something sealed away here, would some kind of enchantment be able to detect it?]

[Not likely,] Nestor replied. [It's standard that prisons are warded against possible divination. It wouldn't be an entirely secure prison if they could be so easily found.]

[Right,] Leon replied.

He didn't say anything more over the next few minutes, lost as he was in pointless speculation over Jormun's motives. Nestor, however wasn't quite done with him, and after taking those few minutes to listen in on the conversation with the Legion knights and the Islanders, he broke that silence.

[I have a wonder, Leon, if you would indulge it?]

[What is it?] Leon asked, trying and failing to keep the irritation out of his voice.

If he picked up on it, it didn't deter him at all, for Nestor immediately asked, [How would you handle the situation here on this island?]

Leon rapidly blinked, unsure as he was as to why Nestor was even asking. [Uhh. What do you mean?]

[Listen, boy. The fate of our entire line rests on your shoulders. The disinterest you show in things like these shouldn't be encouraged, and I will not encourage them. So, let's set the scene, shall we? You have just arrived in the Nexus and made your first conquest. It was a smashing success, you took a few casualties, but the enemy was shattered and their lands were left relatively depopulated—enough that they are no longer a threat to your power. Some of the remaining elites have approached you to formally surrender, speaking at length over their loyalty and how much they wished for our Clan to return and bring peace back to the Storm Kingdom. In other words, this is exactly the situation that you face right now, and that you might face in the Nexus. How would you respond?]

Leon, still a little surprised at the sudden questioning, replied with an uninspired, [... Um... I'm not sure.]

[Then why don't we work these things out? No better time than the present, is there? Not like you're contributing much to their conversation, anyway, and it'll be a better use of your time than speculating after the motives of some pirate covered in more gull shit than sense. So, let's get a little bit more

specific for this scenario. This particular people—for the sake of better synergy, let’s call this place a small city much like this one, not too strong, and a small population—has been a thorn in the side of the Storm Kings for millions of years, raiding and pillaging our lands when our attention was elsewhere. They were eventually conquered, but only relatively recently, let’s say a few thousand years before the fall of the Clan. Now that your reconquest—or *conquest*, I know you want your new *thing* to be different than the old Clan—has begun, how do you deal with these people?]

[That would depend on the resources I have available, I suppose,] Leon replied. [How much do I have? Is it just me and a few friends, or do I have the armies of a Kingdom behind me, as the Bull does now? What I do and do not have would affect my answer.]

[How so?]

[If I have more resources, I suppose there would be merit in razing the city and settling the people elsewhere. If they’re an unruly population, separate them and spread them around.]

[Not a bad decision, and one certainly popular in history,] Nestor said appreciatively. [Expensive, though, and you certainly wouldn’t be making any friends out of that people. If you do that too much, you’d face more rebellions as various people allied with each other against you, but if done sparingly, then it might work well enough. What about if you had fewer resources?]

Leon sighed in thought as his eyes wandered around the courtyard, not looking at anything in particular. [I suppose I would try this first and leave mass deportation and resettlement for emergency measures if other strategies fail. I wouldn’t want to kill them all, I should think. There would probably be a reason for that city to exist, I’d imagine: some resource that it produces that has at least some value. So simply destroying the city would be out of the question... unless that city is completely unmanageable. I suppose that would leave only trying to work with the city’s people to support me. Empower some of the remaining elites in return for them supporting me.]

That was essentially what the Bull Kingdom was doing here, Leon saw. Already, Basina, Theuderic, and Sigebert were treating Turiel as the de facto Earl of Kraterok, though it wasn’t hard to see why. The man was talkative while the other Islanders he brought with hadn’t said so much as a single word since their arrival. He was also being quite supportive, furnishing the Legates with all the information they needed about the island seemingly without restraint, such as where the most important settlements were and where Jormun might be hiding on the other islands. He was especially helpful in pointing to the locations of hidden caves around the city where more rebellious Islanders might be hiding, just waiting to continue resisting the Bull Kingdom.

[That would depend on finding someone you could trust to take the reins,] Nestor replied. [There have been many tyrants installed in power across the Nexus throughout its history, and it was rare for them to work out all that well. You see, all it usually does is bring someone unpopular into power while not doing anything to

Chapter 543: A Legend From Kindred Cultures

Leon stared out at Kraterok from one of the palace’s balconies, not looking at anything in particular, but just staring in thought. The others in his squad had been given places to rest, so that’s where they’d all gone, Anzu was set up in a nearby stable, and Maia was back in his room burying her face in a book—

she proved herself to be just as loath to use the room set aside for her here as she was on Sigebert's ship.

But after his quick conversation with Nestor during the meeting between the Fleet Legates, Leon realized that he had a lot to think about for the future. He knew what he wanted to do, and he knew what he didn't want to do, but he had few strategies planned for when—not *if*, but *when*—things went sideways or when normal human unpredictability threw him some curveballs.

He had to not just be ready for reluctant former vassals of the Thunderbird Clan, but he also had to be ready for rebellious vassals and to deal with people who would resent giving up some of their freedom and independence to a new Storm King. He had to be ready to somehow impose his will upon people who would rather he didn't. To a large extent, it was even against his nature to become a conqueror, and he couldn't imagine himself waging a war of conquest without being given adequate cause.

The Thunderbird Clan of yore would simply use violence to get what they wanted, that much was clear from Leon's conversations with Nestor and the Thunderbird herself. After a couple months spent thinking, Leon wasn't quite so opposed to that strategy, but he didn't want it to be his first-resort. He'd have to replace it with something.

That something would have to be some kind of negotiation, and he wasn't good at that. So, he resolved to pay a little bit more attention to how the Bull Kingdom was going to deal with the Serpentine Isles. It would hopefully be an illuminating experience.

But, for now, he could do little more than gaze out at nothing in particular and think about where his future might lead, and to perhaps plan out some very general strategies for how to deal with problems his blade couldn't solve. He wasn't actually *involved* in putting the Bull Kingdom back in charge, after all, he was only there to find Octavius and haul his worthless ass back to the Bull King.

He couldn't help but momentarily wish that he could go back in time a few years. Everything had been so much easier when his father was alive and Leon didn't have to think about any of this. His life in the Forest of Black and White with Artorias had been simple and happy, free of these responsibilities that he kind of resented.

But he wouldn't trade his current life for his old one even if he had the opportunity, momentary desires aside. Having Maia and Elise in his life ensured that, so he knew he was left with only one option: to do his best to man up and surmount this challenge.

As he stood there, leaning against the wooden railing and lost in thought, he was disturbed from his musings when a huge bird landed upon the railing just a few feet away. And it was a big thing, as far as birds went, with a wingspan greater than six feet and about three feet tall. It was hawkish, with a viciously curved beak and talons that looked sharp and powerful enough to tear a boar to pieces with little effort. Strikingly, this bird had a robust fourth-tier aura, far more than a run-of-the-mill city bird.

Its eyes and feathers, however, were what truly unnerved Leon. Its eyes were the exact same shade of yellow as the Thunderbird, and it had a near-identical pattern of shining brown flecked with gold on its coat. If the Thunderbird were to come out and tell Leon that this was some long-lost relative, he'd find it easy to believe.

The bird perched itself on the railing for several long seconds, simply staring at Leon, locking him in its gaze. It didn't twitch, it barely even moved to breathe, it just stared.

And then, without any other warning, it took off again, vanishing over the roof of the mansion.

Leon rapidly blinked in surprise, his jaw still hanging slightly open, his stance slightly defensive.

'Was that... someone's pet?' he wondered. The bird had not acted in any way that he was familiar wild animals did, but it had no identifying marks or apparel that he could see. Perhaps it was just that well-trained, but its striking resemblance and sheer boldness to get so close to a human had Leon questioning just what in the hells just happened.

"Is everything all right?" asked a voice from the balcony's door. Leon turned and saw that Turiel, the Islander that had seemingly took charge of the remaining local elites following the Legion seizing the island, had just walked out onto the balcony.

Leon fought to keep his expression neutral, clamping down on his surprise and not letting his immediate reaction of mild misanthropic annoyance to manifest itself on his face. He didn't have the best of first impressions when it came to Turiel, but he figured that if he were to ever become better at talking to people and getting them on his side, then he might as well start now.

"Yeah," he murmured thoughtfully before putting a bit more iron into his tone. "You Islanders have some crazy birds living here, I have to say. Just saw one almost as large as me!"

"Is that so?" Turiel asked with a light smile as he walked over to join Leon at the railing. "The jungle is a wild place and has proven itself a breeding ground for all sorts of strange creatures. Scaled things with six legs, a hundred eyes, and a mouth that could swallow a rowboat whole. Great cats with eyes that glow like lit coals and claws that could strip a ship of its hull in minutes—or a man of his skin in seconds. Birds large enough to carry off livestock and strong enough to not care at all when men try to scare them away. And that's just what's inland, I'm not even counting what prowls our coasts..."

"Sounds like a fantastic place to live," Leon replied, his tone only partially sarcastic. Hearing Turiel describe these creatures, Leon had some small desire to go out and see them for himself—probably from the same side of himself that deeply missed his childhood lifestyle.

"It can be, when it's not caught in between a pirate who aspires to be a King and the massive fleet that showed up to enforce another King's will," Turiel replied as he leaned up against the railing, his expression one of almost amused resignation. "I asked those Legates a few questions about you, you know. I hope you don't mind, but I found myself rather curious."

Leon raised an eyebrow, feeling both mildly offended and a little understanding. He supposed the polite thing to do would be to say that Turiel could've simply asked his questions to Leon himself, but Leon doubted he would've been so accommodating, and he wasn't of a mind to lie. Already he could feel some distrust and offense building up.

"What made you curious, I wonder?" he asked. "Couldn't have been because of my charming personality."

"I watched the battle from up here," Turiel explained as he gestured out toward the bay, where the hundreds of Legion ships were sailing in and out, disgorging marines or picking up requisitioned supplies

or whatever it was that they did. “Well, not ‘up here’ up here; until Sir Sigebert showed up, this place was still a private residence even if Dene—the man who lived here before—died in the fighting. But I was still able to watch the battle, and I have to say, lightning magic is quite eye-catching, and certainly not something I’m used to seeing in the Bull Kingdom.”

“So you watched me in the fight?” Leon asked.

“I did indeed,” Turiel admitted with a smile. “When one man leads a group of not even half a dozen to secure an entire island, and all while sparkling like a Grierie tree, it can be hard to look anywhere else.”

“I... don’t know what that is...”

“Oh? A Grierie tree is something we put up for celebrations here. Once every four months, they’re set up on nearly all street corners and decked out in sparkly sap and ribbons. *Quite* fetching, I must say...”

Leon lightly grimaced, but he decided to take the comparison as a compliment and moved on.

“So, what did the Legates say about me?” he asked.

“That you’re a seventh-tier mage, a strong fighter, and not someone to fuck around with,” Turiel replied. “A shame, I would’ve invited back to my place if that last one weren’t the case...”

He gave Leon a suggestive look and a brilliant smile, and while Leon immediately began to feel a little uncomfortable, he didn’t immediately shoot the idea down. In fact, he didn’t quite know how to respond to that, and as the Islander paused for an uncomfortably long time, Leon just stood there looking anywhere but at him, desperately trying to figure out a way to refuse without being unduly rude.

“Ah, you’re not into me, that’s fine,” Turiel replied with a nonchalant shrug. “The Legates didn’t give me too much information about you, not nearly enough to satisfy my curiosity. You aren’t a Paladin, yet you’re seventh-tier—the *only* seventh-tier mage sent on this expedition, in fact! I would’ve thought that after his success in the last expedition sent this way that the Penitent Paladin would be leading the fleets.”

“Penitent is back in the Kingdom guarding the King,” Leon quietly replied, still a little uncomfortable and quite surprised at Turiel’s admittance of attraction.

And maybe a little flattered, too, but he’d rather not have that kind of attention.

“That’s unfortunate,” Turiel said, showing a hint of sadness that Leon found odd. “I had been hoping to meet the Paladin when he arrived. He’s had such an influence on these islands that I would’ve loved to have an opportunity to speak with him again.”

“Again?”

“Yes, I’ve met him before. I’m an Islander, and while I’ve been all over this plane for my occupation as a merchant, I was born and raised here about fifty years ago.”

“So you met the Paladin when you were child? When he came through here before?”

Turiel smiled and nodded. “I wonder, Leon—if I may call you that?”

"That's fine," Leon replied, his eyebrow rising again due to the sudden shift in conversation.

"I wonder why you came here, Leon? Penitent came here to subjugate the pirates that had infested this island, and all the Bull's soldiers that have come since have been seeking to maintain the Bull King's hold over these islands and its people. But you? Not a Paladin, but a seventh-tier mage, and one who possesses strange magic? And possesses an even stranger aura..."

Leon took a step back, bristling at Turiel's veiled question.

"I mean no offence, I but wish to ask you this question. Why did you come here? Was it for money? Glory? I daresay that even with the relative poverty of these islands, both can be found here..."

Turiel gave Leon an inviting expression, and Leon took another step back, his discomfort cranking up another notch.

"No," he anxiously choked out. "My reasons for coming here are personal. I just want to bring Octavius back to the Bull Kingdom. I expended a great deal of energy making sure his coup failed, and I don't want to see all of that work now go to waste just because some shitstick pirate thought breaking him out would make for a fun party story."

Turiel's expression froze for a moment, his eyes slowly wandering away from Leon.

"You shouldn't discount Jormun like that," he quietly stated. "I wasn't nearly as up-front about my thoughts of the man back during that meeting, but I suppose if it's you, I don't mind sharing. Jormun is a despicable man, a charismatic man who can make a person *believe* in whatever it is he's trying to sell. He murdered Kraterok's last Earl and set himself up as the sole authority in these islands. He ruthlessly slaughtered his own people just to make a point. Sure, his crew kept the looting and sacking to a minimum, but the point still stands: Jormun is a powerful man, and he has few scruples. You shouldn't dismiss him so readily."

Leon scowled, almost saying that had faith in his abilities to deal with the pirate, but he stopped himself. He had faith in his abilities to deal with anything they found in the Forest of Black and White, and he'd spent nearly his entire time back there being kicked around and running for his life. He was strong, but he couldn't let his power blind him to the danger of others, especially not those of the same tier. Already, only a matter of weeks after returning to the Bull Kingdom, he could feel himself starting to slide back into old habits.

"Your warning is well-received," he murmured.

"I hope it is," Turiel replied, flashing him a quick wink. "I wonder, Leon, how much do you know of old Serpentine legends?"

"Any reason you're asking?" Leon asked.

"Just a wonder. Do you know why these islands are called the Serpentine Isles?"

Leon frowned as he thought about it for a moment. "... Because they're shaped kind of like a coiled serpent?" he said, despite knowing that was probably the wrong answer that Turiel was baiting out.

"Some certainly think that's the case," Turiel replied. "Maybe it is, maybe it isn't. People have seen stranger things in far more esoteric places. People instinctively see patterns where none exist—pattern

recognition is a deeply important part of the human psyche. So, maybe it's because of the placement of these islands, I don't know. But the stories that are told by Serpentine mothers to their children are a little different. Would you like to hear them?"

Leon shrugged noncommittally.

"It all goes like thi—" Turiel began before quickly cutting himself off. "How about this, why don't you come with me back downstairs, and I can show you something a little more interesting? I promise that I won't do anything untoward... unless you *want* me to, that is..."

"Conversation will do," Leon said, his voice cracking a little bit, but otherwise remaining stoic and reserved, his defenses toward this kind of flirting now having been raised enough to shrug it off a little bit easier than a minute or two ago.

"Unfortunate, but such is life," Turiel replied with another suggestive smirk.

He then led Leon back inside and down to the courtyard. Leon contemplated changing his mind and going to find Maia or something else to occupy his time, but he didn't have much else going on and he was curious as to what Turiel was getting to. The more he spoke with the man, the stranger he seemed, jumping from one topic to the next, and emanating a strange aura from his body. He was a fifth-tier mage, that much seemed clear enough, but there was just *something* about his aura that put Leon off a little bit, and Leon couldn't for the life of him put his finger on the reason why.

Their destination wound up being the peristyle courtyard where the meeting with the Fleet Legates had taken place. There were still a few dozen Legion knights working within since the place had essentially been turned into the city's capitol on land. The Fleet Legates, however, were off ensuring that enough peace was brought to the city that it wouldn't immediately collapse into anarchy upon their departure—and Leon imagined that Sigebert was searching the city for any sign of the Prince, even though Turiel had told them that Octavius was no longer in the city—something which Leon was starting to wonder why Turiel wasn't helping with, if he were actually trying to become the next Earl, as he'd claimed during the meeting.

The man was a strange mystery, and Leon was becoming more and more tempted to try to figure out just what he was trying to hide, if his impression of the man was accurate.

"Up there," Turiel said as he brought them to a halt off to one side of the courtyard, just past the wooden columns and into the open air, one hand raised and pointing to the friezes just above the row of columns.

Leon directed his gaze up there and saw a series of painted carvings on the wood showing various scenes that, without further context, didn't make much sense. He saw some kind of serpent, a bunch of people bowing to it, and maybe three leaders of some kind. It was difficult to tell what exactly he was looking at, but at the very least, it seemed to be some kind of continuous story rather than a series of disconnected scenes.

"You see that?" Turiel said as he pointed toward what Leon took to be the beginning of the story that the friezes were telling. It looked kind a mountain with a serpent coiled around it. "That is the Serpent of ancient times, the old god of these islands since ages long past. It's fallen out of favor in the past few millennia, but it's still a common story told in these islands.

“Now, the way it goes is like this: These islands used to be innumerable, extending all the way to the edges of the Endless Ocean—how they managed to do that, I can’t imagine, but so the story goes, at least—and they were all ruled over by the Great Horned Serpent.”

Leon perked his head up a bit. He knew that name, it was the title used by the evil spirits of the Valeman religion. Instantly, his eyes refocused on the serpent coiled around the mountain on the frieze. It didn’t look like how the Valemens depicted their serpent, but that didn’t surprise him overmuch. But now that he knew what he was looking for, he could see the horn, it was just depicted in such a style that he hadn’t been sure what in the hells it was until Turiel named the creature.

“One day,” Turiel continued, “the serpent, who up until that point had been ruling well and decently, was struck by madness.”

Leon’s eyes washed over the sight of the mountain covered in cities and scenes of glory, all with the serpent above them depicted in curving flowing lines. The point at which it was struck by madness, the serpent became jagged and edged, striking a far more menacing style than previous images.

“It ruled these islands with fear and death. If its demands for blood and gold were not met, it would fill the cities of the Serpentine Isles with its venom—my mother actually used to tell me that the jungles of these surviving islands used to be dense cities that rivaled those of the Central Empires, but the serpent washed them away with its venom, allowing the jungle to take what land was left over as punishment.

“The people of the Serpentine Isles were not capable of providing the required tributes for long, and so they sought outside help from the mainland. And three heroes answered.”

On the frieze, Leon turned his eyes toward the three ‘leaders’ he’d seen on his initial scan, and after another moment, recognized the rough poses that they’re greatly simplified forms had been placed in: they were the same three that were carved into statues over on the sea wall.

“When these heroes came, each one brought their own powers. One brought lightning, another brought wind, and the last brought water. They fought the serpent in a terrible battle that destroyed all but eight of the previously endless islands, and won. In punishment for its crimes, the serpent was sealed away in the heart of the plane, miles beneath the surface, directly under the Serpentine Isles.”

The end of the frieze showed the three heroes standing on the mountain, the serpent upside-down beneath it, the people of the Isles cheering and celebrating its fall.

All in all, it sounded much like the stories Leon heard

Chapter 544: Turiel’s Deception

Turiel was missing. No one had seen him for almost two days, and not for lack of trying. Marines had gone to his reported place of residence in the upper-class district, but no one was home. None of the remaining elite of Kraterok could tell the Legates where he’d disappeared to, either. As far as anyone could tell, there weren’t any missing ships in the port, though given how destructive the battle had been on the local Islander navy, no one could say for certain.

However, after two days, it was apparent that Turiel was missing, and there wasn’t so much as a clue that anyone could find of where he’d gone or how’d he’d disappeared.

To that end, Sigebert, in need of local assistance to prop up the provisional government they'd leave behind when they moved on, decided to start talking to the rest of the elites, giving Leon and several of his Tribunes the task of finding the missing Islander.

The natural place to start was at Turiel's house. Like all Islander homes, its footprint was fairly conservative compared to the palaces of Bull Kingdom nobles, but it was well-appointed and luxurious by the standards of the city. However, one thing that Leon took note of was that it was one of the few buildings in the entire city that had been warded against magic senses.

When Leon and his squad—including Gaius—arrived with about thirty Legion marines and the Tribunes that Sigebert assigned them, it was about noon. Much like the previous few days, it was stunningly beautiful outside, but the forty or so people in the party were all dour and serious, treating the disappearance of the most prominent of the remaining elite in the city with all the seriousness the situation demanded.

Leon, in particular, was disturbed and curious about Turiel's whereabouts. He hadn't seen the man since Turiel had told him the story of the supposedly eponymous serpent of the Serpentine Isles, but he had a good enough impression of him from that conversation that he wanted to know just what exactly was going on.

Wasting no time at all, Leon swiftly knocked on the door, expecting that a man like Turiel would have at least a few servants who could open the door even if he were missing. His knock went unanswered, however.

"Looks like nothing's changed, then," Gaius observed.

Leon shrugged. He couldn't imagine that no one had knocked on Turiel's door in the two days he'd been missing, but he still didn't want to make any assumptions.

"Surround the place as best as you can," Leon ordered one of the Tribunes. He wasn't technically in any position to do such a thing, but that didn't matter, the Tribune immediately complied, taking half of the marines and separating them into four groups that locked down the mansion as best as they could in the narrow, rather confusingly laid-out streets.

Without another word, Leon gripped the door handle and twisted hard, easily breaking the lock and wrenching the door open. Hardly subtle, but he'd knocked first, so subtlety and the element of surprise had already been lost. Not that he thought anyone was still in the house, but still.

Leon walked in, unarmed and unarmored, though his magic was flowing through his body so he could easily change that in an instant. Just about everyone else walked into the house's main hall with a great deal more caution. But it was dark and silent, no lights on that Leon could detect, nor could hear anyone moving about in the wooden building. The magic in the house, too, spoke of little in the way of wards that might either impede their progress or pique Leon's curiosity other than that one in the outer walls that blocked magic senses from entering the house.

"Secure the place," Leon ordered, and over the course of the next five minutes, the marines and Tribunes stormed through the rooms, making sure the place was just as abandoned as it seemed. Leon and his squad, however, took their time moving through the place. The main hall was fairly long and tall,

with all three floors of the house opening into a gallery looking down on the hall. At the opposite end of the hall was a grand staircase that gave access to those upper floors.

“These bottom floors will likely be the most interesting,” Marcus said. “In places like these, these lower rooms would be the ‘public areas,’ I guess you could say. The places where Turiel would operate his businesses from.”

“If he was kidnapped, though, then his private apartments—probably on the top floor—would be where the most evidence might be found,” Gaius countered.

“We’ll start upstairs, then,” Leon said. “If there’s anything to see up there, it’ll probably be more obvious.”

“Can’t argue with that,” Marcus replied. “A bedroom destroyed in a fight would likely be a better place to start than with whatever papers the man had here...”

Leon’s group began to walk upstairs. However, with every step, Leon’s concern and confusion heightened. There were no signs that he could see that the place had been attacked, and with the lacking defensive wards in the place and Turiel’s fifth-tier strength, if he’d been violently kidnapped, Leon would’ve expected to have seen some collateral damage.

He felt a little conflicted when they arrived on the third-floor. He wasn’t particularly interested in Turiel in a romantic way—or any other guys, really—but he couldn’t help but wonder if he’d have been involved in whatever happened if he’d spent more time with the man. One conversation wasn’t enough to build up much of a rapport between them, but Leon was rarely flirted with so brazenly, and he couldn’t help but feel a twinge of guilt at the thought that he could’ve maybe prevented Turiel’s disappearance if he’d been around at the time, despite his lack of romantic interest.

“Look for anything that might be out of place,” Leon said as his squad separated and began to sweep through the third floor of the mansion. By this point, the marines had secured the place, so Leon wasn’t too cautious, but he made sure to project his magic senses into every room he was in just in case, making sure that if anything moved, he’d have as much warning as possible.

The first room that Leon entered with Maia looked to be a private dining room. There was a larger dining room on the first floor large enough to hold at least two dozen people, but a family of five would’ve felt a little cramped in this one. The small light orange wooden table had only two accompanying chairs, a large window let in enough light to keep it pleasantly illuminated during the day, and on the wall hung a portrait of some Islander that Leon didn’t recognize, a man with deep black hair, tall, heavily muscled, and a lean, predatory physique. He was dressed in what Leon could only assume was Islander ceremonial wear, basically a blue sash across his bare chest, a blue skirt that went to just below his knees, and a pair of sandals.

Strangely, he looked nothing like Turiel, but Leon could think of plenty of explanations for that. A distant relation, maybe, or someone that Turiel loved or respected, or even an artistic depiction of some Islander hero of old.

Leon, Maia, and the rest of his squad continued to inspect Turiel’s home, but found nothing else of note, which was in itself noteworthy. Everything seemed pristine, with barely anything out of place. They even found a small armory, with seemingly none of the expensive-looking weapons or armor taken, save for

what might've adorned a single bare mannequin that had been placed quite prominently within the armory.

They did, however, find a few other portraits, and while they all depicted different people, these people all looked remarkably similar to the man in the first portrait Leon saw.

As they returned to the first floor, Leon quietly absorbed everything they'd seen upstairs, and his unease began to grow. No signs of struggle, seemingly no personal effects of Turiel, and no recognizable art of him to be seen.

It almost looked like someone else's house.

His squad then got to work going through the first floor, just looking to see what they could find. They found a lot of paper, as much as a successful merchant would need to run a trading empire, but it would take a *long* time to go through all of that—not that that stopped Maia from diving right in, to Leon's amusement. Everyone else reacted to seeing all of this with a mixture of resignation and disgust. Financial reports did not make for particularly exciting reading material, after all.

For an hour, Leon and the five others he was with poured over these papers, and for the most part, they found exactly what they'd expected to find: not a damn thing of note, just what was being bought and sold and shipped—mostly jungle timber and produce from elsewhere on the island—and some payroll records for sailors and other staff. However, Leon began to notice another pattern that lined up with what he'd seen upstairs: none of the papers he'd looked through had Turiel's name anywhere on them. When he asked his squad if Turiel was named in anything they were examining, they all replied with the same amount of success he'd had.

"Leon Raime!" came a shout from just outside, and the Tribune who'd taken charge of the marines stationed outside stuck his head in through the door of the dining room, where Leon had posted up with his squad to examine the stacks and stacks of papers they'd found.

"Huh?" Leon replied, his attention pulling away from the sheets full of numbers and signatures and lists.

"We found someone who said that she used to work here as a maid," the Tribune replied. "She has information that you ought to hear."

Leon hurried outside with Marcus and Alcander, both of whom seemingly the most ill-prepared to deal with paperwork. Gaius, Maia, and Alix stayed inside, continuing their cursory examination.

The Tribune led them to the main hall where a short and relatively plump mortal woman was waiting.

"We had some trouble with her accent, I don't think she speaks our language all that well," the Tribune whispered to Leon. "However, she told us some very interesting things, assuming nothing was lost in translation."

"I'd like to hear those things from her," Leon said as he walked over.

The woman noticed them walking over and a look of growing anxiety appeared on her tanned face, enough that Leon almost stopped walking towards her. He supposed that anyone as magically weak as her might feel more than a little intimidated at seeing four much more powerful mages marching over, all with stern, stoic expressions.

He took a moment to try and force a smile on his face, hoping to relieve some of that anxiety she was obviously feeling, but the effect seemed decidedly mixed. She didn't back away from them, but she still didn't seem comfortable, so Leon had everyone stop about a step or two before they might've otherwise, hoping that a little bit of extra space would help her to relax and tell him what she knew of what might've happened to Turiel.

"Hello there," Leon said, his smile becoming a little shallower, but also more genuine. "My name is Leon Raime, and I guess I'm in charge here..."

He glanced back at the Tribune with an amused look, and the Tribune just chuckled and nodded.

The woman, speaking in a somewhat high-pitched and nervous squeak, and with a thick accent that Leon was terribly unused to hearing—the only time he'd ever encountered people who didn't speak the same language he did was during the war with Talfar, and that had been incredibly brief. It had been such a nonissue for him that dealing with language barriers after leaving the Bull Kingdom hadn't been something that he'd put too much time into considering. That Turiel spoke the same language as he did so fluently and without even the slightest trace of an accent hadn't even seemed strange to him, but now that he was thinking about it, Leon supposed it was just a little bit odd—though he *was* a merchant and had claimed to be a supporter of the Bull Kingdom...

"I... Gyda," she said. "Work here, in before."

"A pleasure to meet you," Leon replied, his tone soft and encouraging. "I was told that you have some information to share with us about Turiel, the man who used to live here?"

"Miiikct..." she muttered under her breath as she glanced around at the main hall. "No Turiel. Not known person. Burg home master."

Leon cocked an eyebrow in surprise, then slowly dawning realization as his eyes drifted in the same direction that Gyda was looking. There he saw a large portrait of man similar to the rest that he'd seen in the house, a man who looked nothing like Turiel. In that moment, all of the creeping suspicions were confirmed: this wasn't Turiel's house.

"That sly bastard!" Marcus murmured from behind Leon. "No *wonder* we haven't found anything with his name or signature! This isn't his fucking house!"

Leon held up a hand to silence the young nobleman. He turned back to Gyda and asked, "Is that man in the portrait over there the man who owned this house?"

Gyda seemed a bit confused for a moment, but after taking a moment to parse his words, she slowly nodded her head. "Home master, there."

"And the name 'Turiel' is unknown to you?"

"Not known person, Turiel," she replied.

Leon bitterly pursed his lips together.

"I suppose this might handily explain why we haven't found a damn thing since coming here," Alcander growled, clearly irate at the lost time. "Where does this guy live, then?"

Leon scowled as he thought about it, the man's offer to get him alone suddenly taking on a much more sinister tone, his slight guilt from earlier being replaced with rapidly mounting anger. "Who the hell knows?" Turning back to the Tribune, Leon said, "Make sure she's rewarded for her information. Keep everyone else here and sweep this place top to bottom, just in case. Me and mine are going to check in with Sir Sigebert."

The Tribune nodded, and not even five minutes later, Leon and his squad marched right out of the mansion, all expressing various kinds of anger and frustration, everyone wondering just what the hell else Turiel might've lied about if this wasn't his home.

—

"That *fucking bastard!*" Sigebert growled as he stared at the map of the Serpentine Isles on the table in front of him.

Leon had gone back to him immediately to report on his findings regarding Turiel, and Sigebert, instilled with the same suspicion, surprise, and anger as Leon, immediately summoned the rest of the remaining city elite. He'd had them all questioned before about what they might know of Turiel's location, but they'd all claimed to have no knowledge of the man that they could use.

That was, at least, until Sigebert and Leon personally began to ask questions. Perhaps it was because of the seriousness that Leon and Sigebert were treating the situation that convinced them to stop lying, but during their individual interrogations, four of the Islander nobles gave up the fact that Turiel was, in fact, Jormun, the very pirate that had kidnapped Octavius and taken over the Serpentine Isles.

There were a few minutes where Sigebert didn't want to believe it. Maybe it was his ego not wanting to admit that something that huge had slipped past him, but it wasn't until three of the nobles confessed to Turiel's true identity that he finally accepted it.

Leon didn't take that long. That Turiel was the seventh-tier water mage they were pursuing made a strange amount of sense. It explained his strange aura, which Leon now recognized as having been constrained in much the same way that Maia's had been hidden following her killing of the vampires that had assaulted Leon's villa in the Bull Kingdom's capital. It also explained his desire to get Leon alone and away from the rest of the Legion, though Leon was kind of miffed that the attraction Turiel had displayed was clearly not genuine, a little embarrassed that he'd been so flustered he'd fallen for the ruse, and slightly offended that the man hadn't tried harder to get Leon on his own. If it were Leon pulling the same con, then he'd at least try a few different tactics to get rid of the strongest enemy mage in their force.

Though, he supposed that the story Turiel—or rather, *Jormun*, had told, might've been that attempt.

Regardless, they had Jormun here with them, in their presence, breathing the same air, and they'd failed to realize it. They'd let him escape. Hells, if he hadn't disappeared on them, they would've been none the wiser, and might've even left the city in his hands, under the guise of 'Turiel'.

"I am going to cut that man's head clean off!" Sigebert raged.

"Save that rage for later," Leon whispered. "I understand the humiliation, but now we know what he looks like. He won't be able to do this again."

“We should’ve recognized him anyway!” Sigebert insisted. “The Penitent Paladin gave us all his description! *We should’ve known!* Instead, he walked right in here, spouted off a bunch of horse shit about *his own* damned motivations!”

Leon almost responded, but as his mouth was opening, he felt the slightest of touches brush against his ear, and he heard the flapping of feathered wings. When he swung his head around, it took him a moment to see what had brushed against him, but he saw the bird from before perched on the rim of the courtyard’s roof, just over the frieze depicting the Serpentine Island’s eponymous myth—the same bird that he’d seen just before Turiel told him the story, in fact, its resemblance to the Thunderbird even more uncanny in the light of day when the luster of brown and gold feathers could shine even brighter.

The bird glared at Leon with its avian eyes for several long seconds, the strange sight of it utterly captivating him, only for it to then turn and pointedly look at the frieze.

Leon followed its gaze, the possibility of it being sapient suddenly flashing through his mind. His eyes followed the story as they had done a couple days ago, and he wondered just why exactly Jormun had told him that story.

‘He... couldn’t believe that story is true, could he?’ Leon wondered. *‘Is he somehow trying to free that Serpent? But then why did he need to conquer these islands? Why kidnap Octavius? Did he need to do that for his plans?’*

Leon gritted his teeth in frustration. Jormun had probably only fed them a bunch of lies, getting himself off on the fact that none of them knew who he was, flaunting his deception before them. Leon felt his heart almost burst with how fast it was angrily beating. Leon wanted nothing more than to find Jormun and rip into him with his claws and talons, sink his fangs into his flesh and tear, Jormun’s blood turning his feathers and scales red...

‘My claws? Scales?’ Leon thought, that strange instinct pulling him right of the violent fantasy he’d almost lost himself in, the knowledge of just where in the hells it had come from eluding him. But something drew his attention back to the courtyard’s roof.

There, Leon saw that the bird had disappeared.

Chapter 545: Leon’s Ruminations

Leon took a deep breath of the salty sea air as Sigebert’s flagship left Kraterok behind them.

It had been eight long days since they’d arrived and took the city by storm. It was now barely half-populated, having been the site of a brutal sack and two naval battles, but it was still without a doubt the largest city in the Serpentine Isles.

The Legion fleets didn’t waste time dealing with the rest of the settlements on the island aside from a few cursory and token inspections during the search for Octavius. If they needed further attention, then whoever the King decided to install as Earl would see to it. Kraterok was back in their possession, and that was all the Legion cared about. However, it had taken all of those eight days to ensure that Kraterok would stay theirs once they left.

The task force left behind one of the recovered Flame Lances, fifty ships of varying size, and a thousand Legion marines. Normally, this would’ve been considered absolutely overkill, but given that Jormun had

already destroyed one fleet, no one wanted to take any chances with leaving behind a weak garrison. Even when the scouts surveyed the island during the week and reported back that Jormun's pirate fleet wasn't anywhere on the island, no one relaxed; Jormun himself had managed to infiltrate the island and interact with the Fleet Legates face-to-face, and no one had been the wiser until he left. If anything, as Kraterok grew smaller behind them, Leon knew that the Fleet Legates were nervous that the forces they left behind wouldn't be enough if Jormun were hiding his people somewhere else on the island, just waiting for their main forces to leave.

But they had to move on. If Leon knew anything about the Legion that could hold his respect, it was that they didn't waste time deliberating. If Jormun retook Kraterok again, then they'd just turn around and burn him out of whatever hole he was hiding in.

For now, they'd move on to the second island. With the losses sustained during the taking of Kraterok and the demands of the garrison they left behind, the fleet was objectively much smaller, even if they hadn't taken so many overall losses as to be much affected. They were now down one and half thousand marines, and a little over one hundred ships. Granted, most of those ships were fairly small with crews barely more than a couple dozen at most, but the Islander Flame Lances had still managed to sink or severely damage a dozen heavier escorts.

Sigebert's flagship had also been heavily damaged in their initial salvo, with one of his Flame Lances having been knocked out of commission. Fortunately, it had been an easy affair for the naval engineers to rip the slagged weapon down and replace it with the seized Islander Flame Lance that they weren't leaving behind.

The fleets began to speed up as they left the first island, though Leon noted that they stopped accelerating at a slightly slower speed than they had risen to when leaving the Bull Kingdom. They also adopted a more defensive formation, letting smaller and faster ships range ahead farther than they had on approach to the first island. It seemed that they had been once bitten by the Flame Lances taken by Jormun and were now twice shy; they were going to approach the capitals of each island with much more caution from now on, and their eyes were going to be open for any signs of ambush.

Leon himself participated little in the actual affairs of setting up the temporary garrison in Kraterok, though he was still there for most of the meetings. They bored him almost to tears, but he'd taken Nestor's advice and his own realization to heart: he needed the experience in these matters, even if he wasn't going to be calling the shots for these particular cases. He made sure to pay attention to exactly how the Fleet Legates went about incentivizing the remaining local elites into helping them, how they used their manpower to help the people of the city begin rebuilding, and how they subtly and tacitly threatened everyone involved by leaving behind the garrison—for their 'protection'.

Leon would remember these lessons. He'd taken a few walks down into the city with his small squad several times, and it seemed like the Islanders, while not entirely happy with the Legion forces themselves, were at least content and grateful that they weren't being sacked. It seemed like, to Leon's eyes, at least, that the Bull Kingdom had successfully taken back Kraterok and ensured that it would stay in their hands even after they left, barring any action from Jormun.

As for the pirate himself, Leon was sure that Jormun had already quit the island. Instead of sticking around and trying to resist the Legion, Leon felt like Jormun had another goal, one that wasn't quite so

practical and grounded as everyone else was assuming. Leon had thought a lot about the story that Jormun had told him, about the godlike Serpent sealed beneath the island chain, just waiting for someone to come along and release it. The way that Jormun had described it and the way that the bird that so resembled his thunderous Ancestor drew attention to it were signs and glimpses into the pirate's true intention—or so Leon felt. Jormun could've just been messing with his head, but Leon wasn't so sure about that.

Leon kept that theory to himself. He had nothing in the way of evidence to support it, but it just *felt* right. However, the Fleet Legates were clearly of a more immediate suspicion; they believed that when Jormun, as Turiel, claimed that he'd been trying to become King of the Isles, he hadn't been joking. And that theory didn't necessarily conflict with Leon's impression—at the very least, Jormun had certainly come off to him as an ambitious man. But Leon didn't think it was his political ambitions that defined him, but rather his magical and symbolic ambitions.

He *believed* in what he was doing, Leon heard it in his voice when he told him the story, despite later seeming to dismiss the story as just that... though Leon did wonder several times if that was simply his memory playing tricks on him, warping his recollections to suit his narrative.

Whatever the case, as Leon turned his eyes away from Kraterok and toward the second island—even to his eyes still just a gray-green smear in the distance—Leon readied himself for whatever was going to come next, for if he was certain about anything, it was that Jormun was planning something much bigger than the mere act of state-building. He was trying to do something on a whole other level.

If he weren't, then at the very least, Leon would've expected a much more vigorous defense of the Serpentine Isles' largest city and de facto capital. Leon also would've expected an assassination or two after Jormun's successful deception.

As Leon stood there on the deck, leaning on a railing, he glanced over his shoulder at Marcus and Alix sparring together. Marcus was clearly better than her, but Alix was still performing admirably, giving almost as good as she was getting. Alcander was standing nearby, silently watching and waiting with obvious eagerness for his turn to fight. Maia was standing next to Leon, staring down at the water that they were sailing through with a thoughtful expression. Gaius hadn't joined the rest of them for the journey so far, being still an official member of Sigebert's staff and having a few duties to fulfill with the Fleet Legate, but Leon noticed Gaius walking out of the command tower only a few moments after these thoughts finished going through his head, pause for a brief stretch, then start walking languidly in their direction.

Gaius exchanged brief greetings with the others—save for Maia, who barely responded—before joining Leon at the railing.

"So," he began, "Sir Sigebert wants you to know that things are going to be very different when we reach the second island."

"I figured that would be so," Leon replied, his eyes barely straying from watching Alix and Marcus duel. The longer he watched, the prouder and more dejected at Alix's performance he became. Prouder because he'd taught her much of the Raime fighting style when she had squired for him, but also dejected because she wasn't able to overcome Marcus' lifetime of noble training with the blade, even as

skilled as she was. Leon took the blame for that, as he had been Alix's primary teacher during her squireship, even if she had received some tutoring from Prince Trajan.

Gaius paused a moment to watch the spar before he continued. "The second island has several key points of interest we need to capture: the Earl's city, along with a pair of relatively large merchant enclaves. One of these enclaves was established by citizens from the Bull Kingdom, and is also the closest to Serpent's Fang—Kraterok—so that's where we're going to making landfall. Hopefully, if anyone is still there that's sympathetic to the Bull Kingdom, we'll have a much easier landing this time around, but we're still going to assume that the colony has fallen into Jormun's hands and is occupied by enemy forces. We'll hit the sand with a couple battalions of marines, then shadow the fleet by moving south and west along the coast. We'll take the colony by land and sea, establish it as our headquarters on the island, then move on to the rest of the island's settlements. Shouldn't take more than a few days to take all of the targets we need to, but we ought to prepare for a few days spent out in the jungles, just in case."

Leon nodded in acknowledgment. He didn't much mind sleeping out in the jungles—at least, for the moment—and his mind was still more taken by thoughts of Jormun than that rest of the Serpentine Isles.

"It's worth noting," Gaius said, "that the coasts of this island are a lot rougher than the first island. Lots of cliffs, rocks, caves, and all sorts of other places for a possible fleet of pirates to hide in."

"I'll certainly be keeping an eye out," Leon replied. The island was far too big for his magic senses to cover the entire thing, but not for Maia. Magic senses weren't a guarantee that they'd see something, of course, but he was hopeful that if Jormun was going to attack them conventionally, then the pirates would be seen first. "He's not going to stay out in the open, though," Leon said, finishing his thought out loud. "At least, not his *real* troops. Maybe the Islanders will be more blatant in their hostility, but Jormun isn't going to do that. I guarantee you that if he doesn't want to be found, then finding him without tearing the island asunder isn't going to be easy."

"Why do you think that?" Gaius asked, not disagreeing but merely curious as to Leon's reasoning.

"He infiltrated the meeting and hid a pair of Flame Lances that caused a hefty amount of damage," Leon replied, not elaborating too much on specific events. "I spoke with him at great length, and I don't think a man who goes to the trouble of pretending he was someone trustworthy so completely and draw so much attention to himself only to seemingly abandon whatever he was doing and disappear is going to be fighting in any conventional way. We'll need to be prepared for ambushes, misdirections, and feints; sudden strikes and even more sudden retreats, hit and run tactics. Jormun doesn't need to stop us here, he's got three more islands to make us bleed before he'll have to hold the line..."

Leon trailed off a bit, reluctant to continue his line of thought out loud.

'If he even cares about stopping us, that is,' he silently finished. His unease grew with every second they spent slowly sailing toward the second island. Even then, though, not once did he think, even with his doubts about Jormun's 'official' motivation, that the Legion was going to be allowed to run right over the second island, let alone the remaining four. There was going to be at least some resistance, and he had to prepare himself for it.

"You sound almost like you admire him a bit," Gaius said with a sly grin.

"I do," Leon readily admitted. "I could never do what he did, I'm not that good of a liar. You have to admit, though, that it took a crazy amount of balls to just walk right up to the Fleet Legates in the guise of someone else, convincing those hunting you down so thoroughly that you're not the subject of their hunt that they're willing to let you be in charge after they leave. *And* keeping the rest of the remaining nobles in the city in line long enough that no one said *anything* until more than a day after you leave. So, yeah, I respect him for that. Were I in his shoes, I don't even think I'd have that amount of patience or restraint. It just... utterly blows my mind that he did that."

"I guess I can understand," Gaius replied. "Sir Sigebert is *incensed*, though. Even now, he's practically chomping at the bit to introduce that pirate to the nearest headsman."

"Who isn't?" Leon sarcastically asked, though he could think of a few. "I suppose the Islanders don't want to see him dead," he said, his tone turning serious.

"That would make sense to me," Gaius replied. "I don't know any Islanders personally, but I can't imagine they've been all that thrilled with having to give tribute to the Bull Kingdom in punishment for their raiding decades ago."

"You might actually know an Islander," Leon said, surprising the other man.

"Oh? Don't tell me you're an Islander, now, I've already embarrassed myself enough, I'd say, for taking you to be a Valeman..."

"No, not me. One of the people in my unit from our Academy days, a man named Charles. I don't think you'd *know* him, but his family immigrated from the Serpentine Isles into the Northern Territories. I don't think he'd be all that happy with Jormun, but the people who stayed here might be different. I know that I wouldn't be too thrilled if my home were invaded..."

Leon briefly thought about the attack on his home in the Forest of Black and White that left his father dead, and he felt like he could empathize a little bit with how many of the Islanders might feel toward the Bull Kingdom. As soon as the decision was made by Trajan, August, Octavius, and later King Julius that the Serpentine Isles could not be allowed to deny the Bull Kingdom's suzerainty, it was all-but guaranteed that thousands of Islanders would die.

Already, thousands of Islanders *had* died.

Gaius frowned, clearly unable to remember Charles, but he nodded in agreement as Leon continued.

"I'm surprised, Leon, though I suppose I shouldn't be. I never pegged you as the sort that thought about politics and how they impact the people all that much... But I suppose it's certainly something I'd expect from someone from House Raime..."

Leon gave the other man a bitter smile. "It's a recent thing. I don't like politics, I don't like thinking about how they affect the people. But if I'm going to do accomplish what I want, then I'm going to have to change that."

"What is it you're trying to do, if I might ask?" Gaius gave Leon a strange look as he asked that question, one that Leon interpreted as both surprise and appreciation, with a dash of confusion sprinkled in. He

detected no maliciousness in the other man's words, and he figured that since it wasn't exactly something that he had to keep secret, then there'd be no harm in telling Gaius at least some of his future plans.

"When all of this is over, when Jormun is dead and Octavius has been brought back to the Bull Kingdom, I'll be making plans to leave for the Central Empires. I might be joining Heaven's Eye, but it won't be all that soon. Regardless, staying around in the Bull Kingdom is not on my list of things to do. My aim is a little bit higher."

"I think that might be an understatement," Gaius whispered as he nodded in admiration. "Not going to lie, I don't think I'd ever make that decision if I were in your shoes. Having a claim to the Great Plateau isn't something easily given up..."

"Depends on your priorities. Mine do not lay with the Bull Kingdom. I don't plan on stopping my magical growth at the seventh-tier, and the kind of person who would be content with the Great Plateau would, in taking it, only stunt their growth at that level. Besides, the King's doing away with landed nobles, and while it'll take probably the rest of his lifetime to do so, I don't want to make a push for my 'birthright' only to have it taken from my children. Better to just move on."

Gaius just shook his head. "As I said, I don't think I could ever make that decision, or even think that clearly about it. I'd just see the Great Plateau and that would be it."

Leon shrugged. "To each their own, I suppose." Quickly changing the subject, Leon asked Gaius, "Say, what are Sigebert's expectations for the rest of this mission? Like what kind of welcome we ought to be expecting from the rest of the Islanders? I suppose I could ask him myself, but since you're here..."

"After that battle to take Serpent's Fang, he's expecting us to fight tooth and nail for every inch of ground we take," Gaius replied.

Leon nodded and frowned in dejected agreement. "I thought the same."

"I'm thinking most of our people are," Gaius replied. "Enough Islanders have shown that they're willing to fight to keep us away. Enough Legion marines and sailors have died that everyone—at least in Sigebert's fleet—knows someone who will never see home again. They're already thinking in terms of us-vs-them, assuming they weren't before."

"Sounds like a recipe for disaster," Leon observed, feeling some joy at not having to be the person who'd have to deal with all of those issues... at least, for now. If he wanted to unite the former lands of his ancient Clan under his own banner—and he *did* want that—then as Nestor told him that first day in Kraterok, these were problems he was going to have to be prepared to deal with. And, at least right now, he wasn't sure how he'd handle the situation.

He sympathized greatly for the Serpentine Islanders; he'd never considered the Bull Kingdom home, either, and he'd chafed while fighting under them as a knight. Even his current status as something of a mercenary wasn't exactly to his liking.

A strange look must've come over his face, for when Leon glanced at Gaius, he found the other man staring at him.

"What?" he asked.

“Nothing,” Gaius replied. “It’s just as I said before, I couldn’t have imagined you caring about any of this four years ago.”

“Four years ago, I wouldn’t have,” Leon replied as he pushed himself off the railing. “I should get back to work. I haven’t used my bow in a while, and I’d like to make sure it and all the rest of my gear is ready for battle when we arrive.”

Gaius nodded as Maia followed Leon back to their quarters. Everyone else stayed up top for a while yet, giving the two of them some much-needed time for intimacy, while also roping Gaius into their sparring.

Leon didn’t end up doing much work after touching up some of his older enchantments on his bow. He simply lay down in his bed, Maia’s satisfied, sleeping form beside him, as he turned over the thought of how he would pacify the Serpentine Isles were he the one in charge.

By the time sleep inevitably pulled him into its dark embrace, he hadn’t managed to come to any decisive conclusions.

Chapter 546: Arriving at the Second Island

Leon stared at the beach in the distance, a frown on his face. Their chosen landing place was about ten miles away from their first destination on the second island, a small town founded by Bull Kingdom citizens to build ships out of the lumber given by the rest of the Serpentine Isles in tribute to the Bull King.

But the scouts that had been dispatched to ascertain the town’s status had returned with fell news: the town had been razed and abandoned, its primarily wooden buildings blackened by fire and its streets apparently deserted. Being less than twenty miles away now, Leon could easily see with his magic senses the scale of destruction was, if anything, worse than what the scouts had reported, and that the city was just as deserted as the Legion had come to fear. There were no signs of anyone remaining within its maze-like streets and alleys, and Leon couldn’t see a single building that was still intact.

Whatever fire had burned there hadn’t been stopped and had spread from building to building unfettered. Worse, since no one had been able to see the fire from far off—and powerful mages could see a *long* way when on the Endless Ocean—that meant that whatever had happened to the town had happened at least a month before, and yet there had been no word that the fleet had been able to hear. Whatever happened to the people was thus a complete mystery, and one that had many in the task force making everything from conservative guesses—that Jormun had simply taken the people prisoner to try and coerce the fleets to go home—to wild conjectures with little evidence or reason—such as Jormun preparing a massive blood sacrifice to bring ruin to the fleets by invoking the wrath of ancient gods.

After the conversation he had with the man, Leon was more in the second camp than the first, and as the hours passed after discovering the empty colony, Leon grew more and more terrified that Jormun’s Serpent was *truly* down below the Serpentine Isles, and that Jormun was intent on releasing it.

Leon set that fear aside as best as he could and focused his attention on the task at hand: reaching the sacked town with the marines at his back, and maybe figure out just what in the hells happened to it. Perhaps as concerning as the sacked town, however, were the farms in the town’s hinterlands. They

held no signs of having been looted or burned, but Leon couldn't see a single human being among the hundreds of farms along the coast and the few small rivers around the coastal colony.

Leon's route to the colony would take him through many of those farms, so he vowed to stop and see what he could see. The reason for their disappearance could simply be that they didn't want to be in the Legion's way, but Leon had no way to say for sure. He hoped there might be a clue or two in some of the empty farmsteads.

What was also concerning was the fact that no matter how hard Leon looked, he couldn't see hide nor hair of any Islanders waiting in ambush. The task force was made up of many hundreds of ships, there was no way in any hell that their approach could've been missed. There were some pains taken to mask their specific approach—mostly by increasing the width of their sailing formation and sending several other groups on feints toward other potential landing spots—but Leon was resolved not to underestimate Jormun. The pirate was the kind of man that infiltrated the command structure of the task force so completely, so convincingly that the Fleet Legates had been prepared to leave him in control of the island, only to abandon that tactic after less than a day, for some undiscernible reason.

A man like that wasn't one that anyone could predict. Still, the lack of any perceptible resistance to the task force's advance was worrying. That worry only grew stronger a few hours later when Leon and his squad found themselves on the black sand shores of the island, a couple thousand marines disembarking just behind them.

"Where in the hells are these people?!" Alcander wondered aloud, and not for the first time. Leon wasn't alone in his worry and suspicion, but no one, not even Maia with her tremendously powerful magic senses, could make heads or tails of what was happening, or where their enemy happened to be.

"Who knows?" Leon replied with a frown that betrayed just how much he was having to force himself to focus on moving toward the town rather than actively search for their enemy. "Let's just ready to move on. We have to reach that town by the end of the day, and we have a *lot* of ground to cover. Keep your eyes open."

"Yeah," Alcander replied, though he sounded not all enthused. As he fell in behind Leon, Leon heard him murmur, "Just fuckin' fight us straight up, what are you people doing..."

They would move on down the coast, shadowing the fleets as they moved toward the sacked ship-building town. It may have been deserted and ruined, but the loss of dozens of ships and thousands of marines and sailors on their arrogantly forward approach to Kraterok had the Fleet Legates wary of making such a direct move again.

"No damn way they're just going to let us move unobstructed," Marcus murmured, repeating a sentiment that had been given voice many times over the past couple of days.

Leon fully agreed with the statement, and the lack of obvious preparations was starting to get to him. In a way, it would've almost been a comfort to see more conventional defenses, because walls, towers, and armies were something that Leon could easily prepare himself for, and that the fleets were easily capable of dealing with.

Whatever was going on now, however, was going to be much harder handle, that much he could tell.

Leon and his squad were to be the tip of the spear, leading the way at the very front of their marching column. The two Tribunes who were actually in charge of the marines would lead from the center and rear, respectively, leaving Leon essentially unchallenged for dealing with any threats at the front and at what pace to march.

So, Leon set a quick pace. The black sandy shores quickly gave way to tall sheer cliffs and long green tree lines thick enough to block vision after only a few feet. The marines were essentially relying entirely on the magic senses of Leon, Maia, and the small handful of higher-ranked mages they had with them.

Fortunately, as Leon led them down the shoreline, he sensed nothing unusual. However, there was just so many places to hide in the inland jungle that he knew it would've been easy to evade detection. He also couldn't discount the possibility of Jormun or any of his people having laid traps or gotten possession of some manner of invisibility. Or flight, or underwater locomotion, or any of an endless series of possibilities that Leon found himself contemplating with every step he took.

All of this added up to a rather nerve-wracking march. Leon's eyes were constantly scanning their immediate surroundings, looking for anything odd or that stuck out to him as a possible trap. Perhaps an unusually placed rock meant that an explosive spell had been buried beneath it? Maybe there were archers hidden in places that he failed to notice even with his magic senses that were just waiting for a chance to strike, loosing spell arrows into their vulnerable marching column. For all Leon knew, there was even the possibility that some of the cliffs they passed could split open like the sea wall at Kraterok, revealing another salvaged Flame Lance in just the perfect place to punch gigantic holes in their column before they could meaningfully react.

But none of those things happened. And that only made Leon's anxiety worse. His mood was shared by many of the rest of the marines, made obvious by the fact that they marched in complete silence. The dense jungle and lack of opposition had everyone on edge, and everyone who could articulate it would've agreed that with every step, the chances of Jormun attacking them only grew.

Over cliffs they marched, the ocean and the fleet that sailed upon it always there to reassure them on one side, even as the jungle pressed in on the other. They couldn't follow the coast perfectly, however, and several times had to press into the jungle in order to make progress. Each time it was done slowly and carefully, with Leon and his squad ranging forth with significant marine support, ensuring that there were no surprises waiting for them.

Even as the hours passed and they started to enter the cultivated farmlands that were supposed to support the ship-building town, no one relaxed. One reason was that there still wasn't any sign of Jormun or his pirates, but the other was that the empty farms made for eerie scenery to pass through.

The fields themselves were quite anemic compared to some of those that Leon had seen even in the comparatively barren Eastern Territories. Despite being an island people, the Serpentine Islands had relatively few water mages—or mages of any kind, for that matter. Most of their mages took to the seas for their livelihoods rather than committing to developing the islands, acting as fishermen or sailors. As a result, there wasn't much in the way of irrigation, magical or otherwise, that might've helped the farms produce enough food to support larger and more urban populations.

Still, the islands were volcanic, the climate was quite humid with frequent rains, and there were a few small streams here and there, allowing these farms to exist.

As they drew near, Leon and his group saw signs that these farms weren't abandoned long ago. The fields of purple corn were orderly and looked relatively weed-free, the fences keeping the vermin out were well-maintained, and it looked like the storage sheds were still full of tools and other supplies.

And yet, Leon couldn't sense any people around.

Leon called the entire marching column to a halt upon arriving at the first cluster of farmsteads built around a small coastal lake, letting the Tribunes and Centurions take charge of setting up the proper security while Gaius sent up a flare to let the fleets know what was happening. Then, with his squad and a few dozen marines, Leon made his way to the largest nearby farmhouse. By his reckoning, this cluster of farms had enough housing for about half a dozen families.

As they came within a few hundred feet of the farmhouse, Leon whispered to his people, "Spread out and stay alert."

In a few seconds, Marcus, Alcander, and Maia came up on his left, with half of the marines to their left. Anzu, Alix, and Gaius took up positions on his right, with the rest of the marines fanning out in that direction.

Then, they advanced, with Leon and Maia's magic senses spread out in the surrounding area to make sure they weren't about to be attacked. As far as Leon could tell, however, they were alone, and the column behind them was, too.

Leon was the first to reach the door. His magic senses told him no one was inside the small five-room building, but the well-worn ground around the house spoke to it still being inhabited, so he knocked loudly and called out, "Hello?!"

There was no answer, so Leon pushed open the door. To his mild surprise, the door was locked, but there wasn't a single enchantment in the entire house, so he easily managed to push the door open anyway and head inside. The house was only five rooms—one large central room with rough wooden walls, floors, and a ceiling made mostly of thatch filling in around a timber frame. The other four rooms branched off from there, with two bedrooms—one with a single large bed, and the other with three smaller beds—a bathroom that looked like nothing more than a wooden seat with a hole leading to a fairly deep cesspit, and a storage room.

Immediately, he saw that there were no signs of a struggle or hurried packing. It almost looked as if the people who lived in this place had only left for the afternoon and were soon going to return.

The rest of his squad filed in behind him save for Anzu and quickly secured the place, confirming in a matter of minutes what Leon's magic senses had already told him: the house was devoid of people. Everyone quickly shifted into investigation mode rather than security, and they began to practically take the house apart looking for clues as to where its owners might be.

"Look at this," Marcus said as he pointed around in the large central room. Leon glanced over, hoping that he'd found something, but instead just saw Marcus holding up a bag practically overflowing with purple corn. "Wherever these people went, they apparently had no room for food, or at least took all the food they needed and didn't have room for more..."

"Same with the clothes," Alcander added as he exited one of the smaller bedrooms.

"Anything obviously out of order?" Leon asked, but they and the others all shook their heads. Leon scowled as his eyes swept over the place again. "Where the hells did these people go?" he wondered aloud. They couldn't have gotten far, he'd seen people working these farms only a few hours before.

And yet, no matter how hard he looked, he didn't see anything out of place that might suggest a hasty departure. The one table was in the center of the room with a nearby hearth, a large iron pot next to it. The floor was mostly bare dirt, though the table and its half dozen chairs had a roughly spun carpet of jungle plants beneath it. The walls were lined with shelves, barrels, and sacks, with little else in the way of furniture. As far as Leon could tell, most of those barrels and sacks were full, too. Obviously, he couldn't say for certain if anything was out of place, but it certainly didn't seem this was a place that had been attacked or hurriedly evacuated.

Over the next half hour or so, Leon and his squad turned the place upside-down, and yet they found nothing of note. No hidden passages, no doors leading to cellars where the family who lived there might be hiding, no sign of where they had gone.

When Leon came back out of the house, he was thoroughly frustrated, and he wasn't the only one.

"Not a damn soul to be seen, no magic stuff anywhere, this is *creepy*," Alix muttered as she stepped back out into the light.

"Yeah," Marcus replied. "No farmer I know would *ever* willingly give up their land like this, they don't typically care about the goings-on of armies and Kingdoms and all that. So long as the sun keeps shining and their crops keep growing, most don't care. At least, in my experience."

"It's likely that they saw us coming and ran into the jungle," Alix countered with an almost challenging tone as she shot Marcus an almost exasperated look. "They may not care about our politics, but they might still be concerned with the local town having been sacked and then having a massive fleet appear on the horizon."

"Fair," Marcus conceded.

"I'd say there's a damn good chance that they've thrown in with Jormun," Gaius suggested. "Maybe they saw didn't want to answer any awkward questions about what happened to that town. Maybe they're more actively working for their 'Pirate Lord', and are just waiting for us to lower our defenses before they strike. Wouldn't be surprised if they have some kind of place to hide out in the jungle that has been warded against magic senses. I don't th—"

Cutting Gaius off before he could finish his hypothesis, a tremendous fiery explosion tore through the back ranks of the marine's marching column. It was fairly distant to Leon and his squad, but it was impossible to miss as the shockwave punched into their chests.

Immediately, Leon's armor was on and his sword was in his hand. He projected his magic senses again, taking in the sight of more than a dozen mangled corpses of people who used to be Bull Kingdom marines and dozens more trying to shake off their injuries. The rest of the marines marching in their companies swiftly assumed proper defensive formations, with shield walls pointed at the jungle, but there was no one to see out there. No archers, no hostiles of any kind. Just an empty tree line.

“Fucking hell!” Alix shouted as she flinched at the sound of the explosion, while Marcus involuntarily ducked his head. Alcander and Gaius, meanwhile, responded by drawing their weapons and staring at the back of the column. Maia and Anzu were a little startled, but neither seemed particularly anxious.

“Let’s go!” Leon shouted as he led his squad running back toward the company that he been completely gutted.

[Do you sense anything?] Leon asked Maia as they ran.

[No,] she replied.

He couldn’t either, which brought out a terrible frown.

It took only about a minute for Leon and his squad to reach the back of the marching column, even with the companies relatively spread out. In that time, there were no further explosions, and Leon saw no one else moving about in the jungle.

“See to the injured!” Leon shouted at his squad as they started to pull out the healing spells he’d shared with them. He then stood there, staring into the trees as if waiting for someone to show themselves. No one did, and as the confused and pained screams of the injured filled his ears, Leon felt his heart growing cold with fury. The loss of his unit during the civil war was still a vivid and painful memory, and yet here dozens more had been injured or killed on his watch.

This time, however, he couldn’t even see his enemy. It was like some random explosion had just torn through the company holding the rear, without any evidence at all of what had caused it, almost like it had been act of some capricious or sadistic god. Not even the fire magic it had given off was a clue. It could’ve been a fireball from Jormun’s seventh-tier fire mage, or it could’ve been a spell arrow. It could’ve even been an explosive mine left for them to stumble over.

“Who’s in charge back here?” Leon demanded. After a long moment of silence, one of the company Prefects stepped forward, a fresh-faced man maybe about twenty-five by mortal standards, though he was third-tier, so he was likely closer to forty.

“I... would guess that would be me,” he said, his tone uncertain.

“Where’s the Tribune and your Centurion?” Leon demanded to know, though he could make a guess. Neither the company Centurion nor the Tribune that had been marching with them could be seen.

The Prefect took a deep breath and nodded in the direction of several of the incinerated corpses, telling Leon that his guess was accurate.

Leon swore under his breath and did his best to suppress the instinct to charge into the tree line and find whoever did this. But that would be reckless and potentially suicidal, even with Maia at his side. He still couldn’t sense anyone out in the trees, meaning that there was someone or something out there capable of evading their senses, and that made them eminently dangerous.

Still, the hours of trudging along the shore constantly on edge for the inevitable attack had made him eager for a fight. He wanted nothing more than to release all of that pent-up frustration by charging into the trees and hunting down whoever had done this.

But there were no clues to go on, not from his current vantage point. He'd need to get much closer and look for any tracks, and even then, there were no guarantees that he'd find anything.

Leon grimaced as he cast his gaze around to the other companies. He couldn't abandon them like that, and he wasn't sure as to the wisdom of having everyone charge into the tree line chasing an invisible enemy. To make that any kind of viable, they needed a fortified position to fall back to, which they currently lacked.

Leon swore under his breath again, glad only for the fact this his helmet kept his frustration from being too obvious.

"Leon!" Gaius called out, and as Leon turned his head, he saw the other man pointing to the ships off in the distance, and at one of the dreadnoughts that had quite a spectacular array of signal flags flying above its central tower, along with a rec

Chapter 547: Jormun's Jungle Art Project

Leon and the marines made it to the sacked town without any further difficulties. It was so easy and uneventful that it almost seemed like the one explosion that had killed one of the two Tribunes officially leading the force was some kind of fluke or accident.

But Leon knew better than to think that. As far as he was concerned, that was Jormun's doing, probably by some kind of trap spell since Leon hadn't been able to identify any nearby archers or other pirates that might've been responsible.

It angered Leon greatly that he'd been hit by the explosive spell, but it almost angered him even more that Jormun didn't do more to resist their movement—it was almost as if the man was toying with them, showing them that he could strike and kill them when he wanted to, but refusing to do so. Leon was *not* into the idea that his column of marines made it to their destination by Jormun's grace. He would've felt better if they'd had to fight some Islanders or something, *anything* to earn their advance. It felt to Leon a lot like Jormun was rubbing his power over them in their faces with that one singular mine.

As it was, no other traps were encountered, nor were any Islanders at all seen. All of the farms in the town's hinterland had been seemingly abandoned before the marching column came through. There wasn't a single exception.

If he had more time, Leon would've stopped to check these places out more thoroughly, but he hadn't been able to spare the time. The fleets had been close to outpacing him and the marines after they'd been forced to stop to deal with the injured following Jormun's bombing, so he'd had to hurry everyone past the farms without much in the way of investigation aside from cursory scans with his magic senses.

Upon reaching the town ruins, all of that hurry seemed pointless. There wasn't so much as a single intact building anywhere to be found; all of the wooden structures had been razed to the ground, leaving little but piles of ash and blackened timber, and their proximity didn't change anything. There'd been some hope that there'd been people hiding in the ruins who'd reveal themselves as the Legion approached—this was a Bull Kingdom colony, after all.

Leon could only sigh as his magic senses swept across the ruins. He could see no survivors anywhere.

As he stood staring out at the destruction, the remaining marine Tribune came forward and almost apologetically asserted his authority, getting the marines to keep moving down to the remains of the docks. Leon didn't argue, he simply led his small squad to the top of a small cliff nearby that overlooked most of the town, keeping an eye out for anything that might be unusual or might indicate an attack by Jormun.

"This place..." he heard Alix mutter in horror once they could all finally take in the scale and completeness of the town's destruction. Leon shared her horror; even when towns were brutally sacked, it was incredibly rare—at least to Leon's knowledge—that settlements like these were so completely destroyed.

"What kind of hells-spawned people could do this?" Alcander said, adding to Alix's sentiment.

Leon sighed again and simply answered, "Jormun."

—

As night fell on the island, the town looked very different. The Legion engineers who had been almost the first off the ships had demolished most of the ruins in short order—there hadn't been much need to collect evidence, not with the town so destroyed—and then quickly raised a simple, if large, square stone fortress in the town's place. The docks were rebuilt in less than an hour with the earth mages doing most of the heavy lifting.

By the time they were done, the Legion had a good strong point from which they could secure the rest of the island.

However, during all of the construction, there had been no sign of Jormun, his pirates, or any other Islander, for that matter. The Fleet Legates wasted no time in sending out scout ships to the other two settlements they wanted to check out, including the seat of the island's ruling Earl, but as it was, the Legion fleets were seemingly all alone in this little corner of the Serpentine Isles.

Leon found it terribly creepy, which made him restless. As a glorified mercenary, he had little to do as the Legion ran around getting their fortress set up. They didn't know how long they might stick around on the island—In Basina and Theuderic's case, they were under direct orders from the King to reimpose his suzerainty over the island, and that could take a while. Leon and Sigebert, however, were only there to find and recapture Octavius, of whom they had seen even less than Jormun.

But Leon had to admit that he'd barely even thought about Octavius during this journey. The Prince seemed so inconsequential, especially after Leon had met Turiel and the man's true identity came to light. He just had an awful feeling that whatever Jormun's true goal was, it was a hell of a lot worse than setting himself up as a King over the Serpentine Isles, and every minute he spent not doing anything in the Legion camps was not just a minute wasted, it was another minute for Jormun to continue putting his plans, whatever they may be, into motion.

Eventually, Leon found himself on the fairly low and relatively simple walls of the fortress, staring off into the island's nearby jungle. Jormun and his pirates were out there somewhere, he could feel it in his bones. There was no way in the hells that a single explosive mine was the extent of Jormun's plans for resistance on this island, the man was doing *something* with all these missing people.

Leon wasn't sure how long he spent on the battlements. He'd gone up almost as soon as they had been erected and stayed up there until sunset. He gave his squad some time to rest after their march, but Maia stayed with him as he stood up there, staring into the distance, using his magic senses to sweep through the jungle slowly and methodically, looking for anything at all of note.

The jungle was large and dense, though, and it would take days for him to examine everything within his range. Still, he couldn't help the boredom and the sitting around. By the time the sun made contact with the horizon at the edge of the plane and started to slip down under it, Leon was sorely tempted to just leap down from the walls and venture out into the jungle to see what he might be able to find the old-fashioned way.

Before he could do anything with that temptation, however, he noticed Gaius walking along the ramparts, slowly making his way toward Leon's position.

It took a few minutes, but once the blond nobleman drew close, Leon turned his attention away from the jungle just long enough to give Gaius a quick nod of acknowledgment.

"Leon," Gaius responded as he took up a position next to Leon, leaning on a merlon as he stared in the opposite direction as Leon, his eyes taking in all the ships of the Bull Kingdom as they set up their nightly patrols.

They silently stood there for long minutes, no one else but Maia around, their closest company a handful of marines in the nearby towers.

"So," Gaius, said, breaking their awkward silence, "Sir Sigebert's curious as to why you haven't come down, yet. He almost sent me to fetch you and bring you in to the meeting that he and the rest of the Fleet Legates had."

"I clearly wasn't needed for it," Leon replied with a detached tone, his attention still on the jungle and occasionally turning back to the nearby farms. "I would've just gotten in the way. I'm just a mercenary, I'm not here to dictate strategy to the Legates."

Leon felt more than a few twinges of guilt; he knew that had to brush up on his experience in the management department, but his heart just wasn't in it right now. He'd never be able to focus even if he were down there, not with the specter of Jormun looming over everything. Such an attitude couldn't last, Leon knew that, but he still needed the time to unwind a bit.

"You still stepped on a few toes by not showing up," Gaius replied, his tone light and not accusatory. In fact, he seemed almost amused at Leon's apparent snubbing of the Fleet Legates.

Leon took a deep breath as he finally turned his full attention toward Gaius. "As I said, they don't need me for their little get-together. They're more than capable of making the decisions on their own. I'm just here to provide a little extra muscle if Jormun's seventh-tier mages make problems of themselves. I'm sure that their meeting was riveting, but I'd rather spend my time doing what I can to find Jormun."

"Hey, I'm not passing judgment here, I'm just making some conversation." Gaius raised his hands in an almost defensive gesture, as if to block Leon's anger, but he wore a sarcastic lopsided smile at the same time.

Leon took a deep breath and turned back to the jungle for a brief second. With the sun so low, the jungle beneath the trees had turned practically pitch-black, but that hardly made a difference to Leon's seventh-tier senses. Still, nothing out there caught his attention, not even the jungle wildlife that he could see.

"Did you need something, Gaius?" Leon quietly and calmly asked.

"Nothing specific," the nobleman admitted. "Mostly, I was wondering if *you* needed something."

Leon cocked an eyebrow and glanced back the other man, his golden eyes seemingly piercing right into Gaius like the lance of a mounted knight in a full charge. And yet, Gaius didn't flinch, he stared right back at Leon, defiant in his resistance to Leon's unconscious accusing pressure.

"Do I really look that out of sorts?" Leon asked, his tone still even and calm. He even glanced at Maia and gave her a self-deprecating smile. She responded only with a shrug.

Gaius replied, "You've been up here for hours, staring off at not a damned thing. I think I'm warranted in asking if you're all right."

Leon slightly grimaced, but he didn't try to avoid the question. Gaius seemed sincere enough, and Leon reluctantly admitted that he probably *did* seem a bit out of sorts to everyone else.

After a moment's pause, Leon whispered, "Restless."

"Hmm?" Gaius responded in confusion.

"I'm restless," Leon clarified. "Some of the people I was responsible for were killed today, and instead of finding those responsible, I continued on like nothing happened. More than that, Jormun is still out there, doing who the hells knows what with Octavius..."

"Concerned about our dear kidnapped Prince?" Gaius sarcastically asked. "I'm not. Personally, I say that no matter what happens to him, it's not enough."

"We *don't* know what's happening, though," Leon pointed out in a slight growl. "He *should* be a head shorter right now; instead, for all we know, Jormun has been serving him blue-claw lobster on a silver platter every day and hosting him in a golden palace."

"You don't really believe that, do you? That was a pretty ridiculous scenario, as far as things go..."

"No, I don't really think that's what's happening. But Jormun needed Octavius for something, otherwise he wouldn't have acted when he did. He wouldn't have *done* what he did. Why break out a Prince from the Royal dungeon and flee here? If he wanted to be a King as everyone seems to think, why did he not just stay here and solidify his base instead of provoking the Bull Kingdom? That would've been a much more productive use for his time if that's what he wanted."

Gaius nodded and said, "It's a little strange, I admit. But then again, Jormun doesn't quite seem all there in the head, if you know what I mean. He hasn't exactly behaved as if he takes us seriously. He had the perfect chance to cut off the head of our task force, and yet he didn't take it."

Leon scowled. "Maybe that means he's crazy. Maybe it means what he wants isn't political. Maybe it means we don't know what the fuck he really wants. Maybe, maybe, maybe. I just want to find him, cut

his damned head off, and then drag Octavius back to the capital so his daddy can give him his spankings and then we can all just move the hells on.”

Just saying those words out loud had Leon feeling like his stomach was about to fall out of his body. It did nothing to alleviate his dread; if anything, his dread had only grown.

“What do you want to do about it?” Gaius quietly asked.

“I want to get off this damn wall and go find that damn pirate,” Leon growled through clenched teeth. “I don’t like this... this *waiting*. This waiting to be attacked. This waiting for Jormun to make the next move. If you ask me, this focus on the people of the Serpentine Isles is misplaced right now. We need to find Jormun and end him. These Isles will never fully submit to the Bull Kingdom if he’s still around.”

“If Jormun has support among the people, then we have to work to do something about that,” Gaius pointed out, his fairly flat tone making it clear that he wasn’t so much disagreeing with Leon as he was simply giving some obligatory advocacy for the other school of thought. “Besides, the people on this island may know where he’s hiding. Reaching out to them and getting them to work with us might bring us to Jormun and Octavius even faster.”

“Maybe,” Leon conceded. “I’m not good at that, though. I’m better in the wild, tracking down my enemy and putting them down.”

“Yeah, speaking from personal experience, you’re pretty damn good at that,” Gaius replied with a chuckle. “But, listen. No one wants this to be over more than I do. I spent more than a year working for that shit Prince Octavius. I know exactly how bad he is, and in hindsight, I probably could’ve saved the entire Kingdom a *lot* of grief by doing something about him before he could assassinate Prince Trajan and kick off a civil war. I want to head out there, too, and bring all of this to an end.”

Leon nodded in agreement, though he knew what Gaius couldn’t do such a thing. He was still a knight, essentially fulfilling the same role he’d filled when he had squired for Octavius. He was a hostage meant to keep his family in line until King Julius could reassert his authority. He was still answerable to the Fleet Legates in all the ways that mattered, he wasn’t free enough to just leave the fortress and go pirate hunting.

But Leon was—or, he at least thought himself free enough to do so.

“How about this,” Leon said as his patience started running on empty, “I’ll head out there with my people and scout out the interior of the island a bit, maybe head back to those farms we passed by earlier today. See what I can find. Sigebert and the others can continue with getting set up here. With the fleet just offshore and thousands of marines in camp, Jormun would be a fool to attack, so it’s not like you *need* me here. And I’ll never be too far that you can’t signal me with a flare. If I don’t find anything, then I’ll come back and focus on the more social aspects of this campaign tomorrow.”

“I... don’t think that would fly with the Fleet Legates,” Gaius responded with a frown. “They don’t typically like people going off and doing their own thing.”

“Good thing I don’t answer to them,” Leon replied with a cheeky smile. He’d already been paid his silver coin, so it wasn’t like the Legates had much power over him. “Besides, I don’t need the idea to fly with them when I can do that myself. Do me a favor and make sure Sigebert knows what I’m doing...”

Leon then turned toward the camp and leaped down from the battlements, Maia only a step behind him.

“Leon, wait!” Gaius called out as he held out his hand as if trying to reach over and stop Leon, but he was far too late, Leon had already run into the tents.

—

It wasn’t too difficult for Leon to find his squad. The tents set aside for him and his people were closer to the center of the fortress where the command tent was, but instead of going there, he went to a section of the camp near the inside edge of the walls closest to the shore; that’s where the marines and sailors had their designated relaxation zones. An area had been set up filled with bars, tables, and even a small stage for people to play music and a ring for people to spar with each other if they so desired.

It was a relatively strange sight for Leon, he’d certainly never seen something like this in a Legion camp on land, but he supposed he’d never spent much time in a fortress like this aside from the Bull’s Horns, and neither had he spent much time with sailors and their accompanying marines.

After taking a moment to look around, he swiftly found Alix just about ready to bare-knuckle box a man twice her size with a murderous look in her eyes while Alcander stood just behind her, a derisive sneer on his face directed towards the marine that had seemingly aroused Alix’s ire. Marcus, meanwhile, was only about a dozen feet away absorbed in a game of cards with about a hundred silver sitting in a pile between him and three other players.

“... and say that again! I fucking dare you!” Alix shouted, her voice backed by her fourth-tier power easily carrying over the loud din of the rest of the gathered men and women. Leon even felt a wisp of killing intent wafting through her aura.

The hulking brute she was shouting at put on a brave face, but Leon could see his knees subtly shake, his third-tier aura flagging slightly. However, he was in front of the rest of his squad, and they were shouting and hollering at Alix and Alcander, so he couldn’t just back down.

“Keep talking, girly, and I’ll have you bent over one of these tables!” the man shouted, his voice cracking almost imperceptibly and betraying his lack of confidence in his ability to follow through on that threat.

With a smile, Leon and Maia approached the group. He was tempted to just let things take their course—watching his former squire kick the marine’s testicles up into his throat would’ve been entertaining, if nothing else—but he wanted to get moving outside the walls as soon as he could.

“What’s going on here?!” Leon thundered, the smile on his face disappearing as everyone around turned in his direction. He had to fight a little bit harder to keep his face stoic and serious when he saw a handful of the gathered marines and sailors pale slightly upon seeing him.

“Leon!” Alcander called out, his eyes subtly glaring at the marine from the corner of his eye. “We were just about to teach some of these squids a few things about respect. You in?”

Leon glared at the marine opposite Alix, and he could swear that if the man hadn’t been supported by more than a dozen at his back, he would’ve passed out in terror. Leon couldn’t tell if the marine—or anyone else there, for that matter—could recognize him apart from his obvious and unhidden power, but as it was, all the blood drained from the man’s face and sweat began forming on his brow, so

whether or not the marine knew who he was hardly mattered, Leon had already achieved his desired effect.

All it took were a few menacing steps for Leon to get in the man's face. The marine was a little bit taller than Leon, but compared to the latter, he seemed no bigger than an ant. He shrunk down at least an inch under the weight of Leon's aura and sweat began to drip from his forehead and down the end of his nose.

"You making trouble for my people?" Leon growled.

"Uhhh..." the man mumbled, and said nothing more, meekly backing down.

Leon raised one of his hands and brought it to the marine's cheek. The marine flinched, but Leon just ended up patting his cheek like he would pet a dog's head and drawled, "Good."

"He *was* being a bit of a dick, Leon," Alix said, her eyes staring daggers at the marine.

"Then make it quick, we've somewhere to be," Leon replied as he stepped away and started walking toward Marcus. He heard the sound of a fist meeting a cheek resound through the area, immediately followed by at least two dozen people groaning in sympathy and mockery for the marine and in celebration of Alix's swift and efficient strike.

A moment later, before he'd even reached Marcus' table, Maia was joined beside Leon by Alix and Alcander.

"Could've taken him without your help," Alix insisted, though she wore a muted smile on her face that betrayed her happiness with the result.

"Of that I have no doubt, but I want to get us moving," Leon replied. Once he'd finished, they'd reached Marcus' table, and Leon didn't even hesitate to grab the back of Marcus' chair and spin him around in the dirt.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Marcus shouted in alarm, having apparently missed Leon and Maia's arrival due to being so absorbed in his game. "What's going on?"

"Stuff. Let's go," Leon said as he started to drag Marcus away, chair and all.

Marcus squalled in surprise as he twisted in his chair to grab his share of the silver on the table before Leon dragged him away, to the protestations of those he'd been playing with. But with Leon there, no one actually tried to stop him.

"What's happening?!" Marcus asked as he stuffed his silver into the satchel at his hip and rose from the chair to follow Leon on his own feet.

"We're heading out tonight, I want all of you suited up for battle," Leon said.

—

Alix, Marcus, and Alcander weren't particularly happy. They'd gotten a few hours of rest, and then Leon dragged them back out of the walls to trudge through the jungle instead of relaxing in the fortress drinking and fighting and gambling, as they'd been planning on spending their evening.

Gaius, too, wasn't happy, but Sigebert, perhaps knowing that he couldn't stop Leon and didn't even want to try, had ordered him to accompany Leon's group as he'd been doing since they'd arrived at the Serpentine Isles. Gaius had met Leon and his squad at the fortress' main gates.

Now, with Leon, Maia, and Anzu, all of them were making their way around the walls of the fortress.

"Why are we going this way?" Gaius asked as he walked just behind Leon. "The farms are the other way..."

"I'm aware of that," Leon replied. "No doubt we can learn something if we go back and give those places a closer inspection, but this town had, what? Five thousand people living in it? More than that?"

"Something like that," Gaius replied. "About one and a half thousand families, I think..."

"Right. And how many remains did we find when the town was demolished?"

Gaius almost answered before he caught himself. "I, uh... don't know. I don't think anyone said. At least, not while I was around."

"No human remains were found here," Marcus said from behind them. "One of the engineers I was playing cards with said so. Not even a single scorched skeleton anywhere. No survivors, either. It's like this town's inhabitants just vanished shortly before it was burned to the ground."

"Right," Leon said. "I doubt they vanished, and that many people don't just disappear without leaving some kind of trace. Maybe they were all loaded onto boats and taken away as Jormun's slaves or something of that nature, I can't say. But what I *can* say is that if they were taken away on foot, then I'll see some evidence of it. I just have to take a look."

Many of the traces left behind of what happened to the town would've been destroyed by the town's demolishing, but the Legion engineers hadn't gone too far with it. The fortress wasn't as large as the town, so after demolishing all the burned ruins, they didn't have to clear any of the jungle away from the walls for security purposes. So, all Leon had to do was inspect the tree line and see what he could see. He wasn't intending to stray so far away from the walls that he could be cut off from Legion support, but he felt like taking a quick look to see what he could see.

Scouts, of course, had already been sent out to get the lay of the land around the fortress, but as far as Leon knew from watching with his magic senses, they'd mostly focused on the shoreline, where the habitable land was to be found, placing extra emphasis on the seemingly abandoned farms. There hadn't been much inspection of the jungle itself, which Leon thought to be an oversight. Putting himself in Jormun's place, if he wanted to get a bunch of people to disappear over land, he'd have them travel through the harsher terrain first to throw off any pursuers. Jormun, of course, could've used ships to transport the townsfolk, but Leon had to check, just in case.

So close to the walls, no one was particularly stealthy, and neither did the early evening darkness stop them—all of them were powerful enough to see perfectly fine in the dark, especially with the clear island skies letting the bright moon and countless stars shine down on the jungle as they crawled higher into the sky.

Still, there wasn't much to see. Damp jungle ground and a whole lot of greenery, plus the incessant buzzing of insects and the occasional staticky sound of Leon blasting some tiny flying bug that strayed

too close. But, in a way, that was almost a good thing because it meant Leon didn't have to spend much time looking for trails; five thousand people traipsing through the jungle would've left quite the footpath that would've been impossible to miss. But that wasn't to say that Leon got careless, he still spent sufficient time examining the tree line for any signs of recent human activity, and he set a slow pace so that he could properly inspect the land in front of them for any additional traps that Jormun may have laid out here.

Unfortunately, he still came up short. About all he managed to find were a few small hunting paths that clearly hadn't been used in a while and were far too small to have been used by so many people.

He almost called the search off in favor of heading back to the farms where the trail was much warmer, but something stopped him. It was a strange feeling that he'd missed something obvious, something that was now almost calling to him.

Frowning, Leon led his group back in the opposite direction a short ways despite the muted grumblings of his companions. As he walked over ground he'd already covered, quietly examining the ground they passed, he didn't see anything that he'd missed, however.

Again, he almost called off the search in order to move on, but as the thought crossed his mind, he heard the beating of feathered wings in his ear before the thought could transform into words.

Leon looked around and saw the same bird—at least, he thought it was the same bird—that he'd seen in Kraterok. It was perched on a nearby tree, its Thunderbird-like feathers shining in the moonlight, its yellow avian eyes locked on him. Leon stared right back, briefly wondering if he ought to call out to the creature to test whether he was right or not in recognizing its obvious intelligence. It had followed him so far, after all, and seemed strangely fixated on him, almost as if it could sense his heritage.

Or so Leon justified it in his head for he couldn't immediately think of any other explanation for the bird's strange behavior.

Before Leon could say anything, though, the bird briefly looked down at the ground around the tree, then took off in flight deep into the jungle, leaving Leon rather perplexed.

But Leon did as the bird seemingly bid, and glanced down, noticing the subtle signs of a hunter having passed through the area, though not recently. With a narrowing of his eyes, Leon followed the trail a little bit into the tree line, eliciting questions from his companions, to which he merely responded that he wanted to investigate this trail a little bit.

He didn't find anything of note, but he felt like that bird had been trying to tell him something. He didn't know what it was trying to imply—he thought that it might've been related to Jormun's whereabouts, but the trail it was telling him to follow didn't seem to line up with that hypothesis, no one had used the trail in more than a month, perhaps even more than two as far as Leon could guess.

But there was still an undeniable sense of trust that bloomed in Leon's mind for this bird. It had to know who he was, or at least have some kind of idea. It could sense his power and was responding to it, that had to be what was happening.

Leon quickly cast his magic senses further into the jungle, trying to follow the bird's flight path. He didn't have to look far, for the bird was only about two hundred feet into the jungle, perched on the branch of another tree, staring back at him, clearly waiting for him to catch up.

"Let's head this way, at least for a little bit," Leon muttered to the others as he led them deeper into the jungle.

"Why? Notice something?" Gaius asked.

Leon was about to mention the bird's strange behavior, but he caught himself. For some reason, he didn't think that the bird would be considered compelling evidence, and he didn't want the others to think he was leading them on a wild goose chase. So, even though he didn't really want to and didn't much see too many benefits in doing so, he replied, "Yeah, I think there's something here..."

The others didn't question him after that. His skill in the forests were undeniable, and though these weren't exactly the forests he was used to, he was still the unquestioned expert in this field.

Leon led them into the jungle. Anzu, being the largest of them by far, had a little bit of trouble making it through the underbrush, but with a little bit of applied wind magic, he was able to cut his way through. Everyone else had few problems following Leon's lead.

For his part, Leon didn't pay too much attention to the path they were on. He'd occasionally glance down long enough to see that they were still on the old hunting trail, but for the most part, he paid most of his attention to the bird, watching as it flitted through the trees, landing and waiting for him to catch up before taking off again and leading him and his people further into the forest.

Several times, large predators came near them. A giant snake with a head the size of a carriage and fangs longer than Leon's body; some long reptilian thing with a spiked tail, bulbous eyes, a long snout, and more teeth than Leon's entire party combined; a huge green cat with black tiger-like stripes, fangs that extended down past its jaw, and claws like black steel; a boar bigger even than Anzu and with tusks that would've made a bull elephant shrivel in shame. These creatures were all powerful, at least fifth-tier and a couple even stronger, but none of them even seemed to notice Leon's party. It was a good thing, too, because while Leon and especially Maia were stronger than all of them, he didn't want to waste the time dealing with them. But Leon could still appreciate why the Serpentine Isles had such a small population and why civilization hadn't seemed to have penetrated further into the jungle. If these were the beasts on the outskirts of the jungle, he shuddered to think what might be lurking even deeper.

After following the bird about a quarter mile into the jungle—just at the edge of where Leon would've forced himself to call everyone to halt and turn around—it eventually revealed its destination, the thing it had decided to show Leon. At first, though, Leon was unable to recognize it. To his magic senses, it almost looked like the bird had landed upon nothing at all, as if it were perched on air. There was clearly something there since he could feel *something* pushing back against his magic senses, something that was somehow keeping itself invisible without entirely scattering his magic senses and immediately alerting him to its presence.

As Leon approached and finally pulled into visual range, he froze in shock.

The bird had landed in the middle of a tiny clearing barely large enough for Leon's entire party. Still, despite the clearing's small size, the moon still shone down upon it through an unnatural hole in the jungle canopy.

In the center of the clearing, upon which the bird had perched, were three large wooden planks each at least ten feet long, all nailed together in the center to create a star shape. Tied and nailed to the planks at the wrists, waist, and ankles was a human skeleton, not so much as a single strip of flesh still attached to its body, its bones brown with dried blood, its head upright and staring back at Leon as if it were still alive.

For a moment, Leon almost addressed the skeleton, its hollow eye sockets seeming to follow him as he forced himself out of his brief moment of visceral shock and carefully approached the corpse, but he quickly realized that it was truly dead, and its upright skull had simply been propped up against the back of the vertical plank. The others followed suit, all of their eyes locked on the skeleton, curses muttered under their breath. Only Maia and Anzu retained their composure.

As he stepped close, Leon wondered just how the skeleton was staying intact, for not even at a closer view did the skeleton reveal any flesh. It just lay against the planks, lifeless and unmoving, yet somehow not just falling to the ground.

After a moment, Leon's eyes fell upon the planks themselves. They didn't immediately seem to be anything to write home about, but as Leon slowly circled this grisly display, ignoring the questions and reactions of his companions for the moment, he saw that all three planks had been heavily enchanted by burning runes into their backs. It wasn't a complicated enchantment, but it made it so that this... *whatever* it was, couldn't be seen with magic senses.

But as Leon was examining the runes, he noticed a second enchantment hidden within. It didn't seem dangerous, so when the others started to approach the corpse, drawing closer to it than Leon did, he didn't immediately start to panic. Seeing the runes suddenly glow with white light gave him a bit of a scare, but there wasn't enough magic within the enchantment to present any kind of danger.

And it soon became clear what the enchantment did. The skull slowly turned its head, the bones of its neck creating a horrific grinding sound as did, while most of the fingers of the corpse's left hand curled, until it was pointing and looking directly to its left.

Leon and his squad instinctively followed its gaze with varying expressions of horror, but no one saw anything out in the trees. Leon projected his magic senses in that direction, but again, saw nothing. However, whomever had set this up clearly possessed knowledge about how to hide things from magic senses, so Leon didn't immediately assume that there wasn't anything in that direction.

But he didn't start moving in that direction. He intended on following the corpse at some point, but he'd gone as far as he was willing to without returning to the fortress and get some support.

"We're going to head back," he slowly said to his people. "Or, someone needs to head back. I don't want to leave this thing here and have it disappear on us. Most of us will stay behind to keep an eye on it, how about—"

"Leon!" Gaius suddenly shouted, and Leon, surprised as he was, paused a moment to look at the blond nobleman.

Gaius was staring not at the corpse, but at the sky, barely visible through the trees apart from the unnaturally circular hole in the canopy directly above the crucified corpse. Leon followed his gaze and saw a strange red haze in the air. Without any clouds for the light to bounce off, it was dim, but Leon easily saw what caused it.

This was a flare sent up by the fortress. The task force was under attack.

Chapter 548: Jormun's Second Strike

Ships in the hastily reconstructed port were ablaze, sailors and marines were scurrying around finding their weapons and getting organized, and the hundreds of other ships anchored out at sea were slowly getting moving.

Leon could only stare at the chaos going on back at the fortress, almost unable to understand what in the hells had just happened, before his brain kicked in and he shouted, "We're heading back! Now!"

Without another thought, Leon tore off into the jungle, the rest of his squad just behind him. They left the crucified skeleton behind. Leon knew how to find it again, anyway, but right now, whatever it was pointing at or whatever that bird had tried to lead him toward could wait. Their priority had to be the fortress.

Leon kept his magic senses projected the entire time, keeping just enough of his attention on the jungle around him to not stumble or trip, but his focus was on the fortress. The more he saw, the more he could see the order in the chaos: the marines were far more organized than the sailors, already forming up along the battlements of the fortress walls and getting into formation just behind them. The sailors and marines at the port were focused mostly on putting out the fires, but already Leon could see that at least two dozen of the smaller ships and at least two larger war galleys had been damaged to the point of no longer being seaworthy. It looked there had been significant damage to many more ships, as well.

But there didn't seem to be any sign of whoever or whatever had done all of that. Leon couldn't see any sign of their enemy, and neither did it seem like anyone else could, for the rest of the fleets were scrambling to get their crews back at their battle stations while making sure that the port was locked down.

And then Leon found out what happened, for it happened again. A lone ship, only a little bit longer than a war galley, but much thicker, erupted from the ocean right in the center of a cluster of ships. A pair of short metal tubes attached to large metal canisters easily the size of carriages the looked terrifyingly similar to the Legion's Flame Lances that were mounted on its main deck swiveled as men and women scrambled around their base. A moment later, the tubes flashed with red light as countless runes along their length filled with power, and fire poured from their barrels, bathing a number of the nearby Legion ships in bright orange flame.

The sailors on the decks of those ships screamed as the flames washed over them, the sound reaching Leon's ears even as far away as he was. For a moment, this handful of burning ships almost seemed like they'd keep floating, the enchantments wrought into their hulls doing their best to keep them above the water, but then Leon watched them begin to sink into the ocean as the attacking ship passed them by, with many of the surviving sailors jumping into the water to try and save themselves.

The rest of the ships in the group didn't take that lying down, however. Most of them were small ships, but a few were decently-sized war galleys with brutal rams that were already turning to face their attacker. One even had an artillery trebuchet that Leon could see being loaded with a round stone covered in fire runes.

As this conflict continued, the bigger ships in the fleet turned their attention their way. The dreadnoughts had already brought their Flame Lances to bear on their attacking enemy, but other Legion ships always seemed to be in the way—or rather, this attacking ship was making sure it stayed close enough to other Legion ships that the dreadnoughts couldn't fire for fear of hitting their comrades.

By this point, Leon and his squad had torn through enough of the jungle that they emerged out of the tree line and into the cleared area in front of the walls. But once there, Leon's focus was pulled away from the battle out in the port when he noticed—with his eyes rather than his magic senses—a dark shape a couple hundred feet away.

It was vaguely humanoid, dark, and emitted a few traces of killing intent, though little else in the way of noticeable aura. It was hunched over behind a fern, not moving too much, but just visible enough to catch Leon's attention. As Leon stared at it, his senses locking onto the unmistakably human shape that he occasionally glimpsed as it seemed to shrink away from him, he realized exactly what it was: someone was wearing a black cloak that covered their entire body, and one that had been somehow enchanted to be nearly invisible to magic senses.

"Hey!" Leon shouted a moment after he came to a stop, the rest of his squad looking in the same direction he had and brandishing their weapons. Fortunately, all were fully armored, as was Leon, for in response, a hail of arrows came pouring out of the trees.

With a quick swish of his blade, Leon let loose with a torrent of lightning, while Anzu flapped his wings and created a powerful gust of wind, and Maia summoned a water dragon to provide all of them with more cover. Not a single arrow even touched Leon or his squad.

"What the..." Alix muttered in shock and anger before pulling her bow off her shoulder and drawing a handful of spell arrows.

"Whatever's happening is multi-pronged," Gaius said. "We need to get inside the walls! Better to fight there!"

"I agree!" Marcus added, his eyes locked on Leon.

Leon almost growled before putting away his blade. He cast his gaze up to the low crenellations where he could see many Legion marines who already seemed to know what was going on, so he glared once more at the trees from which no more arrows appeared and began to run again for the walls. He knew that Gaius was right, with those cloaks he couldn't get a good idea of just how dangerous this threat was, and he didn't want to get caught up in an unwinnable fight outside of the walls.

It didn't make it feel better, though. He felt almost like he was running away from this fight when the enemies were right there. He contented himself by running at the back of the group, drawing his bow from his soul realm, and firing a quick explosive arrow back into the trees, which detonated with a satisfying boom and gout of bright orange fire that Leon saw engulfed several of the dark shapes that he could see now that he was looking for them.

Fortunately, he—or at least *Anzu*—was famous and eye-catching enough within the task force already that the guards didn't even hesitate to open the gates to let them back inside the fortress. Leon and his squad sprinted on inside, with Leon glowering back at the jungle hundreds of feet away, his heart racing madly and his face scrunched up in distaste behind his helmet, the one explosive arrow not doing enough to alleviate his anger and indignation.

"Leon!" called out the Tribune that had command over this gatehouse. Leon glanced up at the man leaning over the battlements on the gatehouse roof. "Sir Sigebert sent a runner here only minutes ago! You're needed back at the command tent!"

"Got it!" Leon replied, waving at the Tribune, who quickly turned his attention back to the jungle. It didn't seem like anyone was charging out of the trees, though even if they were, Leon knew from experience that the enchantments placed upon the walls of Legion camps were tough to crack, especially for those without siege weapons.

Leon then led his party through the camp towards the command tent. Any signs of revelry and relaxation from earlier in the night were gone; aside from the main paths through the square-shaped fortress, there weren't any people around. They were all on the walls or assembling just behind them.

"What in the hells is going on?" Leon heard Alcander wonder aloud behind him. Leon had told the others of what he'd seen, but he hadn't been too descriptive, and he wasn't entirely up-to-date on the situation, either. He quickly fixed that as well as he could with a pulse of his magic senses.

The situation in the port had changed for the better, at least as far as he could tell. The marines had gotten most of the fires under control with the swift action of the Legion water mages, while the ship that had caused so much damage in the first place had vanished—presumably diving back under the waves where Leon's magic senses couldn't easily penetrate. Leon didn't think it had been sunk, for the rest of the Legion ships were still circling around one area of the bay while the rest took up defensive positions a few hundred feet out from the docks. He couldn't see anyone else attacking the fortress; all other sides of the walls were manned by the marines, but it didn't seem like many were actively engaged in combat.

Leon quickly informed his squad as they sped through the camp about what he could see.

"It was only a matter of time before Jormun decided to attack," Marcus responded to Alcander. "The only thing surprising about this is that it seems so small. I would've thought a bigger fleet or maybe picking off our scouts. This is... both too small and too bold, I can't understand it..."

"Well, hopefully we're about to get some more information," Leon said as they arrived at the command tent.

Upon entering, he found the three Fleet Legates, their immediate subordinates, and the highest-ranked commands of the marines all gathered a hand-drawn map of the fortress and its surroundings.

"Leon!" Sigebert exclaimed as Leon walked in, the rest of Leon's squad following him inside save for Anzu and Maia, who stayed outside.

"Looks like there's some people out in the jungle, but they're not attacking," Leon stated as he walked over to the table.

“Are there...?” Basina replied as she scowled and quickly made a few quick marks on her map. “Do you know how many?”

“Couldn’t say, they seemed to have some kind of cloaks on that prevented me from seeing them,” Leon responded.

“Regardless, thanks for the info,” Basina said. “For now, we need you down at the docks. That ship out there is Jormun’s, I would stake my life on it. And if he’s there, then that’s where our strongest fighter has to be.”

“Makes sense,” Leon agreed. “If you don’t need me for anything else, I’ll head out right now.”

Basina nodded, and Leon turned right around and hurried out of the tent. The Legates had to organize the counter-attack and send out patrols to secure the surroundings. It was going to be an organizational nightmare as far as Leon was concerned, and he didn’t want anything to do with it.

‘... Even though I might need to do that myself one day...’ Leon thought, his scowl growing deeper.

Only a few minutes later, Leon found himself down at the stone docks feeling kind of useless. There weren’t pirates running around looting and pillaging and burning, the fires had largely been contained, and the attacking ship had vanished. There didn’t seem to be much for him, specifically, to do.

Alix asked the question on everyone’s mind. “Where the hells did they go?”

Leon sucked in a frustrated breath and glanced at Maia, a concealed smile appearing on his face behind his helmet. “Up for a swim?”

Maia silently replied, [Always. Should be fun to find these little minnows and tear them asunder—so long as they aren’t too far out to sea...] A vicious smile spread across the face of the river nymph, and Leon found himself almost feeling some kind of pity for the crew of that ship—probably Jormun, but he didn’t want to make any assumptions.

“Uuuuh, a swim?” Alix asked. “If you’re going to do what I think you’re going to do, I don’t think we’d be able to follow you... I also think it’s a *terrible* idea...” She cast a meaningful glance at Marcus, Alcander, and Gaius, who while remaining silent, nodded in agreement. They were all third-tier or stronger, and while that meant they could hold their breath for a while, their ability to fight underwater wasn’t superb.

“We won’t go far,” Leon said, ordering them all to stay there, despite their protestations.

He was serious, he and Maia were hardly going to be swimming out to sea. It was just that magic senses had a terrible ability to penetrate water—it was damn difficult to penetrate water when they were projected from above the waves, and even when projected from below, his range was only a little over ten percent what it was on land. It was almost impossible for Leon, or even Maia, to see what was beneath the surface without sticking their heads beneath the water and using their eyes.

“Quick look,” he said, “just to see what we can see...”

Maia nodded, and the two, without so much as another word, smoothly jumped off the docks and into the water.

Leon immediately engaged his armor's enchantments to keep water out of his helmet and create the ice flippers so that he could actually swim with something that resembled speed. That, however, was all he did, for as soon as he started to actually look out into the bay, any desire he had to swim out farther than the end of the docks instantly vanished, to be replaced with a deep, visceral fear that cut to his very core.

Out in the deeper reaches of the bay were gigantic dark shapes that twisted and curled in on themselves, huge cephalopod bodies surrounded by hundreds of writhing tentacles. These hordes of tentacles whipped through the water, snapping up the bodies of sailors that had fallen into the water and pulled them toward the base of the creatures' bodies, where the tentacles extended from. There, the bodies of the sailors disappeared, presumably eaten by these immense leviathans.

These creatures numbered only three, but that was more than enough to instill a primal fear deep within Leon. As the closest of these creatures twisted in the water, turning its body until an eye located about halfway up its long and relatively thin body pointed in his direction, that fear doubled. These monsters were krakens, and Leon had just entered their domain. Worse, he could feel through their connection a spike of fear within Maia, even though he couldn't see her—she'd vanished as she melted into the water around them.

Leon's heart rate skyrocketed as his helmet had to work overtime to supply the air for his sudden and panicked spike in breathing rate. His eyes made contact with the enormous round eye of this beast and he couldn't look away, some magic the creature possessed keeping him from reacting as he should've. He was utterly entranced and paralyzed with fear, unable to do anything more than slowly float down to the sandy bottom of the harbor.

This kraken slowly split off from the other two, its tentacles—each hundreds of feet long, and it had far too many for him to count—whipping through the water as it turned its body to 'face' him, and slowly start to accelerate in his direction, the sheer size of thing causing great waves to be kicked up onto the docks as it rapidly cut into shallower water. Its dark green body shone as the feeble light of the moon penetrated the water, its sixth-tier aura growing in intensity as it swam in Leon's direction. The thing was *massive*, but fortunately, when it turned toward Leon, it had broken eye contact. The monster's eyes were on the sides of its body, not its pin-shaped front tip, and that presented an opportunity.

Leon, realizing that he had only a few seconds to act before the monster drew close enough to reach him with its tentacles, immediately sent a bolt of lightning surging through his body, the silver-blue power of the Thunderbird cleansing whatever hold the kraken had seized over his mind. His heart rate didn't drop, and he was still terrified almost beyond reason, but Leon had control over his body again.

With a powerful kick, Leon exploded toward the surface of the water, only a few dozen feet away. As he did, he bellowed at Maia, [We need to get out of the water, NOW!]

He felt no argument from his river nymph lover, only agreement and terror as the kraken swiftly drew closer. The fact that it was so much weaker than the two of them, magically speaking, doing nothing at all to weaken their terror. The thing was large enough to be beyond reliable evaluation of its danger by strict magical tiers—it had so much mass, so much physical strength, so much physical toughness that to fight it was not something Leon or Maia wanted to try, even with all the powers at their command.

It only one more kick for Leon to come within a foot of the water's surface, and he risked one last look backward. The kraken was still bearing down upon him, but he could see in the distance its two fellows writhing and twisting as they swam away. Between their massive forms, Leon caught a brief glimpse of a long object—the attacking ship entangled within dozens of their tentacles.

For the briefest of moments, Leon thought that *maybe* the ship had been caught by the monsters and was being dragged down into the depths, never to be seen again, but then he saw a single person standing on its deck, his feet planted on the wooden surface and his hands folded behind his back as if he were enjoying a leisurely cruise on the ocean surface.

Leon instantly recognized him. Turiel—or rather, Jormun.

The pirate seemed to sense Leon's attention and glanced back over his shoulder, and he and Leon briefly made eye contact. The pirate smiled at Leon, his face splitting open with a tremendous shit-eating grin, and one of his hands came up to give Leon a sarcastic wave before the krakens and his ship vanished into the darkness of the abyss.

Leon kicked once more and burst from the ocean with enough force that he was easily able to pull himself back up to the docks. His pause to look back had been just long enough for Maia to have emerged before him, and for the last remaining kraken to have already been reaching out to grab him. As Leon stumbled up onto the stone docks, the end of one of its smallest and longest tentacles—it was still as thick as his waist—whipped out of the water and wrapped itself around him, squeezing him hard enough that he heard his metal armor groaning with the strain.

Leon screamed in terror and rage; he wasn't about to let this happen to him, even if it did terrify him in the most primal possible way. He called upon his lightning as his comrades only a few steps away reeled back in surprise and shock. Only Maia darted forward, the water around the dock receding as she formed much of it into a massive serpentine dragon.

Silver-blue lightning danced across Leon's form as his arms wrapped around a nearby iron cleat. The dock had only been built that afternoon, but the Legion engineers had made sure that it was strong and stable; even as the tentacle started to pull Leon and the cleat began to bend, Leon avoided being ripped back into the water.

His body exploded with lightning at the same time that Maia's water dragon tore into the kraken's sucker-covered tentacle. A moment later, it released Leon, its oily green hide scorched black by lightning, and pulled back into the water leaving a trail of blood behind it.

But Leon didn't relax even as the tentacle vanished beneath the turbulent waves. He pulled himself fully back onto the dock and shouted, "GET BACK! KRAKEN!"

Not even a moment later, a dozen tentacles erupted from the waves and began slamming down onto the dock, smashing several Legion sailors into paste in an instant.

Three tentacles almost fell on Leon's squad, but a quick lightning spear from him deterred one, Maia's water dragon threw back another, and an explosive spell arrow nimbly fired by Alix injured the third enough to wave it off.

By this point, many of the sailors around began to scream in fear and run from the dock, and Leon wasn't far behind them. He kept himself between the water and his squad, his magic senses bathing the docks as he searched for a sign that the kraken wasn't backing down, but fortunately, it seemed they'd injured it enough to get it to leave. As the sailors fell back and Legion ships started to come closer to protect the dock, no more tentacles came whipping out from the water.

"What... the fuck

Chapter 549: The Second Island's Ritual Site

Leon collapsed on the ground a good distance away from the docks, sucking down air like it was going out of style as he did his damndest to steady his racing heart. He'd fought against stone giants, snow lions, a Gorgon, and hordes of enemy mages, but only the ice wraiths and their banshees had ever terrified Leon so much as making eye contact with that kraken.

But he'd grown up with the fear of banshees and ice wraiths; as terrifying as they were to him, they were at least familiar. These things were so alien to him, so far removed from his frame of reference that he could do little more than sit on the ground and try to get a hold of himself.

He didn't even register what was happening around him until Anzu protectively curled around Leon's body, glaring at anyone who looked at Leon with his blood red eyes, promising only death if they tried to disturb his human. Maia was right there with Anzu, absent-mindedly running her fingers through the feathers of one of his wings, a haunted look in her eyes. The rest of Leon's squad stood nearby, waiting with looks of varying concern for Leon and Maia to recover even as sailors and Legion engineers sprinted around them, tending to the damaged docks and ships.

As he slowly returned to the present instead of lingering on the baleful gaze of that kraken, Leon took in the extensive damage that had been inflicted upon the port. Dozens of ships had been damaged, dozens more now rested upon the sea floor. Hundreds, perhaps even thousands of sailors were killed or wounded, and they had little to show for it.

Leon contemplated being angry about it, perhaps seeking to lay the blame for this at the feet of the Fleet Legates, who should've had their fleets be more ready to face such threats, but after seeing just what was below the waves, Leon couldn't bring himself to muster the energy. Three enormous krakens, each possessing sixth-tier magical strength and enough physical power to tears entire war galleys asunder, had accompanied the pirates.

For some reason.

'Great,' Leon thought, his heart sinking as he started to wrap his mind around the magnitude of this problem. *'Three seventh-tier mages. Flame Lances. A ship with those flame-throwing things that can heavily damage some of our strongest ships. And now three damned krakens!'*

Leon hadn't an earthly clue as to how to deal with this problem, but deal with it he knew he had to. The scale of this problem was proving itself to be too large to ever consider ignoring. Already, he'd been determined to find Jormun and bring him to justice out of embarrassment for so completely fooling him in Kraterok and out of a sense of lingering obligation to see Trajan's killers brought back to see a Bull Kingdom headsman, but now...

Now, he saw the powers that Jormun commanded. He had some vague, cryptic hints as to what the pirate was planning to do, and if the krakens and the crucified person he'd found out in the jungle was any indication, then Jormun was at least into some dark shit. He was showing what he was using his powers for.

And that sarcastic salute as he was carried away by krakens just made everything so much worse. It was like he was saying that no matter how powerful Leon or his people were, they couldn't stop him or his plans.

Leon only wanted to stop him all the more, now, and not just for the disrespect and personal grudge Leon had been left with. He couldn't look the other way on this. One fleet had already been ruined by the pirate, and judging by the losses they'd taken so far, Leon could easily see the Bull Kingdom losing these three in the task force in this venture as well. Any faith Leon had that the Bull Kingdom had the ability to stop Jormun was on its last legs.

For now, though, there wasn't much that Leon could do. He pulsed his magic senses to check on the situation outside the walls of the fortress and saw at least half a dozen companies of marines sweeping through the hinterlands immediately around the site of the former town. None of them seemed to be fighting, so it was clear enough to him that the people who'd shot at his squad as they returned seemed to have bugged out.

With a heavy sigh that finally started to calm him down, Leon got to his feet. His movement shook Anzu out of his hyper-protective stance and bring Maia back to reality.

Leon looked over to his river nymph lover and saw the lingering terror of the krakens within himself reflected back at him.

[How are you?] he asked her.

[Well enough,] she replied. [Maybe talk later? Not now...]

[Later then,] Leon agreed, and the two shared a brief smile before turning to face the rest of the squad who'd hesitantly approached.

"Everything... all right?" Alix asked, undoubtedly giving voice to the question on all of their minds.

Leon looked around at them and nodded. "Yeah... Let's head back and meet with the Legates. We've clearly got some work ahead of ourselves..."

—

The meeting with the Fleet Legates was tense, and more than a few heated exchanges were had. In the end, though, Leon had been comforted when Basina made it abundantly clear that they had gotten too lax and complacent in the half century since the Bull Kingdom's last true need for a fleet. While some elements of the fleets moved to secure the rest of the settlements on the island, she would be running the rest of the fleets ragged doing drills and running scouting missions to ensure that such an ambush couldn't happen again.

Leon, while not happy with that answer, supposed that he wouldn't be entirely happy with *any* answer they could give him, and decided to just drop the subject after Basina said that. The results she would

show would have to speak for themselves. He knew less than nothing about fleet management and he had no official ranks to speak of, so there was nothing at all he could possibly do for the fleets except trust that Basina, Theuderic, and Sigebert had it in hand.

But just because there wasn't much he could do for the fleets, that didn't mean that there wasn't anything at all he could be doing. With the Fleet Legates taking responsibility for putting together some kind of response to Jormun's raid, Leon turned his attention back to the crucified corpse he'd found—or rather, *been led to*—only a few hours before.

It was still there, its head turned to the side, its left hand pointing off into the darkness. After the encounter with the Krakens, however, much of the visceral horror of the scene now looked kind of tame in comparison.

"Krakens... crucifixions... stealing Princes... what in the hells is going on?" Marcus wondered aloud as the company of marines that accompanied them started to swear in shock and horror.

Leon thought back to the story Jormun had told him in Kraterok of the eponymous Serpent that lay imprisoned beneath the Serpentine Isles, and replied, "Our pirate friend seems to be messing with forces beyond human ken. Perhaps he needs the Prince's blood for something. Wouldn't surprise me, to be honest..."

Leon made a mental note to himself to discuss with the Thunderbird what exactly Jormun might be trying to do. He felt like such an ancient and venerable being as her ought to have at least some insight into these matters. Perhaps Xaphan did, as well, being a demon and all that.

[Hey, Xaphan,] Leon whispered to his demonic partner.

[What is it?] Xaphan replied, sounding just a little bit irritated, as if Leon were distracting him from something.

[I've got something I need your opinion on, I was hoping you could pay attention for a little while...]

Leon felt Xaphan's magic senses pulse out through his body, taking in their surroundings.

[Ah, cute. You do this yourself, Leon? I didn't think you had it in you to be so creative...]

[No, I didn't fucking do this, demon,] Leon retorted, feeling vaguely insulted even though he knew the demon wasn't being the least bit serious. [I just want you to see what you can see. I have limited experience dealing with things that can't be solved by a good stabbing or a liberal application of lightning, and I was hoping you might be able to fill in some gaps for me...]

[I'll do what I can, but that corpse, at least, doesn't look like much other than some try-hard's attempt at edgy art.]

Leon smiled, Xaphan's flippant description helping to put things into perspective. It didn't matter what Jormun was doing, the forces Leon had on his side were far more terrifying.

Or so Leon told himself, but the memory of that kraken's eye sent a shiver down his spine despite the sentiment.

"All right," Leon said out loud. "It doesn't look like anything's changed. If no one can see anything new, then let's see what this guy's pointing us toward..."

"A trap, most like," Alix whispered.

"Maybe," Leon conceded, "and I wouldn't be surprised given what we saw today. An ambush out in the jungle after a lightning raid on the port. Those people who shot at us earlier are still out here, so keep an eye out for anything at all that might be suspicious..."

There wasn't much that proved that the people in the magic-senses-resistant cloaks were on Jormun's side, but there wasn't much to disprove it, either. That they had started to encroach on the fortress walls while Jormun was attacking the port was too big of a coincidence, and the fact that they never committed to a proper assault didn't detract from that. Even if they weren't on the same side, they still used the pirate's attack as a cover to get in close to the walls without being detected and attempted to harm Leon and his squad. Whoever they were, they were no friends of Leon's, and they hadn't been caught by the Legion patrols.

Leon, without any noticeable fear or hesitation, started walking deeper into the jungle, following the direction that the corpse was pointing in. His squad followed close behind and the marine company just behind them. They numbered a little over a hundred, and while a tough unit all on its own, every step they took left them farther away from the fortress and potential reinforcements. The Legion fleets heading up and down the island's coast would hopefully provide enough distraction for anyone in the jungle who might wish them harm, pulling them back to their homes instead of waiting for an ambush, but Leon kept all of his senses sharp for anything of note. Knowing an enemy was out there with the capability of fooling magic senses was enough on its own to keep him from getting too relaxed, let alone the possibility that any of Jormun's seventh-tier mages might be about.

For a while, Leon's head was on a swivel, his eyes darting from hither to yon in search of any sign that they were being stalked or that there might be Islanders out in the jungle waiting to ambush them. His magic senses remained projected, too, and he kept an eye on all the dangerous fauna that prowled the humid jungle just in case they got too close.

Most of all, however, Leon was looking for the Thunderbird look-a-like that had led him to the first corpse. It flown away in the same direction that the corpse had pointed in, so Leon had assumed that the bird had been trying to lead him to whatever the corpse was trying to point him towards. Instead of following, however, Leon had returned to the fortress to provide what little aid he could in its defense, so he didn't know if the bird was still out there or if it had left when it realized he wasn't following it.

His worries were put to rest when he heard the sound of beating wings, and a moment later saw the bird alighting upon a nearby tree branch for a moment, lock eyes with him, and then turn and fly away into the jungle.

"There..." Leon muttered, and he made to follow the bird deeper into the jungle.

"Huh? See something?" Alix asked from just behind him.

"Yeah," Leon said, his focus shifting from the jungle around them to fixing on the bird as it flew away, "you see that bird?"

“What bird?” Alix replied.

Leon was hardly fazed, there were birds all around them, though most weren’t making too much noise given how late it was, so he wasn’t too surprised that Alix hadn’t been paying too much attention to a single, if fairly large, eagle-like bird.

“It went this way...” Leon said, his eyes narrowing as the bird stopped about a thousand feet away, seemingly hovering in the air as it perched on something he couldn’t see.

“Leon, what are you talk...ing...” Alix said as she took off after Leon as he tore into the jungle. For him, it was heedless and almost without thought, and she could see that in his suddenly-changed demeanor, but his skills in the forest, while not necessarily directly translatable to the jungle, still ensured that he moved almost silently and with great speed. Anzu and Maia quickly blew past Alix, not even sparing her a glance as they followed Leon deeper into the jungle.

Leon, however, wasn’t entirely heedless as he followed the bird. With his magic senses, he kept an eye on everyone behind him, making sure they followed him and weren’t being attacked as they fell a little bit behind. He also made sure to move slowly enough so as to not lose them, but he also didn’t want to fall too far behind the bird. If was reading its emotions correctly, it seemed to be glaring at him for not having followed it earlier.

Soon enough, Leon burst out into another clearing, where a second crucified corpse had been left, this one still with a little bit of blood on its bones making for a much grislier sight.

Leon paused not too far away and watched as the bird took off again, flying away into the trees. Leon had to fight the urge to instantly follow it, but he made sure to pause long enough for everyone else to catch up.

“Another one, huh?” Gaius observed as he stepped out into the clearing. “I guess it was too much to hope that there was only going to be one. Who do you think this is?”

“I’d be willing to bet quite a bit of money that this is one of the missing townspeople,” Alcander stated. “It’s kind of weird how decayed it is, and yet how intact it is, though. This person couldn’t have been here for very long, especially not bloody.”

“I agree,” Marcus added. “It’s hard to believe that scavengers haven’t carried off some of these bones, and yet they’re all still here. Seems like a lot of effort to put into this. Someone wanted these bodies found and their directions followed...”

The nobleman gave Leon a pointed look that bordered on reproachful, and Leon at least had the good graces to look a bit embarrassed.

“Ah, you’re right, I shouldn’t be running ahead like that,” Leon said contritely. “I got a little bit ahead of myself. Still, this is leading us to *something*. I’m sure there’s more bodies to be found out there...”

There were thousands of people who lived in the town where the fortress now stood. That meant potentially thousands of bodies, assuming Alcander’s belief was correct and these crucified people were the townspeople.

But there was only one way to find out. Leon carefully approached the body tied to the wooden star, his caution high again. He didn't want to accidentally spring any traps like he'd done on the way into the town that afternoon. That would've been a truly terrible way for him to end after all that he'd been through.

Fortunately, there were no traps that he could yet see, and the bloody skeleton was soon turning its head to its right as the fingers on its right hand curled, leaving on one extended finger pointing into the jungle in the same direction that the bird had flown in.

Leon had to catch himself from just running off again. Marcus was right, he needed to take things slower, even if the bird seemed to be in a hurry. It had led him this far, so surely it must understand the concept of caution.

Leon took a few minutes to have the marines accompanying them send back a quick report to the Legates and then spread out a little bit more. Leon then led the way deeper into the jungle, though at a much less breakneck speed than before, making sure that he stayed with the group and didn't outpace them again.

Like that, following both the bird and the pointing skeletons, Leon's group found no less than half a dozen more skeletons, all leading them deeper and deeper into the untamed jungles of the island.

Not once were they attacked by any Islanders or pirates. Once, a large jungle cat got in their way for a few seconds, and its sixth-tier strength was certainly something to be impressed by, but all it required was a brief hit of Leon's killing intent for it to turn right around and not bother them again. Their miles-long trek into the depths of the jungle was remarkably peaceful.

Finally, only about an hour or so before dawn, they finally reached what it seemed like they were being led toward. The final bloody skeleton—this one with all the flesh of its pointing arm still attached to the bone, though having started to rot and stink—pointed them toward a half-buried stone ruin so consumed by the jungle that it wasn't until they drew closer that Leon realized what it was.

This ruin was *old*. Moss covered most of the stone and jungle ferns and trees grew amongst the paths between the foundations of the large buildings, though these buildings had been long collapsed into indistinct piles of rubble.

The entire place seemed to be some kind of palace or temple complex, with a large square courtyard in the center, surrounded by a wall and buildings on all sides, which was in turn flanked by a square street which then led to a second square wall of buildings. In the center of the stone courtyard, terribly weathered and half devoured by the branches of a nearby jungle tree, was an immense serpentine colossus. Its body was perhaps a hundred feet long, coiled up, and about as thick as Leon was tall. Any other notable features had long been weathered away, but the statue was the only thing that drew anyone's attention as soon as they laid their eyes upon the ruin.

All along the serpent's body, and crucified throughout the large courtyard, were hundreds of bodies. These weren't absent their flesh like most of the previous corpses, either; no, these bodies looked like they had been nailed to the stone and the wood while they were still alive and perfectly healthy, then left to die and rot.

Leon could only stop and stare at this scene, walking forward only until he came to the pathetic shin-high walls of the closest ruined building, and took in as best as he could this scene of mass terror and death. All around him, his squad and the marines that had escorted them did likewise, though many of them swore in horror. Leon was vaguely aware that a few even ducked back into the jungle to vomit into the bushes.

Men, women, children, the old, he could see bodies of all kinds left in the courtyard.

“Stay... stay back...” he called out, noticing that a few of the marines had started walking forward, probably with the intent to start cutting the bodies down. “All of this... may be trapped,” he explained when curious eyes were turned in his direction. “Let’s just take this slow.”

Leon couldn’t sense anything overtly magical about the place, other than the simple fact that the same enchantments that blocked his magic senses from seeing the other bodies were present here, hiding all of this torturous carnage until it could be physically seen. But just because he couldn’t sense anything didn’t mean that there weren’t any traps around.

After a few more seconds, Leon started getting his head back into the game. He got the marines moving to secure the area, surrounding this ruined temple or whatever it was, making sure that there were no potential enemies laying in wait.

Chapter 550: A Bit of a Problem

[This is definitely some kind of blood ritual,] Xaphan whispered to Leon as they watched a couple hundred marines set about removing the corpses from the ruined square around the serpent colossus.

[You’re sure about that?] Leon asked as the scowl that had perpetually marred his face since arriving at this grisly scene deepened.

[Look down at the floor,] Xaphan directed. [Notice the grooves in the tiles and how the floor isn’t perfectly flat? The floor around the colossus is a couple of feet lower than the floor at the edge of the square. Blood is meant to drip from sacrifices and flow down toward that idol. Given the size of this place, it was designed to facilitate *large* sacrifices.]

[I seem to recall you saying multiple times to me in the past that you didn’t have much knowledge of blood rituals,] Leon stated, though his tone was casual and not particularly accusative.

[I’ve said many things, boy,] Xaphan testily responded. [I’m not overfond of blood sacrifice, and I’ve never put too much of my time into studying it, but for things *this* crude and *this* blatant, a demon will always know. Much blood has been spilled here for the benefit of whatever that idol is meant to represent.]

Leon sighed deeply as he turned his eyes toward the massive serpent statue in the center of the ruined square. He and his squad had been here for long enough that the sun had started to rise, and not long after their arrival, he’d sent word back to Sigebert detailing what they’d found. Not long after, the Fleet Legate arrived to personally witness what Leon had found, and he’d brought half a marine battalion with him. Even still, despite working for several hours, not even half of the bodies had been cut down, leaving the serpent statue still covered in dozens of corpses nailed to its exterior.

The area was covered in blood, though strangely absent scavengers. As Marcus had pointed out during their trek through the jungle, Leon noticed that despite these corpses having been here apparently for days, they were largely untouched by rot and wild animals had left them alone. From what his magic senses told him, this was hardly due to lack of animals, but it seemed that anything larger than ants kept a wide berth from this place, and *nothing* touched the corpses.

The whole thing gave Leon the creeps beyond the sheer visceral revulsion of seeing hundreds, perhaps even a few thousand people so murdered and mutilated.

And yet, Leon could sense very little magic in their surroundings that could be considered notable. With so many mages running around, hauling tools and bodies or securing the surroundings to keep the ruin safe from predators and any potential Islander attacks, the ambient magic in the air had certainly gone up, but Leon couldn't detect any enchantments in the ruins, any traces of magic power flowing through the rubble, or even any magic seeping into the serpent idol in the center of the square.

As far as he could tell, the ruins were completely mundane, absent any noticeable enchantment or magical augmentation.

[Can you sense anything else here?] Leon asked Xaphan, hoping that the demon could provide any other insights that he was missing. Without much else to go on, Leon feared that this would be nothing more than a grisly sideshow, devoid of meaning. But all of this had to have been set up for a reason, he couldn't imagine that Jormun—and he couldn't believe that anyone but Jormun could've done this—would've gone to all this trouble for no reason.

Or at least, he didn't want to believe that all of this had been meaningless. Whether it be power or perhaps related to what Leon believed to be Jormun's intent—releasing the mythical Serpent of the legend he'd relayed to Leon—Leon didn't want to believe that someone had done all of this for no practical reason.

'Could this be why Octavius was kidnapped?' Leon wondered, remembering one of the stories that Jormun had told him back in Kraterok in the guise of Turiel—Jormun had said that there was a rumor about him that he was stealing people with Inherited Bloodlines to sacrifice to some dark god. Leon had pondered that, but had wound up largely disregarding that particular tidbit, chalking it up to Jormun just screwing with him and the rest of the Legion.

But now, seeing what Jormun had seemingly done—and Leon had no doubt in his mind that this was Jormun's handiwork, despite a lack of conclusive evidence—Leon found himself revisiting that rumor.

'Maybe Jormun just admitted to what he was doing and reveling in the fact that he could've said anything back then...' Leon thought to himself.

[I can't sense anything in particular,] Xaphan admitted as he answered Leon's question, [but that's not to say there was nothing magical here. Surely you realize just how quickly magic will dissipate into the environment when an enchantment has been destroyed or erased.]

[I do, but if this was to be a sacrifice, why erase the enchantment?]

[There could many reasons, too many to say for certain...] Xaphan began to list out those that he felt most likely, but Leon stopped paying attention as he tried to contemplate the problem. He remembered

again Jormun's story of the sealed Serpent beneath the Isles, and he wondered for not the first time how true that story was.

'Was this done to release that Serpent?' Leon wondered. 'Maybe if there was an enchantment here, then it contributed to the seal that keeps that Serpent sealed.' After that particular thought, Leon's mouth turned upward in a self-deprecating smile. *'Or maybe Jormun was just feeding a load of shit and is now watching with glee as I gulp it all down...'*

Leon tried to dismiss that theory; he very much did *not* want to imagine that Jormun was going to release some dark god that would bring ruin upon all of Aeterna. But no matter how hard he tried, the evidence that Jormun was trying to do just that was all around him, displayed and crucified.

After a few minutes, during which Xaphan realized Leon wasn't paying attention and just went quiet, Leon started making his way through the veritable forest of strung-up corpses that had yet to be cut down, eventually arriving at the statue of the coiled serpent. He didn't have much room to inspect it with how packed the square was with bodies, but he didn't need much room, he simply moved an errant leg of one of the victims a few inches to the side and pressed his hand to the cold stone of the statue.

He almost immediately pulled his hand back in shock at how bone-chillingly cold the stone was, but he managed to hold on just long enough for his magic power to enter the statue and probe around, searching for anything of note before Leon had to pull his hand back, his skin turning red as it fought off the profound cold of the statue. Leon scrunched his face up in confusion and concentration, for he could find no trace of magic power within the statue that would betray the presence of hidden enchantments or anything of the like, and yet the statue was still somehow cold enough to be too uncomfortable for his seventh-tier hands to bear for long.

[There was something here,] Leon whispered half to himself and half to Xaphan. [There's no other explanation I can think of. Something used to be here, some kind of power, but this blood sacrifice must've... I don't know, released it or something.]

[Did you sense something specific, or is that just speculation?]

[A bit of both,] Leon replied as he rubbed his fingers together to bring a little bit of warmth back into them, quickly filling Xaphan in on the cold he felt as he did so.

[It was cold, yet you felt no magic power?]

[Yes...]

[Perhaps it was something... divine? Or maybe a better word would be Primal?]

[What do you mean?]

Xaphan didn't say anything more for a few long seconds. Leon could practically feel his hesitation and reluctance to speak again as if those emotions were his own.

[I... I'm not sure,] the demon finally growled, shame pouring out of him in such a torrent as he admitted his ignorance that Leon could feel it through their contract. [This might be... something that the sparkly pigeon might be better at explaining, but... well, let me put it to you like this. During the process of

Apotheosis, you'll slowly start to generate and use divine power, or Primal power, whatever you might want to call it. You can think of it like a tremendously more potent form of magic, or maybe a purer form. I used it when I was at my peak, but now it's been so long since I tasted of such power that I've almost forgotten what it felt like it...

[Anyway, this power is extremely rare; even in the strongest beings in the universe, they'll only generate about one part of divine power for every ten thousand parts of magic power. But beyond its potency and rarity, it's also almost nigh-undetectable on its own. It'll usually create magic power as it dilutes and dissipates in the environment—so I suppose 'concentrated magic power' might be a better way to put it, rather than pure or potent—which allows it to be detected by proxy, but divine power itself cannot be detected without using divine power in turn.]

Leon nodded as he started walking back out of the square, ignoring the questioning looks and occasional actual questions he got from the marines as he went, his attention fully focused on his conversation with his demonic partner. [So, there was power in that moon stone back in Nestor's lab that I couldn't perceive?]

[Probably, but with how much magic power it was emanating, its divine power might've been lost even to post-Apotheosis mages without a very in-depth examination—think of it like the sun blocking the stars. Not a perfect comparison, but it works well enough.]

Leon nodded again. That made some degree of sense, Nestor had told him that, during his inspection of the stone after the Clan first acquired it, his initial hypothesis was that the moon stone had come into contact with a Universe Fragment before he and the Thunderbird clarified that it had actually been 'touched' by a Primal God.

[But...] Xaphan continued, [if divine power were here, there'd be magical signs, much like that shitload of light magic that poured out of that moon stone. So... I've got nothing, but I suppose that your theory that *some* power was here at some point might hold some water.]

Leon grunted in acknowledgment. He hadn't the tools to really *know* what happened here, but from what he could piece together, disregarding the idea that Jormun was planning on releasing the Serpent from his story would be a mistake.

Leon sighed as that realization crossed his mind, while a muted feeling that he was in way over his head started to cause his stomach to sink to his knees. But after taking a deep breath, Leon battered that feeling down; it wouldn't help, and he wasn't about to just let Jormun finish whatever he was going to do. This wasn't something he could just ignore, nor was it someone else's problem. It would take two months minimum for the Bull Kingdom to send someone else if reinforcements were requested, and Leon couldn't imagine that they'd arrive in time. At the very least, Leon didn't want to risk it.

He was the most powerful person now actively opposing Jormun, and that made this his responsibility to fix—at least in part, for there were others in positions of power in the task force, as well.

Glancing around, he saw Sigebert busy directing the marines as they moved the bodies into a nearby mass grave, and Gaius not too far away. He began walking over, but he only went a few steps when he paused. He'd decided to pulse his magic senses to check up on his squad and saw Alix, Marcus, and

Alcander a ways into the trees, keeping close enough to everything going on as to be safe, yet also maintaining a good distance from the field of death that they'd stumbled into.

Maia and Anzu, meanwhile, were just lounging around the ruins, not paying anyone too much heed. The sight of so many crucified people had clearly not affected either of them in any noticeable way.

But the former three concerned Leon. Alix was hunched over and looked to be quietly sobbing in horror. Marcus and Alcander looked to be a little more put together, but Leon could also see their hands shaking and their eyes wide with shock.

Without a second thought, Leon turned toward his squad. They came before Sigebert, he could always speak with the Fleet Legate later.

A couple of minutes later, Leon was taking a seat on a large tree root close enough to Alix to lightly clap her on the shoulder as a show of support. She was, indeed, quietly sobbing, her eyes shut tight, her hands clasped in front of her face so tightly that her knuckles were white. Leon wasn't too forceful when he joined her, he merely wanted her to know that he was there.

"Everyone all right?" Leon asked, his smooth voice pulling them all out of their weird headspaces long enough to make eye contact with him. The answer was obvious, of course, but he wanted them to get talking and to maybe start feeling something other than horror at what they'd just seen. "That was a... *tough* scene to witness. I can't blame anyone for being a little bit shaken."

Leon waited a moment for anyone to say something. He almost thought no one would, but Alcander proved him wrong.

"That... was more than tough," he whispered. "Don't get me wrong, Leon, I'm no stranger to seeing a great deal of death, not after what we've all seen and done, but..."

The large man trailed off, leaving it to Marcus to pick up the statement where he left it.

"That was something else entirely," Marcus finished. "It's one thing to see dead soldiers—they died in battle, fighting with everything they had. Those were... civilians. Children. People only a few years from joining their Ancestors anyway. People who shouldn't have been treated... like *that*."

Leon didn't interrupt them, he just wanted them to talk. He couldn't pretend that a sight of a couple thousand people horribly murdered left him unaffected, but his entire childhood was filled with blood and death, albeit the blood of monsters and animals, not humans. At the very least, he could compartmentalize well enough that his shock and horror wasn't quite so debilitating.

It helped that he didn't know those people, so suppressing his empathy for a while wasn't the hardest thing to do. Focusing on Jormun, speculating on the pirate's goals, and how to stop him also made this a lot easier—Leon did his best to focus not on what he couldn't do, but on what he *could*.

"This doesn't change anything, though," Alix said, her voice iron hard as her hands fell from her face a few inches. "Jormun has to die. That's what we've been working toward, right?" Her deep brown eyes turned toward Leon as if she were both asking if she were correct and daring him to disagree.

If Leon hadn't personally met Jormun as Turiel, then *maybe* he would've disagreed. He'd originally agreed to go on this expedition because of Octavius' escape, but at this point, the runaway Prince was

practically meaningless to Leon, only kept relevant in his mind for his part in Trajan's death. But now, Leon's thoughts were different.

"I can't say that nothing's changed," Leon replied as his golden eyes met Alix's, silently telling her not to interrupt until he'd said his piece despite seemingly disagreeing with her. "When we set out, hunting down Jormun wasn't that big of a priority. He was a target, to be sure, but for the Bull Kingdom, and us by proxy, the mission was to bring the Serpentine Islands back under the Bull Kingdom's suzerainty and to retrieve Prince Octavius. That was it."

"Was it?" Marcus asked, noting Leon's tone and his specific phrasing.

Leon glanced at the young nobleman and nodded. "Was," he confirmed. "After speaking with the man, I had my suspicions about his motives. Now that we've seen this... I'm only more convinced about what he's trying to do. And we cannot, under any circumstances, allow him to succeed."

"What is he trying to do?" Alcander asked, his eyes narrowing in concern, his tone deadly serious.

"I believe he's trying to unseal some kind of great beast that used to rule here," Leon explained, his voice slow yet steady enough to project confidence—it was a bit of an insane theory, and he didn't want his voice to waver as he told it. He wanted this to be taken seriously, he didn't want this mass sacrifice they'd stumbled upon to be disregarded as nothing more than wonton sadism by a psychopathic pirate. "Some 'Serpent' with great power. I'm uncertain as to the exact details, but... if all of *that* is anything to go by, then what he's trying to bring back is unfathomably large and powerful. From what I was able to gather, there were thousands of people back there, all used to fuel some kind of blood sacrifice that—and this only a guess on my part, but I have some confidence in it—has released a magical seal or lock or something of that nature here.

"And the Fleet Legates aren't even focusing on it. They're too focused on the political angle, they only see the Serpentine Islands and Octavius, but... well, I can't say that Jormun doesn't care about them, I don't know enough about the man, but I simply can't shake this feeling of dread in my bones whenever I think about this thing that Jormun is trying to unleash."

"Assuming your guess is correct," Alix whispered, her expression of horror slowly deepening, showing Leon that while she was giving voice to skepticism, she was a little more convinced by his words than that might imply.

"Assuming that, yes," Leon said just as quietly. He was about to continue when he saw the Thunderbird-like bird out of the corner of his eye. He froze for a moment, his instinct to inform the others dying on his tongue for reasons that he couldn't quite fathom.

The bird alighted on a nearby tree, stared at him for several seconds, then took back off in the direction of the square.

Leon stood back up. "We're going to get this fucker even if we have to leave the Legion behind to do it. Let them play Earl-maker here in the Isles, let them bring their Prince back to their Kingdom. Jormun has to be stopped."

With that said, Leon walked away from them, leaving them a little clueless and flabbergasted at his sudden departure, but also giving them some space to digest his words and their own feelings about what they'd found. He followed the bird back toward the square.

He watched it soar—seemingly unnoticed, for not once did Leon ever see a head turn in its direction—over the working marines and strung-up bodies, past the corpse-covered serpent statue, and toward one of the ruins on the other side of the square. Without hesitation, Leon made his way over, eager to see what the bird had to show him.

The bird led him to one of the larger of the ruined buildings that was little more than one partially-standing wall and a pile of rubble, the remains of perhaps the most important structure in this temple complex if its size was any indication, and one that had only light Legion presence around it—most of the marines were working around the square, and the bird had led Leon to the side of the building opposite to the side that opened onto the square, giving them manner of privacy. It watched as Leon approached, its eyes narrowing like it was watching a clueless field mouse approach, but Leon couldn't sense any power in its gaze.

He stopped a few paces shy of the bird, just at the edge of the massive pile of rubble that the bird had perched upon. He stood there in silence for a few long seconds, he and the bird simply star